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LOGICAL POSITIVISM AND NEO-ORTHODOXY

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In our attempts to preach the gospel, win men for Christ, and instruct the converts in the full Biblical message, several specifically different difficulties are encountered. They may all stem from the easy cooperation of the evil human heart with the wiles of Satan, but they are different in form and require different treatment.

First there are the ordinary and constant troubles which harrass every congregation in its local program. None of us, pastor or people, are free from frailties and failings; and our stubbornness, blindness, laziness, or just the cares of earning a living hinder the progress of the gospel. Outside the church, on the other hand, the people whom we wish to reach enjoy their sins, gross or relatively refined, see no need to alter their mode of life, and display a massive indifference to the message of salvation. Notwithstanding the full realization that this sort of thing constitutes the bulk of the pastor's time consuming burdens, this article wishes to draw attention to two other matters which, because of the pressures of immediate duties, are frequently set to one side, sometimes even unrecognized, and all too often underestimated. Nor are these two matters unrelated to the immediate difficulties of the congregation's weekly and daily work. Insofar as the massive indifference of the population, particularly in the cities and wealthy suburbs, is a reflection of contemporary culture, these two factors are its chief causes.

The first of these barriers to the reception of the gospel is the philosophy of logical positivism, or, more broadly, the viewpoint of secular scientism, also frequently called humanism. This is the contemporary form of the older atheistic materialism; but because the modern form is more sophisticated than the older, because it has avoided some of the earlier technical fallacies, because it is not "materialism" in the former sense, many of the arguments which our Christian forefathers used against their opponents do not meet the modern problems squarely.

The second type of attack which Satan currently makes against the Biblical position comes in the form of a seemingly devout religious emphasis. Even Christian terminology is most often used; and for this reason open and honest positivism may perhaps be less insidious than the second enemy. The two of course differ widely. The one is not found to any extent in the churches; the other is solidly entrenched in the seminaries and pulpits of most of the large denominations. They also differ in their interests: the former spends time on symbolic logic, mathematics, physics and the other empirical sciences; the latter talks a great deal about theology. But though so different in many ways, their theories of language and logic, strangely enough, present a point of similarity which, since it precludes the possibility of an intelligible divine revelation, is an item that deserves the careful attention of every Christian worker. Some patience, however, is required to follow the analysis to its conclusion.

I. Secular Humanism

Dr. Herbert Feigl, professor of philosophy at the University of Minnesota, one of the most prominent logical positivists, has asserted that "Probably the most decisive division among philosophical attitudes is the one between the worldly and the other-worldly types of thought . . . Very likely there is here an irreconcilable divergence. It goes deeper than disagreement in doctrine; at bottom it is a difference in basic aim and interest." He does not say in so many words, "I am an atheist;" but he contrasts his own interest in "this world or ours" with those who consider "nature as an unimportant or secondary thing." The positivist has a "respect for the facts of experience . . . an experimental trial and error attitude . . ." in distinction to "the more impatient, imaginative, and often aprioristic thinkers in the tender-minded camp." He admits that the older materialists fell into the reductionist fallacy and held that men are **nothing but** machines and mind is **nothing but** matter. This is an oversimplification that is to be avoided. Yet

"the empiricist will with equal decision reject wishful thinking of all sorts, the reading into experience of features which are incapable of test, and the multiplication of entities beyond necessity."

Discussions on God, the Hegelian Absolute, or cosmic teleology are "verbal magic." The nature of language will show, so the positivists hold, that such discussions violate rules of syntax and therefore contain no cognitive meaning. Meaningful language, on the other hand, consists, first, of words that refer to objects of experience, and, second, of logical and mathematical formulas. The former words contain factual information; the latter are purely tautological devices, useful for the more efficient handling of factual problems. Logic and mathematics are therefore purely formal and have no ostensive reference. These formal propositions of themselves give no actual knowledge. "If and only if assertion and denial of a sentence imply a difference **capable of observational** (experiential, operational, or experimental) test, does the sentence have factual meaning."

Since the term **God** has no ostensive definition, since it does not indicate any operational procedure, since God cannot be observed, it follows that all theology is literally nonsense. The words have no meaning.

The physics and biology of logical positivism, beyond its theory of linguistics, and the general conflict between science and religion cannot be canvassed in any short article. Besides, much of it is already familiar. The theological Dark Ages were scientifically sterile; when experimentation began, progress became rapid. The Church persecuted Copernicus and Galileo, and the Christians made fools of themselves over evolution. And look how wonderful contemporary scientific achievements are! Such are the ideas, more or less clearly accepted, that influence millions of Americans against the gospel. Without explicitly advocating atheism, the radio, the T.V., the magazines, and the more serious literature enforce a secular culture that is hostile to Christianity. Whether the discussion concern juvenile delinquency or international affairs, it is irrelevant and downright impolite to mention God.

