

Intelligible Christianity

(Address given by Gordon H. Clark, Ph. D., before the Wayne Christian Fellowship I.V.F., Wayne University, Detroit, Michigan.)

At the present time there are two major attacks on Christianity to which students in universities and seminaries are being subjected. The one comes in the name of science and admits of no truth that cannot be verified by sensory observation. It opposes all *a priori* knowledge and considers logic to be an arbitrary convention. This is the philosophy of Logical Positivism. The other attack comes in the name of religion, comes indeed in the name of Christianity, and with the aim of magnifying the transcendence of God, prohibits the human intellect from grasping any religious truth. This is called neo-orthodoxy, and it too disparages the law of contradiction. Though these two philosophies are so obviously different, though their advocates are men of contrasting temperaments, though the first has no room for faith and the latter no room for anything but faith, they have a basic similarity in their views of logic and reason. This similarity makes them equally anti-Christian because while Logical Positivism leaves no place for any theology or metaphysics, neo-orthodoxy equally undermines the idea of verbal inspiration, a written revelation, and an intelligible message from God. It would be profitable to compare these two philosophies, but in these few minutes, there will barely be time to present a brief sketch of the latter.

Neo-orthodoxy came into being chiefly because of the inherent defects of modernism. One of these defects was the difficulty encountered in the quest of the historical Jesus. With the assumption that the Bible is unworthy, various critics reconstructed the picture of Christ in various ways. One made him a simple teacher of morality devoid of all theology, while another made him an eschatological fanatic.

The upshot of this is that Jesus is the man nobody knows. A criticism that denies the historical accuracy of the Bible cannot give us the knowledge that our spiritual needs require. To base our religion on historical criticism is therefore to succumb to relativism.

In view of this many modernists tried to rise above what they called the historical husks of Christianity and tried to find a non-historical, abstract, universal religion of general principles. This usually turned out to be some sort of Hegelian idealism. But the attempt foundered on the emptiness of the abstractions and their

lack of relevance to mankind's real, existential situation. In particular, idealism's picture of man was too idealistic — angelic in fact. The idea of inevitable and rapid progress was brought to a jarring halt by a world at war.

Neo-orthodoxy aimed to steer between Idealism and Relativism. The flight from time and space into a realm of eternal Ideas is illusory, and the shifting relativism that denies a divine revelation in history leaves us with no hope. Both must be avoided. At the same time Neo-orthodoxy also aimed to escape another dilemma. The fundamental, evangelical, or Biblical Christians had argued: Either Jesus lived and spoke as John records, or he is not the Christ.

The neo-Orthodox want Jesus to be the Christ, even though most of what John says is false; and they want Christ as a divine revelation in history without our knowledge of him depending on historical investigation.

To work out this program in detail neo-orthodoxy, or, let us say Emil Brunner in particular, makes use of certain categories that involve a view of human knowledge.

One of these categories is that of *Urgeschichte*, or a history behind history. Creation, the fall of man, and the Resurrection of Christ are events that lie behind history. They are not historical events. They did not occur in time. Therefore our knowledge of them does not depend on historical criticism, nor are these doctrines weakened by the fact that the Bible is historically inaccurate. In one book at least Brunner said that the events of Christ's life and his words are of no decisive importance to Christianity. Somewhat inconsistently he seems later to have retreated from this extreme expression, for if anything essential to Christianity has occurred in time, the attempt to avoid historical investigation by a flight into *Urgeschichte* becomes useless.

This category of *Urgeschichte*, and its companion category of *Gleichzeitigkeit*, or Contemporaneity, by which the historical interval of 2000 years is cancelled on the ground that we are contemporaneous with a non-historical, timeless event, as well as the other categories that would take too long to discuss just now, raise two very important problems. One of these is the role of the Bible in such a view; and the other is the nature of human knowledge. The two are closely related.

The neo-orthodox insist strongly on the word of God; but by the Word of God they do not mean the Bible. Both Barth and Brunner are liberal critics. Brunner denies the unity of Isaiah, declares that John is unhistorical, and in brief, holds that the Bible is full of contradictions. The question then arises, especially in view of his efforts to avoid history, Of what use is the Bible today?

To answer this question Brunner relies on a distinction between two kinds of truth. First, there is ordinary, intellectual truth. Mathematics and physics and no doubt biology deal in truths about things. These truths can be grasped and understood by reason. They can be expressed plainly, accurately, and adequately in words. This type of truth Brunner calls It-truth. But truth about persons, or Thou-truth, is beyond intellectual apprehension. It is not grasped in concepts and cannot be expressed in words. This is most emphatically the case when the Thou is God. The mind of man can think or speculate about impersonal things; but a person cannot be thought; a person can only be encountered.

Therefore divine revelation is not a revelation of doctrine that can be thought. God does not reveal something; he reveals himself. Thus it follows that the Word of God is a person, Jesus Christ, and not something written in a book.

Before continuing with the exposition of neo-orthodoxy, one ought to pause over the idea of personal confrontation. It is a deceptive idea, and the antithesis between the living Word and the written words is unfortunate. Reflecting on our own experience of other persons, can we honestly maintain this distinction? How do we come to know other people? For Brunner a person cannot be thought, he can only be encountered or met. This surely is not true. When we meet people, we do not stand dumb before them. We and they speak. We use words. By considering the meaning of the words, we come to know each other. We reveal ourselves by words and concepts. Any other sort of meeting would be most unsociable.

