Think with me of the statement of the Apostle Paul when he was imprisoned. “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is to Christ and to die is gain.”

Our gracious Father in heaven, we’re thankful that you have provided answers for us that are significant in life and in death. We thank you for the way you brought those answers home to Edward John Carnell, and we pray that you will bring them home to us as we think further about his ministry today. For the glory of Jesus Christ, our Savior and his, we pray, amen.

In our last lecture we saw that Carnell learned from empiricists, rationalists, biblical presuppositionalists, and from existentialists. In this lecture, look a bit further at an outline of his approach or epistemology. What was his logical starting point? It was not unexamined presuppositions, supposedly objective observations, or immediate religious experiences, but interpretative hypotheses that may be either confirmed or disconfirmed, lest Carnell meticulously examined the hypotheses that the triune God of the Bible exists. “If He exists,” reasoned Carnell, “then we should be able to make sense of life logically, factually, and existentially.” Rudolph Nelson refers to Carnell as a presuppositionalist who comes close to writing 359 pages begging the question, but Nelson fails to comprehend the difference between untestable presuppositions and hypotheses that can be confirmed or falsified. Carnell’s method is neither presuppositional nor circular; it calls for openness that will consider any hypothesis and follow the relevant evidence where it leads.

What then about his view of common ground? Is there a point of contact with unbelievers or are religious issues too ultimate and emotively explosive for productive cognitive evaluation? Is it possible to consider with a high degree of philosophical
fairness issues with such deep polarizing loyalties? Carnell finds a basis for dialogue with different cultures and philosophies in an analysis of what makes human experience meaningful. This initial step provides the ground rules for his verificational procedure. Analysis of what makes human experience meaningful is not inductive or deductive inference from experience to something outside it. Neither is it simply a phenomenal, logical description of our experiences. Rather, it is a reflective evaluation of the various elements already present in our experience. This cannot be done by proxy through what we hear from others. It is one's own unique experience that one analyzes. Carnell's analysis of what makes his experience meaningful provided several points of contact then with non-Christians. These points of contact are featured in a number of his apologetic works.

First, respect for the inherent worth and rights of others, a valuing of other persons above all things. Second, relationships characterized by justice, consideration, and love. Third, care about the psychological well-being of others. These moral and existentialist values are shared by all human beings, all forms of non-Christians and Christians. There are some others. Other points of contact include intellectual honesty. Other points, however, differ initial worldviews maybe, include four intellectual honesty and humble acknowledgement of relevant evidence, and fifth, communication in a way that others can follow; that is, without intellectual hypocrisy or self-contradiction. These universal points of contact enable finite fallen humans in a pluralistic world to live and learn productively—to move beyond mere opinions to increasingly well-informed, correctable opinions and eventually to well-founded true opinions.

On the basis of the common ground identified by his analysis of what makes human experience meaningful, Carnell observed that there are certain normative standards by which to test claims about ultimate, moral, and religious realities. Anyone's starting points may be tested by three basic criteria of truth arising out of the common ground. One, logical noncontradiction; two, empirical adequacy; and three existential viability, including ethical, axiological, and psychological data. Carnell often summed up these elements as systematic consistency. A true or well-founded option is without contradiction and fits the facts empirically or externally and existentially or internally.

One using Carnell’s method of justifying beliefs will accept the hypothesis that provides the most coherent account of both areas
of relevant data. Attainment of the ideal of complete knowledge is not possible, but one will accept as more probable the worldview with the fewest difficulties and greatest coherence and viability.

