

Language, Truth, and Revelation, Part 2

A Lecture by Dr. Gordon H. Clark

In the introductory paragraphs to Part Two, it was noted that Kierkegaard and Barth had a compelling influence over most of the later authors. The work of E.L. Mascall, however, will prevent us from assuming that this influence was completely universal. His only reference to Barth says, "It is not surprising that Dr. Karl Barth's slogan, *Finitum non capax infiniti*, (which means the finite is not capable of the infinite) went together with a denial not only of the possibility of natural theology (that is, of any knowledge of God acquirable by man's natural powers) but also of any rational understanding of revelation" [*Words and Images*, p. 104]. We must now outline the matrix, that is, the theory in which this quotation is embedded. Karl Barth used that phrase a couple of times. He thought that the finite could not comprehend the infinite. I think anybody who has ever studied geometry would disagree with Barth on that point.

In Mascall's book, *Words and Images*, the Foreword raises the question whether "the utterances which we make when . . . asserting or denying that God exists have any significance whatever." In anticipation of the Thomistic view that he will defend, he acknowledges that Christian philosophers "at their best... had always been willing and indeed anxious to admit that there was something very peculiar about theological assertions ... and the medieval theologians had constructed a department of logic—the doctrine of analogy—expressly to deal with this fact" [p. viii]. You will find my discussion of analogy in the Thales to Dewey book as a criticism of Thomas Aquinas's cosmological argument, if you want to look it up.

Mascall begins with a long critique of Ayer's verification principle. His fourth point is... And I guess I discussed Ayer early in the book, did I? Let me see if I did. Yeah, he is there on page 43... Mascall's fourth principle is that point that Ayer uncritically limited "experience" to sensation. This limitation, however, cannot be a generalization from experience because "mystical experience in the broadest sense . . . contradicts it and [this] certainly ought not to be dismissed without detailed examination. But in Ayer's book such an examination is nowhere made" [p. 10]. Mascall defends mystical experience. This was Mascall's fourth point. His other arguments are also important, though they are not necessary to an exposition of his theory of language.

However much Mascall opposes the verification principle (that's the principle of the logical positivists), and the restriction of meaningfulness to tautologies (that is, definitionally true) and sensorily verifiable statements (meaningful but sometimes true, sometimes false), he insists on empiricism. Experience is the sole source of knowledge, but experience is not always sensory. Even "sense experience itself may consist of something more than experience of sense-objects" (p. 31). And "there may be experience which is not expressible in sentences at all, or which is expressible only in sentences of a very peculiar kind" (p. 31). Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, in addition to or because of their sensory definition of experience, denied to the intellect any activity other than inference from sensation: "the intellect in no way apprehends, it merely infers" (p. 33). Against this Mascall asserts, quite apart from any mystical experience, that the sensible "particular . . . is not the terminus of perception, not the objectum quod . . . but the

objectum quo... And if you don't know Latin, or just one person in the class who seems to know Latin. You want to translate that for us? [female student responds but audio is not clear] Oh! It's on page 96. Objectum quod means the object which. Objectum quo means the object by which...through which the intellect grasps, in a direct but mediate activity, the intelligible extramental reality, which is the real thing" (p. 34).

It is interesting to note that Mascall goes beyond (as he says) Thomas and refuses to assume that "the real intelligible world [is] isomorphic with the subjective sensible one" [p. 41]. For example, relativity and quantum theory are not statements about sensible phenomena: They are "expressions of the kind of intelligibility that the real world has."

Then Mascall adds a short defense of mystical experience, the language of which is entirely unintelligible to all who have not had the experience. Hence it is useless to discuss it.

Any theory of language depends on a view concerning the extent of possible knowledge and the methods of learning. Basic to Mascall's position is the assumption that "the intellect does not only reason, but also apprehends; it has, as its objects, not only truths, but things" [p. 63]. Understanding as *ratio* is the power of discursive, logical thought, of drawing conclusions; understanding as *intellectus* is a *simplex intuitus*... You can see what those words are in English. They seem just about the same... a simple vision to which truth offers itself like a landscape to the eye. "Intellectus is not concerned simply with the apprehension of a purely spiritual or ideal realm; it is concerned equally with the perception of the everyday world of material things" [p. 64].