Now, if Brunner deprecates words and concepts, and stakes everything on an unintelligible encounter, what role can he assign to the Bible? What is the use and the value of its words. What is their status? Brunner describes Peter when he faced Jesus and said, *Thou* art the Christ. This is Thou-truth. Then Peter turns to us and says, *He* is the Christ. This latter statement is It-truth; it is no longer Peter's answer to God's call, but a reflective statement about the personal encounter. It is doctrine; it is not revelation.

Doctrine is of course important. Peter had to tell us about his meeting with Christ. That

Peter and the Apostles, in describing their encounter, make contradictory and incorrect statements about Christ is unimportant, for their aim was not to present a system of truth, it was to produce faith in the person to whom they were speaking. The gospel writers never intended to give us history; Jesus probably never said a word of what John reports; but John gives us a picture of Jesus as seen by faith, and it was to produce faith that the Apostles wrote and preached.

On the other hand, if there is a point of contact, and if the Holy Spirit inspired Peter's confession, then this is a case of verbal inspiration. Now, if verbal inspiration is possible for verbs in the second person, verbal inspiration would seem to be equally possible for verbs in the third person. But this in effect brings back the orthodox dilemma: either the gospels tell the truth, or else Jesus is not the Christ.

There is more to be said about Brunner's use of the Bible, but to prepare for this further material it is necessary to turn to the second problem mentioned above, viz., his view of logic and human reason.

Reason, according to Brunner, is valid only within the sphere of It-truth. Within this sphere, however, he is willing to call reason a most valuable gift of God. He praises it as much as any rationalist could wish.

Yet, as has already been indicated, Thou-truth is not intellectually grasped and is not susceptible to rational categories.

When Brunner sets faith against reason, he does not mean that faith includes a certain amount of conceptual information about the Lordship of Christ and his resurrection from the dead, but in addition to these concepts faith goes further and includes other elements as well. Brunner does not mean this. Unfortunately he holds that faith conflicts with reason, and that faith must curb reason. To follow out the implications of a principle in physics is well and good; but the laws of logic, so he says, lead us astray in religion.

But if this is so, how then can one tell when, if ever, to draw logical conclusions in religious matters? In one case Brunner argues very logically that God must have created man righteous, for otherwise there could have been no fall, and if there had been no fall, there could be no redemption. Since further Brunner does not accept the historicity of Genesis, it is by logic only that he can speak of a fall. Then too in arguing against Schleiermacher, Brunner uses logic by pointing out the contradiction between insistence on the absoluteness of Christianity and the discovery of a common element in all religion. Sometimes, then Brunner is logical.

But when Brunner turns from Schleiermacher to Calvin, his faith must curb his logic. In discussing Romans IX he asserts that Paul was not speaking of Jacob and Esau, but of Israel and Edom, and that God had punished the Edomites for their sins. He overlooks the fact that Paul referred expressly to a time before Jacob and Esau were born, at a time before either of them had done any good or evil. If we drew valid inferences from Romans IX, says Brunner, we would arrive at the doctrine of double predestination. This is inconsistent with God's love. Therefore we must choose between love and logic. We cannot have both. Hence, says Brunner, there is nothing logical about Romans IX; election is illogical; and because the Bible teaches election it is consistently illogical.

This decision to be logical when refuting one man and illogical when opposing another, the practice of drawing conclusions when it suits one's purpose and of curbing implications when they are embarrassing, leads to or is based on a strange view of the Bible.

It was said before that the Apostles in speaking or in writing to us had no intention of being historically accurate but were trying merely to give us the faith that came to them in their encounter with God. The Bible therefore is not the words of God. The Bible is not itself a revelation. The encounter was the revelation, and the Bible is merely a pointer to the revelation. The rational or intellectual content of the Bible's message is not the real thing, it is not what we really want. We want what it points to.

Therefore it is immaterial whether its message is true or false. God is not restricted to truth. Brunner explicitly says, "Gott kann, wenn er will, einem Menschen sogar durch falsche Lehre sein Wort sagen" (Wahrheit als Begegnung, p. 88). In English: "God can, if he wishes, speak his word to a man even through false teaching."

If these words of Brunner are pointers, then shall we not say that they point to a God who tells lies?

Astounding as this is, what better could be expected of a view that repudiates logic and rationality? What better could come from an anti-intellectualism that uses and discards the law of contradiction at will? For it is the law of contradiction, the intellectual categories of thought, and nothing else, that establishes the distinction between truth and falsity.

Brunner may indeed say that he accepts this or that Christian doctrine. For example, he professes to believe in the Incarnation. His favorite quotation from the Bible is, "The Word became flesh." But of what use is it to believe in the Incarnation? If God reveals himself in falsehoods, perhaps the Incarna-

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tion, even though revealed, is a false doctrine. Or, again, if the Word became flesh, did the Word also dwell among us? That is, did the Word have a historical life span, or is the Incarnation some non-historical event of *Urgeschichte* with which we are contemporaneous? And at any rate, the intellectual content of the doctrine, its meaning or significance, the concept of Incarnation is only a pointer to something unintelligible that cannot be understood or thought about. Or, again, if the accounts in the Bible are untrustworthy, if the Apostles wrote as fallible men, what reason could there be for choosing and emphasizing this verse rather than any other? And finally, believe the Incarnation though we may, it cannot control our thought, for we are at liberty as we choose, to accept its implications or to reject them. There is no compulsion to be logical; quite the reverse, we are positively obliged to be illogical.

This, I submit, is an excellent way of denying the doctrine of verbal inspiration, an excellent way of divorcing religion from history, an excellent way of discarding unwanted parts of the Bible; but it is no way at all to bring people a message of good news, it is no way at all to publish events that have actually happened, it is no way at all to say something that can be understood, it is no way at all to proclaim the truth of God as it is in Christ Jesus.



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