What about the role of reason? Reason plays a necessary role in Carnell’s verificational method, but it is not a sufficient one. Carnell did not find this issue easy. No student of apologetics ought to imagine it so. In Carnell’s perspective of faith and reason, which is Augustinian rather than Thomistic, the ultimate object of religious faith remains unseen, but the signs indicating its reality are seen. There actuality and significance can be either confirmed or disconfirmed, thus, reason, scientia, precedes faith in testing conflicting claims. When a few is confirmed, it is seen to be adequate, and we have good cause to believe in its invisible referent. In this way, faith in the God who personally relates is established; we can then make wise choices according to His eternal wisdom in all areas of life. Another indication that Carnell’s apologetic is more in the tradition of Augustinian than of Aquinas is that he defends Orthodox or evangelical Christianity, not mere Theism. In defending belief in the God of Jesus Christ and of the Bible, he includes more theology than traditional arguments for the existence of God. Carnell emphasizes Trinitarianism, the incarnation, scriptural authority, illumination, and existential works of love. Furthermore, it is not the case that reason functions alone, for part of the way and is then followed by a leap of faith. Rather, reason distinguishes what to believe and why. Belief in the reality designated then leads to a commitment. Thus, faith in turn, leads to the desire for more knowledge. Knowledge and faith lead to each other in a kind of Augustinian chain reaction.

What then of Carnell’s view of the basis of faith? In his writings it is knowledge of what is to be believed and why one is to believe that and not something else. Who cannot see that knowledge precedes belief, but faith is more than knowledge. Knowledge to be sure is a necessary prerequisite and faith is based on the sufficiency of the evidence, but faith is whole soul trust in God’s Word as true. More than knowledge is needed; therefore, the Spirit must overcome opposing desires and stubborn pride-filled wills. The Spirit’s task is not to create new revelation or new evidence, but to secure response to the evidence publically available. Faith guided by truth away from idols to the God who relates, evokes emotional responses. A new convert joyfully sings, “Oh happy day! When Jesus washed my sins away.” But such feelings are only as secure as the system of truth which fortifies them. Truth establishes feelings; feelings do not establish truth.
Ontologically, the outcome of Carnell’s critical epistemology is a critical realism. A mature use of his verificational method moves toward a non-disillusioning sense of reality. Critical realism in the study of what is real is not to be confused with a naïve realism or a common sense realism. Neither is it an idealism. Against idealism, critical realism retains belief of naïve and common sense realism in independent things and states of affairs. On the other hand, the fact that, say the statue of David in Florence, can be seen from different angles does not mean that our knowledge is nothing but varied perspectives. The variety of perspectives, indeed the same individual may have different perspectives at different times and in different situations, calls for a critical discernment. A critical method is indispensable if we are to confirm or dismiss partial beliefs about elephants, persons, events, and God. Whether derived from common sense, sensory observation, rational analysis, or mystical intuition, our perspectives are limited. Hence, we must always be open to considering additional elements of truth. In brief, as responsible students of the God-originated Word, we must justify our proposed interpretations by showing that they coherently fit the relevant, literary, grammatical, historical, and contextual evidence. Similarly, as responsible observers of the God-governed world, we must justify our interpretations thereof by showing that they, without contradiction, account for the relevant data we receive not only physically through the five senses, but also morally, psychologically, and experientially.