In order that the reader may not confuse the position of the present writer with those of Mascall, Gilkey, or others, it seems allowable to interpolate into this exposition some preliminary but basic criticism... People often object to my writing. They say they can't tell when I'm talking for myself and when I'm explaining somebody else. Well you have to read a little carefully to see which. But, I think it is always indicated. And certainly it is indicated here.

From the time of Parmenides down to the present, various philosophers have based their epistemology on an analogy between eye-sight and knowledge... And it strikes me that between 8 and 10 o'clock this morning that is what some of you were doing in this room... From the time of Parmenides down to the present, various philosophers have based their epistemology on an analogy between eye-sight and knowledge. The object of knowledge, the thing known, has been regarded as an individual object, somewhat like a tree or a rock. The object can be "seen" with various degrees of clarity. Poor eye-sight or fog prevents seeing it clearly, though the field of vision includes its complete outline with the background around it. One sees the whole of it, if not the details. Thus God looms up before us in a fog. Bonaventura described it as a global representation of which the intuition is lacking. Mascall presumably wants to preserve some sort of intuition.

But before considering such a difficult object as God, let us apply Mascall's view to a tree or a rock. He says the intellect grasps material things: We can know the tree. Now if one should challenge him to prove that he knows this individual tree, what could he say but that it is an oak

tree, about forty feet tall, with leaves shaped like those of other oak trees, whose wood is coarse grained and very hard? Unless he says something like this, would we not conclude that he does not know this individual tree? Of course, he could be less botanical and say simply, the trunk is brown and the leaves are green.

Note that when he tells us what he knows, he gives us sentences. For the sake of argument, we agree that the sentences are true. But the words "oak tree" are not true. A noun all by itself is neither true nor false. Knowledge (and is not knowledge the possession of a truth?) knowledge always comes in propositions. Otherwise language could not express a truth. Therefore the intellect does not grasp individual material things. It is also impossible to know mental "things," if there are such. Is the concept of two an individual thing? Whether or not, the concept of two, all by itself, is unknowable. "One plus one equals two" can be known, and we assert it as a truth; but the number two, alone, like the oak tree, is neither true nor false. The content of knowledge is always propositional. This view allows the intellect to do something else besides drawing conclusions. It can know premises as well as conclusions. Call it *simplex intuitus*, or contemplation, or understanding, it is different from drawing an implication. Axioms can never be conclusions. But all truth comes in propositions. One can somewhat anticipate how this view of truth can apply to a theory of language.

After some twenty or more pages of Thomism, Mascall is ready to discuss "the relation of words to thought and communication" [p. 88]. First, he repudiates the notion that language is a code, in the sense that one person puts his thoughts into a code and the other person decodes them again into thoughts. We shall not boggle at the necessity of both persons' knowing the same code. With all the ambiguities of English, "neither of them will apply the name 'tree' to the object to which the other will apply the name 'tin-opener.'" The two persons learn the code "by a process in which ostensive definition by our elders plays a large part" ... Really I guess he should have said the whole part but at least he says a large part.

This code theory, Mascall continues, is not wholly false, but it has "only a very limited validity" (p. 91). Its basic defect is the same as that of the sensationalist theory: It confounds the *objectum quod* with the *objectum quo*. This defect becomes clear when one inquires as to how the code was originally set up. Ostensive definitions are impossible unless the learner already knows that ostensive definition is going on. Dogs don't know this.

Linguistic formulae, like sensible particulars, are neither *objecta quae* of communication (for then they would be mere *flatus vocis*, mere sounds in the air) nor are they merely more or less accurate structural replicas of thought; rather they are *objecta quibus*: They are the means by which two minds can share in a common intellectual life. *Cor ad cor loquitur*. That means heart speaks to heart. Mascall as a learned Thomist must use the Latin code: English says, heart speaks to heart (p. 92). But neither English, nor Latin, nor Mascall, is very clear on this point.