It is impossible here to discuss Galileo or evolution; there is insufficient space

to acknowledge the mistakes of Christians or to analyze the fallacies of pseudo-scientism; an exposition of the philosophy of science would be a lengthy matter. Two points only can be mentioned, and only in brief at that.

First, if all cognitive statements, i.e. sentences that state true, factual information, depend on observation, what is the experiment that shows that all truth depends on experiment? Now, laboratory manipulation of microscopes, balances, electric currents and so on is very successful at verifying specific items of scientific information. Thus we derive Ohm's law, the corpuscular theory of light, and the terrors of nuclear fission. But no observation of such specific items can ever show that "all truths depend on observation." If then this is so, the logical positivists' basic principle is itself not based on experiment and is therefore, on their own showing, devoid of factual information. It is not a cognitive truth.

Second, and worse. If the laws of logic are tautologies and, as A. J. Ayer says, merely arbitrary conventions which might have been different, then there is no necessity that Peter and Paul should be two different Apostles. It would be possible to construct a convention by which the two men would be the same man. After all, it is merely a matter of the use of words, and nothing prevents us from defining the words so as to make Peter and Paul mean the same thing and to make two men the same as one man.

Unfortunately for logical positivism, however, logic is not an arbitrary convention. No doubt we can arrange the books of a library either through one set of numbers or through another set. Many methods of classifying books are equally satisfactory. But there is no alternative to the law of contradiction. Communication of thought and thought itself is impossible without it. If therefore the positivistic distinction between formal and factual and the restriction of cognitive meaning to observational sentences result in making revelation impossible nonsense, logical positivism itself, for the same reason, becomes nonsense too.

II. Neo-Orthodoxy

The second barrier to the successful proclamation of the gospel in these days is Neo-orthodoxy. Quite different from logical positivism, it is not secular nor particularly interested in science. It is

very much interested in theology; it talks about sin and stresses the transcendence of God; and to this extent at any rate is definitely other-worldly.

Yet though these two philosophies are so obviously different, though their advocates are men of contrasting temperaments, though the former has no room for faith and the latter no room for anything other than faith, they have a basic similarity in their disparagement of the law of contradiction. As logical positivism leaves no place for theology, so Neo-orthodoxy undermines the verbal and plenary inspiration of the Scriptures. But, likewise, as the former turned its own principle into nonsense, so too Neo-orthodoxy is chiefly successful in destroying its own position.

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 untrustworthy, various critics reconstructed the picture of Jesus 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, so they argue, 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 they hold that most of what John says is false; and they want Christ as a Divine Revelation in history without our knowledge of him depending upon 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 the categories is that of *Urgeschichte*, or a history behind history. Creation, the fall on 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 then weakened by an admission 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 position of 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 2,000 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 questions. 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 about him 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 experiences 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 other 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 them. We reveal ourselves in 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 the Bible? What is the use and value of its words? What is their status? Brunner describes Peter when he faced Jesus and said, **Thou** are the Christ. This is Thou-truth. Then Peter turns to us and says, He is the Christ. This latter is It-truth; it is no longer Peter's answer to God's call, but a reflective statement about a 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 con-

tradictory 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, one may now pause for a moment to ask a question. If the Neo-orthodox allow for a divine inspiration of Peter's confession; if indeed the Holy Spirit guided Peter to say, "Thou art the Christ;" 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 gospel is true, 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, and in addition to these concepts that faith goes further and included other elements as well. Brunner does not mean this. Unfortunately he holds that faith must curb reason. To follow out the implications of a principle in physics is well and good; but the laws of logic, he says, lead us astray in religion.

But if this is so, how then can we 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 religions. 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, a time before either of them had done any good or any evil. If we drew valid inferences from Rom. IX, says Brunner, we would arrive at the doctrine of double predestination. This he says 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 refuting 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 merely points to the encounter as 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 false or true. God is not restricted to truth. Brunner explicitly says, "Gott kann, wenn er will, einem Menschen sogar durch falsche Lehre sein Wort sagen" (Warheit 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 falsehood.

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 incarnation, 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 an historical life span, or is the incarnation some non-historical event of *Urgeschichte* with which we are contemporaneous? 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 of 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 as we may, it can not 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.