By using Carnell’s comprehensive verificational method and three basis criteria of truth, students of human experience and of Scripture can successfully evaluate contradictory claims about reality. Carnell was himself one of the first evangelicals to be heard across theological and philosophical lines. Neo-Orthodox theologian William Hordern regarded Carnell’s work a major attempt to converse with modern philosophy and non-conservative theology. Carnell served warning that the new conservative was no longer content to hide in an intellectual ghetto. He was prepared to march out into the modern world and meet it on its own terms. And John Stackhouse called Carnell an archetypal evangelical who foreswore the claustrophobic security of the fundamentalist bedroom. He apparently never paused at the doorway, but he boldly strolled out into that marketplace to learn as well as to teach. Those who wish to call themselves evangelical today might well ask themselves, “Who follows in his train?” Those who adopt Carnell’s methodology will be able to enter into discussion with non-conservative Christian theologians and with non-Christians.
Consider then Carnell’s view of biblical inerrancy. This has been a very controversial issue in the last half of the twentieth century and in regard to Carnell in particular. In his first book, Carnell maintained that religious revelation is derived from the canon of Scripture which is plenarily inspired. By inspired he meant that the authors were moved by the Holy Spirit to write down only what God approved. He concluded his chapter on the problem of biblical criticism with the affirmation that Christianity knows no contradiction of its radicals, but that there will be the perpetual presence of minor difficulties. While some of Carnell’s interpreters think that he moved away from his early position of verbal plenary inspiration (plenary meaning complete and equal throughout), David Frazier says, “Careful examination of his writings makes this doubtful. It appears rather that he refined his understanding of inspiration, so as to face more honestly the inductive difficulties of the Bible without shifting from a basic conviction of complete trustworthiness.” But Rudolph Nelson has proposed that the issue of biblical inerrancy was a major source of tension throughout Carnell’s life. Carnell was burdened with the dead weight of Clarkian Rationalism and in an anachronistic theology inextricably tied to an inerrant Bible. He not only never achieved the happy harmony of head and heart, but found intolerable, unconsciously perhaps, his failure to do so. He was too imbued with the constraints of Rationalism ever to be comfortable with Kierkegaardian Existentialism and too inward to ever be content with Clarkian Rationalism. He could not jettison the one in favor of the other.

In the case for Orthodox theology, Carnell did classify as Orthodox the view that the formal inerrant record contains errant historical detail, but did not espouse that position for himself. Similarly, with the purpose of defending all who were Orthodox, but not necessarily fundamentalists, Carnell included James Orr’s approach to inspiration, as well as the Princeton theology. The intramural debate between Orr and Warfield, he said, “had not been successfully terminated.” Nelson’s view that this issue was a major source of Carnell’s psychological unrest is belied by Carnell’s subsequent statement. Orthodoxy may never officially decide whether the Holy Spirit corrected the documents from which the chronicler drew his information, but this resolution does not affect the theology of the church—Paul received his theology directly from Jesus Christ. He did not draw on existing documents. Orthodoxy’s intramural debate on inspiration in no way disturbs the truth of the Gospel, and to think that it does is cultic.
In his introductory course in logic, Carnell distinguished sentences as verbal vehicles from propositional meanings they convey. Applying this basic logical distinguished I have argued, and I think he would, that truth (freedom from error) is a quality of the Bible's propositional assertions or meanings; whereas, infallibility or effectiveness is a quality of the Bible's sentences. Robert Price suggests that Carnell and other neo-evangelical leaders were moving toward a merely conceptual view of inspiration, but Carnell affirmed that both the truth of the Bible's conceptual teaching and its effectiveness as a verbal communication for achieving God’s purposes.

While engaging in dialogue with Karl Barth in Chicago in 1962, Carnell mentioned that he too faced difficulties with historical detail. For this attempt to identify with Barth and his failure to challenge Barth when he was given the opportunity, Carnell was attacked by fundamentalists with some justification. But as Carl Henry recalls, he later reaffirmed his belief in inerrancy and indicated that he considered Barth’s reply unsatisfactory. Indeed, Carnell insisted that evangelical Christianity should not jettison the doctrine of inerrancy.

Carnell’s position on inerrancy is also made clear in a letter written to Christianity Today the year before he died. Warfield clearly perceived that a Christian has no more right to construct a doctrine of biblical authority out of deference to the presumed inductive difficulties in the Bible than he has to construct a doctrine of salvation out of deference to the actual difficulties—difficulties which arise whenever one tries to discover the hidden logic in events; events such as A) the Son of God’s assumption of human nature or B) the son of God’s offering up of this human nature as a vicarious atonement for sin. We are free to reject the doctrine of the Bible’s view of itself, of course, but if we do so, Carnell says, “We are demolishing the procedure by which we determine the substance of any Christian doctrine.”