This vagueness, because no one knows what hearts speaks to heart means, this vagueness allows him to say that the techniques, the codes, of poetry, painting, science, and theology will all be different. Each is adequate to its particular function. Nor is the function of art merely to evoke emotion, and not to communicate truth.

With less vagueness, hopefully, the present writer agrees that the function of art, even music, which does it the least of all, is to express truth; but maybe not just as Mascall intends. Further, Mascall is not so much interested in the languages of music and painting as he is of theological language where the transcendent God stands out in sharp contrast with every other subject of human thought and discourse (p. 93). Maybe not a verbatim quotation, but essentially what he says on page 93.

Mascall gives two examples of the theological language. First is the poetry and prose commentary thereon, of St. John of the Cross. In spite of the 'artificiality of the technique, every reader, says Mascall, must be struck by the coherence and profundity of the Carmelite Doctor. What justifies a particular descriptive technique is not its conformity to a predetermined criterion, but its simple capacity to get its stuff across" (p. 95). Some people, however, would say that St. John leaves them completely baffled as to his meaning.

The second example is that of some "Protestant controversialists" who have trouble with the epistle to the Hebrews. They argue that Christ relinquished his office of priest because after his ascension he sat down on the right hand of the heavenly majesty. Priests stand; kings are seated. No one can be both seated and standing at the same time. Therefore Hebrews is inconsistent because it describes him as sitting and also as a priest. Mascall, to defend the consistency of the epistle, argues that analogies are not to be taken literally. Analogies literally understood may conflict, but yet convey consistent meanings. To some extent this is true, if analogies convey enough meaning.

But would it not be better to end this puzzle before it begins? Sometimes priests sit down and sometimes kings stand in their chariots as they ride into battle. Of course, it is true that analogies are not to be taken literally; but here is where the theory of analogy must engage in mortal combat, rise from its seat, and be laid low. Mascall himself states the problem: how "a figure which is used only analogically manages to describe its object at all" (p. 96). You can find more of my opinions on analogy in Thales to Dewey where I critique the cosmological argument. But there is some of it here.

To the critic Mascall's answer seems to be an admission of complete defeat. The atonement, he says, is variously explained by Christians and Christian churches. There really is no one clear-cut doctrine of the atonement. Several incompatible picturesque images are in use, none of which applies univocally.

Each analogy applies only up to a point and no further. Yet this does not imply "that theological discourse is insufferably imprecise" (p. 97). The figures of speech may awaken a man to the realization of his alienation from God. Then when he enters into the sacramental fellowship of the church, he will experience the atonement. "The mystery will now be known obscurely and imperfectly, it is true, but no longer imprecisely." The atonement is then "known not by description but by acquaintance." That is something Bertrand Russell invented, I think. Well maybe not invented. He used it anyway.

The question was, How does a figure of speech, an analogy, manage to describe its object at all? Does not Mascall reply, It doesn't? Since he insists that there is no orthodox doctrine of the atonement, since therefore several people mean different things by the term, the analogies apply equally to incompatible doctrines. Or, better, they apply to nothing, for no one idea is acknowledged as being pictured.

If the doctrine of the atonement were clearly known, a preacher might use a pleasing analogy or illustration that might attract his congregation and help fix the meaning in their minds. But suppose none of them has the least literal notion of what doctrine X means. This might not be the case with some well instructed congregations, but it was certainly true on many foreign mission fields in the ninth or the nineteenth century. Now, then, says the missionary, I want to explain to you doctrine X. None of them had even heard the word X before. So the missionary says, X is like the dawning of the morning. One of his audience thinks, X is an event that happens approximately every twenty-four hours. Another in the audience thinks, X is something reddish-orange. A third guesses that X is a work of art, though not necessarily reddish-orange. A fourth supposes that X is a method of locating east. But since none of them has any knowledge of the literal meaning of X, they have no way of determining in what respects X is like the dawn and in what respects it is not. Analogies require but do not furnish information.

Mascall is forced into his otiose theory of analogy by his basic concept of the origin and use of language. "God is by definition an infinite and suprasensible being, while all the language that we have in which to talk about him has been devised in order to describe and discuss the finite objects of our sense-experience" (p. 101). But if one rejects this view of the origin and purpose of language, if one maintains that language is a divine gift for the purpose of conversing literally with God, as well as for counting sheep—then he does not entangle himself in ineffective illustrations in order to talk about God or even the number two.