Furthermore, at the time of his death, Carnell had affirmed in the introduction to a book he was writing on the Bible that “the view of biblical inerrancy in my finite judgment is correct.” Carl Henry concludes, “If we inquire about Nelson’s preferred alternative, we are left pretty much with a bag of wind.” To his dying day, Carnell would have fought the imaginative proposals that Nelson postulates. Many quotations Nelson cites by way of implicit criticism of Carnell’s positions are akin to those that Carnell would have wrestled and pinned to the mat. Historian
George Marsden acknowledges that for Carnell the inerrancy issue remained a source of constant strain, but Carnell as an act of demission would have well handled the strain involved. The roots of Carnell’s major anxieties must be sought elsewhere.

Consider then his personal struggles. In the making and unmaking of an evangelical mind, Nelson sees Carnell’s life as a parallel to his own experience of breaking away from evangelicalism. Nelson writes, “By the time Carnell died in 1967, I was beyond the point where his books on apologetics could have changed the course of my life. For about this time, I was forced to acknowledge that for some twenty years my own faith had been suffering a steady process of erosion.” Finally Nelson’s faith was chipped away down to the core and he was through playing intellectual games. Then he says, “I cut all my ties with creedal and institutional Christianity.”

Do Nelson’s struggles with the view that the Bible is inerrant and historic Christianity is true really parallel Carnell’s experience? The indications that Carnell’s faith unraveled are very tenuous and merely circumstantial—offhand remarks he made while working in the dining hall as a student at Wheaton College, the comments of friends, and his need for medication and counseling. Indeed, Nelson undermines the credibility of his own thesis and I quote, “Admittedly we can find little evidence of ideological uncertainty in Carnell’s published writings. I have no illusions,” Nelson admits, “that the Edward John Carnell who is emerged in this book is an objective, factual reproduction of the real thing. He is rather a Carnell that I have had a part in creating.”

Reviewing Nelson’s book on Carnell, John Stackhouse observed a pervasive background of assumption that Carnell’s revealed religion is false. But Nelson needs to demonstrate how Carnell’s reasoning or how evangelicalism itself falls short, and this he finally fails to do. The author’s assertion and limited evidence that evangelicalism was an intellectual and spiritual cul-de-sac for Carnell and much more that it is for everyone, cannot take the place of a proper demonstration of this point in his interpretation.

How then are we to explain Carnell’s internal struggles? His anxieties stemmed from several factors other than uncertainty about the truth of the Bible’s basic tenants. Having identified himself as a fundamentalist in his early years, Carnell struggled with issues relating to fundamentalist legalism, negativism, and separatism. He was awakened out of dogmatic slumber to realize
that possession of truth does not mean possession of virtue. Sanctification requires also an existential repentance, faith, and love. Carnell commented, “I know that much of this will sound elementary to outsiders, but to one reared in the tyrannical legalism of fundamentalism, the recovery of a genuine theology of grace is no insignificant feat. The feat calls for a generous outlay of intellectual honesty and personal integrity.”

Second, Carnell’s early successes probably occasioned unrealistic hopes for his entire career. By the age of thirty he had to his credit two earned doctorates, a prize-winning book, a record of outstanding teaching, and an appointment to the Fuller Theological Seminary faculty. At the age of thirty-five he became president of the seminary. The demands of administration did not allow him then to keep up his impressive record. Carnell’s experience reminds one of John Stuart Mills, whose private education gave him an advantage of a quarter of a century over his contemporaries, but it also contributed to a mental breakdown.

Third, a major source of Carnell’s anxiety was his five years of administrative duties as president of Fuller, for which he himself said he had neither the time nor the inclination. Personal attacks by fundamentalist leaders had traumatic affects furthermore. This fourth point is crucial. These attacks came not only on Carnell, but also on Fuller Seminary and radio preacher Charles E. Fuller. The income generated by the national radio broadcast—and so the seminary’s income—was serious curtailed. The first public attack on Carnell came for his use of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which was thought to reflect liberal assumptions. Marsden reports that in the midst of all this, Fuller called a moratorium on public faculty discussion of the RSV. E. J. Carnell later wrote that the bitter war of nerves of the Orthodox against him for defending the RSV was what first made him realize that Orthodoxy suffered from a serious illness. Having until then always thought of himself as a champion of Orthodoxy, Carnell began to examine whether he needed to purge himself of his own fundamentalist illness.

Although able to relate fairly and lovingly to people who were on the left of his position, Carnell found it increasingly difficult to respond in like manner to critics from the right. Instead, he published a scathing attack, categorizing them as cultic. Even Bernard Ramm, in a review of the case for Orthodox theology, warned that Carnell’s treatment of the fundamentalists will call forth a very strong reaction from them,. And I would remind the good author that the fundamentalists, for all the shortcomings
they might have, are still members of the church.

Fifth, consider also the time and energy Carnell was compelled to devote to pursuits other than his beloved philosophy and theology. This driven scholar eventually declared “All my free time must now of necessity go into ethics. I literally have hundreds of books and articles with which I must make peace and soon.”

Sixth, Carnell suffered mentally and physically from the side effects of the psychiatric treatment of the time. Seeking to combat lifelong depression and insomnia, he underwent numerous electroshock treatments and became a barbiturate addict. Victimized by heavy sedation and accompanying memory lost, the classroom presence of this one-time master teacher became marked by concentration on personal problems, academic ineffectiveness, and dwindling student interest. Carnell never found the ivory tower in which theologians are alleged to spin out their theories. Theologians are fully human persons with both finite and fallen natures. Their special interests and commitments, however, do not exempt philosophers or religion from responsibilities as parents, neighbors, citizens, administrators, fundraisers, counselors, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.

Attributing Carnell’s death to an unknown amount of barbiturates, the coroner concluded, “I find death undetermined whether accidental or suicidal.” Without sufficient basis to rule the case of suicide, the far more probable hypothesis is that Carnell had experienced difficulties in getting to sleep while anticipating the next day’s lecture at a Roman Catholic institution. On the advice of his psychiatrist, Carnell’s wife had customarily dispensed the sleeping pills as needed because of his occasional unreliability in keeping track of the dosage. Marsden concludes, “Carnell died as the result of acute depression that one way or another overwhelmed his rational control. He was in a state in which desperation could have obliterating normal categories of intention. If his death was in any sense willed, it was not premeditated. It had none of the Carnell organization; the overdose was ‘moderate’ and the room showed signs that the seizure was unexpected.”

Look briefly then at his theology. Although some elements of Carnell’s theology are evident in the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, the primary exposition of his doctrinal stance is in The Case for Orthodox Theology (1959)—written as part of a trilogy that also included William Horner’s Case for a New Reformation Theology—and L. Harold DeWolf’s Case for Theology in Liberal Perspective.
Carnell’s slender work explicitly discusses theology in a single chapter, chapter five of twelve pages. It is based on Paul’s epistle to the Romans. Here Carnell incisively states his views of human sinfulness, divine righteousness, justification, federal headship, sanctification, the unique Christian conflict, and adoption. The subjects of the other chapters are foundations, faith, authority, hermeneutics, proof, difficulties, perils, and the future. The book contains much pungent materials. Millard Erickson writes, “The chapter on difficulties in Carnell’s *Case Book*, for instance, is one of the most candid pieces of self-criticism in all of theology.”

Regarding him as one of the more prolific and articulate apologists for biblical Christianity in our generation, Ronald Nash compiled and edited a number of Carnell’s essays on theology, philosophy of religion, ethics, ecumenism, fundamentalism, separatism, and other topics of contemporary interest; the title of that book being *The Case for Biblical Christianity*. John Sims says, “Much of Carnell’s contribution lay in the fact that his theology provided a balanced view of the subjective and objective aspects of revelation.” At the beginning of *The Case for Orthodox Theology*, Carnell differentiates theology from apologetics. Statement draws on theology; defense draws on apologetics. There follows a volume of incisive statements many of which unfortunately are not well-supported in terms of his own verificational approach to knowledge. For example, he declares, “The theology of Orthodox theology is the theology of the Reformers and the theology of the Reformers is the theology of the prophets and apostles.” Armenians might well demand some justification for this identification of Orthodoxy with Reformed theology. One would have expected Carnell to consider Reformed and Wesleyan Arminian theologies hypotheses to be tested by the law of noncontradiction and by the facts external and internal. Similarly, rather than considering Orthodoxy and fundamentalism—two hypotheses to be critically examined by the criteria of truth—Carnell simply denounces fundamentalism as a mentality divorced from the creeds of the church, seeking status by negation and dominated by ideological thinking that is rigid, intolerant, and doctrinaire.