A paragraph in the book almost admits this, but Mascall seems to miss the import of his own words: "We must recognize that thought about God—knowledge of God—precedes discourse about him. If we could not know [ital. his] anything about God, we certainly could not say anything about him. And the possibility of knowing God is intimately bound up with the doctrine of creation" (p. 103). Mascall makes this excellent statement to prepare for his rejection of Barth's view. It is pertinent. But does it not also, if slightly less obviously, dispose of Thomism as well?

Mascall then concludes by noting the undeniable fact that the Bible uses images. It is not so undeniable that such images are "*objecta quibus*, in the cognitive process." Further, the cognitive process Mascall has in mind does not seem to be cognitive, for he quotes Farrer with approval to the effect that if we seek theological propositions, if we try to deduce from Scripture a logical system of doctrine, "we close our ears to the voice of Scripture" (p. 115). What we need is "the life of spiritual images." In his own words Mascall continues, "for the understanding of images it is not necessary for us to get behind them to a non-metaphorical understanding of fact. The images themselves illuminate us" (p. 116). These statements are not meaningless nonsense as the positivists would claim; they are just plain false.

Now we'll leave England and the Thomists in the Anglican church and the descendants of the Puritans in Boston. And if you are a little puzzled by what I have read so far, the point of it all should become clear in this short chapter.

Some conservative theologians may still dimly remember Bushnell. How many of you have ever heard him before? Oh, good. I'm delighted to have a class like this. Of course you ought to be better than college students. You've had four more years. But anyhow, I'm happy about it. Is that an emotion? No, it is rational. It is an exhibition of rationality which is of a greater degree here than it is down on Lookout Mountain. A rational approval of rationality. Well, I'm delighted to know that most of you have heard of Horace Bushnell. Some conservative theologians only dimly remember him, and they usually remember him as the one who preached the moral influence theory of the atonement. But few, only those in this class, but few conservatives, or even liberals have ever heard of his theory of language until Donald A. Crosby published *Horace Bushnell's Theory of Language* (Mouton: The Hague, 1975). Disagreeing with that author's evaluation, this study will nonetheless profit by his scholarly investigations.

Language, for Bushnell, begins when some primitive man ... There was one theologian in the 19th century who understood precisely what Bushnell meant. Don't I mention it here? Well that is terrible. Remind me when I get to the end of page 104 and then I'll tell you who it is, if it is not here.

Language, for Bushnell, begins when some primitive man attached sounds to physical objects. It was essentially a language of nouns. Verbs begin as nouns denoting actions. All words originate in physical images. He means physical things. The word *and* came from an add. In time—lengthy time is often used to solve problems that cannot be explained—intellectual terms came into use. Physical objects furnish the ground for the symbolism of intellectual discourse.

This development is not so successful as one might wish. Words cannot properly represent even physical shapes. Words name species, they don't name individuals; in fact, they name only sensations. Hence the inexactitude of the original physical language increases when applied to the shapeless ideas of the mind. That is a language which is built out of material objects now is naming material objects just won't do for abstract ideas.

Here an observation may be interpolated. Bushnell raised a question as to how a code could originate. It is a legitimate problem. But there is no difficulty in defending the adequacy of codes. The letters d-o-g and the letters h-u-n-d and the letters c-h-i-e-n are all adequate to represent a certain type of animal.

Symbols are always adequate, just because they are symbols. It seems useless to question the adequacy of theological language. If theological thought can be defended, the language will take care of itself. A person may indeed think of cat or God at the wrong time; and he may say chien when he means chat, but this is no defect in language as such. Therefore if one has an idea of the shapeless number that solves the equation $x^2+1=0$, any symbol will do. Now, of course, they did choose a symbol, you know the one, I'll write it on the board for you. The mathematical symbol. But any symbol would do. You can make some other wiggles on the board and it would

do just as well. It is something that solves the problem of quadratic equations. What symbol you want to use is immaterial.

However, for Bushnell, the shapes of physical objects are supposed to represent, poorly, theological and mathematical objects. Figurative language is clearer than literal. "No turn of logical deduction can prove anything, by itself not previously known by inspection or insight" (Crosby, p. 28; Bushnell, *God in Christ*, p. 58). Or, conversely, the logical arguments of the trinitarians are bad and irreligious; but the Unitarians are even worse because their logic is better. Both should confine themselves to images.

Bushnell seems to oscillate between language and the thought it symbolizes, for he explains that logic—not the choice of symbols—developed from grammar and grammar came from physical relations in nature.

This is a basic and fatal flaw in all empiricism. Even Aristotle failed to give Aristotelian logic an acceptable basis. The reason is that the laws of logic are universal. The syllogism Barbara (now that is one of the most beautiful syllogisms of all. She was a nice girl) The syllogism Barbara is always, everywhere, (You know all the syllogisms have names. Barbara is the name of the first syllogism. A lovely sweetheart.). The syllogism Barbara is always, everywhere, and without exception valid. But experience is never universal. One may observe a thousand black crows, but this is of no value in supporting the proposition, All crows are black. The next crow may be an albino. There are albino crows, you know. But many people haven't seen any. And if you were relying on induction, you would come to the conclusion, All crows are black. And Hence you would believe a falsehood. Hence physical relations in nature, if indeed they could produce grammar, would still never arrive at any principle of logic, mathematics, or theology.

Maybe Bushnell had some vague inkling that this is so, for he concludes that therefore language can apply to truth only in an analogical sense. Maybe we'll get to Van Til before the end of the semester. But if we don't, all right. You've heard of Van Til, maybe I don't need to talk much about him. But you know he uses a theory of analogy and Thomas... anyhow. As I said before, you can find out my nasty remarks about analogy in the Thales to Dewey book. Maybe Bushnell had some vague inkling that this is so, for he concludes that therefore language can apply to truth only in an analogical sense. We need poetic insight. We come closer to the truth only when it is offered "paradoxically." Paradoxically is Bushnell's own term, some seventy-five years before Karl Barth. And it is much the same irrationalism. Poetry is better than prose; the poet's contradictions are all facets of the truth.

Inconsistency is a positive good, for truth resides in feeling. The Gospel of John is the best Gospel because it contains the greatest number of contradictions. Creeds have some value for their own time, for each one illuminates a given facet. We should, or can, easily believe them all. The assumption of Mary, the Swedenborgian heaven, the pronouncements of Brigham Young, and the *unveränderte augsburg confessione*. When such criticisms are directed against Bushnell, a peculiar situation arises. The author Crosby, in defense of Bushnell, complains that the critics take Bushnell literally whereas he should be understood metaphorically. If he says language begins with nouns attached to physical things, he does not that mean that this is true literally. If

he says that the laws of logic are abstracted from limited experience, he does not really mean it. What the critics should have done is take Bushnell's words suggestively. To some people Bushnell's words suggest nonsense.

When in opposition to Bushnell's emphasis on feelings, Hodge says, yes Hodge is mentioned here. He is the one, he is the only one so far as I know, there may be others, but I don't know them, but at any rate, Hodge stands out in the 19th century as having recognized not only that Bushnell had an unorthodox theory of the atonement, but this unorthodox theory of the atonement was based on a theory of language. If you could find some other theologian who recognizes that, I'd be happy if you would tell me. As I say, I haven't read every theologian who wrote in the 19th century. I've read quite a number, but not every one. And even those I read I might have missed it you know.

When in opposition to Bushnell's emphasis on feelings, Hodge says, "The whole healthful power of the things of God over the feeling depends on their being true to the intellect. The Bible is not a cunningly devised fable, a work of fiction addressed to the imagination." And when another author asserts that intellect precedes sense and there is an intelligible world independent of the universal intellect, Crosby returns to defend the imagination, fiction, and feeling. Certainty can only be had in an immediate, imaginative grasping of the truth. Of course, Crosby does not mean this literally. For him there are two truths. First, ordinary information. But second, truth is also a device to create a response. And in this second kind of truth, the question of truth or falsity does not arise. Crosby and Bushnell do indeed speak so as to create a response. I feel, I have an imaginative grasp, I see intuitively, that's all nonsense. This is a satisfactory reply because my feelings are mine as much as his feelings are his.