As a writer of theology, Carnell effectively stated his conclusions, but he did not adequately disclose the data and method of reasoning by which he arrived at them. Had Carnell used his verificational method in his work on Orthodox theology, he would have at least briefly traced lines of relevant evidence from the whole Bible in support of his assertions. But he limits himself to Romans as the ideal treatise in systematic theology, and because
it is not a corrective for any specific dissentions, heresies, or attacks on Paul’s authority. Ignoring, as it did, Carnell’s own verificational method and criteria of truth, the case for Orthodox theology aroused controversy. A simple statement of theological conclusions without presenting a coherent basis for them naturally raises controversy. Wise students of theology like those in other fields, justify the statements they make. Theological, as well as philosophical, knowledge is not mere opinion. It is not even true opinion. Knowledge in theology is elsewhere is well-founded true opinion.

Why did Carnell not utilize his own method in the case for Orthodox theology? The limits of space may be part of the answers. He may not have regarded the givens of Scriptures for the more as evidence to the givens of nature and history. It may be that if Carnell had not taken the presidency at Fuller and had taught theology through those five years, he would have given more thought to theological methodology. He felt deeply his lack of opportunity to pursue theology more fully. After stepping down from the presidency and returning to life as a professor, he said it in a note to his brother-in-law, “Remember, I lost five years as president. I also lost the field I had prepared for, systematic theology.”

Carnell’s works have had a remarkable impact in many branches of Christian thought and service. His methodological contribution can be seen in a variety of fields. Some of the writers we will cite represent independent parallel developments, showing ways in which his method may be applied; but most show his impact directly. In ethics a Carnell-like approach is used by Oliver Barclay. His reasoning is neither deductive nor inductive, he explains, rather it is a whole gestalt framework that is uniquely convincing as an explanation of the phenomena of life both intellectual and experimental. The ethic of love given us ready made in the Bible, Barclay argues, “Fits and explains human thinking and experience as nothing else does.” Christian ethical hypotheses have a uniquely convincing explanatory value.

In the sciences, David Dye’s *Faith and the Physical World: A Comprehensive View*, recommends Carnell’s works highly and shows how a Christian worldview consistently accounts for all the aspects of human life. Using a verificational approach, Dye concludes that physical reality exists, logic applies, and causality operates not deterministically, but probabilistically. Bernard Ramm supplied the factual confirmation of the Christian
hypotheses in his *Protestant Christian Evidences*, arguing that by reason of its factuality, Christianity is the religion which reflects reality. Richard Purtill’s *Reason to Believe*, similarly seeks to show that Christianity is not only logically possible, but also fits known facts, and for purposes of pre-evangelism, Francis Schaefer made use of a non-technical version of Carnell’s apologetic method. Schaefer’s reasoning was not that of a Van Tilian presuppositionalist, nor an evidentialist. Carnell starts not with allegedly objective empirical data impinging on a blank mind, nor with the unchallengeable premises of presuppositionalists, but with hypotheses to be tested. Charles Purce calls this process *abduction*. Abduction is the means whereby hypotheses are generated, moving from a particular case to a possible explanation in general.

John Warwick Montgomery calls it *retroduction*, holding that scientific theories are conceptual gestalts, built up retroductively through imaginative attempts to render phenomena intelligible. Although Schaefer’s works do not cite sources, his apologetic method generally follows this third way of reasoning—Carnell’s verificational approach.

At our next session we will have opportunity to look at his approach and its implication for our witness more fully.