The twentieth-century religious language philosophers, as before stated, seem not to have been influenced by Horace Bushnell. Langdon Gilkey in *Maker of Heaven and Earth* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959; Anchor Books ed., 1965) makes no mention of him. Yet one will observe several similarities.

The Vanderbilt and Chicago professor begins by branding the early chapters of Genesis as fables and myths, reflecting "the prescientific speculation of the Babylonian and Canaanite cultures" (p. 27). And there is a footnote on Oswald T. Allis. Then, to find religious value in Genesis, Gilkey empties it and most of the Old Testament of intelligible thought.

This is accomplished by his constructing a theory of language that pretends to preserve some religious significance in "all these clearly paradoxical anthropomorphisms" (p. 320). How paradoxical anthropomorphisms, and even Babylonian mythology, can be religiously important without having any cognitive content, Gilkey explains by saying that all language about God is analogical. Or, to quote, "because it is inescapably analogical in character, theological language points to a meaning that transcends any clear and precise description" (p. 67). That's why Niebuhr never said the Apostle's Creed, he sang it. This explanation needs to be read carefully. It says, paradoxical anthropomorphisms are useful in religion because all religious language is analogical. But if analogical language has no cognitive content, how can it make

anthropomorphisms comprehensible? How indeed could it make even non-anthropomorphic language comprehensible? And if all religious language is analogical, what good is any of it?

Mascall, to whom Gilkey devotes a lengthy footnote on page 162, presumably held to St. Thomas' theory of analogy. Bushnell and Gilkey apparently use the term vaguely to denote any kind of similarity. These men do not seem to consider that the statement of the similarity must be literal, not analogical; and that without the literal basis no analogy is possible. Now that's an argument I put some stress on and you're supposed to think about it for a while. What Gilkey expressly says is that "theological language points to a meaning that transcends any clear and precise description" (p. 67). This notion of a pointer Gilkey probably borrowed from Emil Brunner, or some other source in the so-called neo-orthodox or dialectical school. But pointers are obfuscatory. First, in this connection the verb point has no meaning. If I put a mathematical problem on the blackboard, I can point to it, or to a part of it, with my finger, and explain the difficulty; yet pointing does not explain. But if there is no blackboard, how can I point to triangularity, Rosaceae, justice, or relativity? The opposition will reply that I am taking the verb point too literally. But if I take it as a figure of speech that means imply, so that the relations among certain lines and angles imply a theorem, the opposition will like it even less, for this is an example of reasoning *a outrance*. What then do they mean by it? Apparently nothing. Then second, how can they know that the analogy points to anything? If I stick out my finger at random toward the empty sky, I am not pointing at anything. To know that one is pointing, one must see the object pointed to.

But Gilkey's finger points to "a meaning that transcends any clear and precise description." So, the impossible pointer gives us a non-meaning. Gilkey may say that this is not his meaning. Maybe it is not; but who can know, for his meaning or, better, his non-meaning, is unintelligible. Gilkey constantly emphasizes the unintelligibility of religion.

It is a "simultaneous affirmation and denial" (p. 335); Whatever we say of him, that's God, whatever we say of him, must be affirmed and denied at the same time. That's a verbatim quotation. And then I put it my own example. God is both merciful and merciless. He is both omniscience and ignorance. He has no spatial limitations and he is 6 ft tall. "We cannot hope to discover how this likeness and unlikeness is to be resolved. Paradoxes are the only way of speaking about God. He alludes all our words and categories." Perhaps then we were wrong in say God is merciful and merciless, both spatial and non-spatial. We should have that God is neither merciful nor merciless, neither spatial nor non-spatial, neither conscious nor unconscious. The name of the object that fits this description is nothing. But Christians should not be disturbed because to attempt, therefore, to smooth out the paradox is fatal to the meaning of the Christian message. You mustn't try to harmonize this because if you can explain it you have ruined the Christian message.