Jesus said, according to John 8:32, “Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” Father in heaven, as people all around us are enslaved to sin and evil, we pray that You will set them free. Enable us to understand Your truth and to present it effectively that the oppressed may be liberated around the world. For Jesus’ sake we pray. Amen.

In the last lecture we evaluated Van Til’s charges against Carnell’s starting point, common ground, and test for truth. We now briefly compare their views on the role of reason and the basis of faith.

The role of reason. Van Til considers its role to be purely exegetical and expository of Scripture and confessions. In Carnell, reason functions by exegetically and critically. It does exegesis and exposition only after first testing the validity of the claims of books alleged to be specially revealed sacred writings. Carnell tests religious claims on the basis of logical, factual, and existential data. The stool on which he sits has three solid legs, not just one or two as in the previous approaches.

On the basis of values, as well as logic and fact, he can trust the God disclosed in Scripture. On that basis he knows why the Bible merits the consuming attention of our colleges, seminaries, and churches. Van Til criticizes Carnell for using points of common ground in these three areas for deciding four basic Christian presuppositions. But people change their ultimate assumptions from time to time when they are found to be unrelated to reality and life. We do not need to make our most fundamental decisions in a vacuum, we must adopt the postulates of a worldview wisely, as did the people of God before the Bible was all written.

A critical use of reason in the Old and New Testament times distinguished true from false prophets, messiahs, and apostles. Today, a critical use of reason distinguishes true from false claims to divine revelation. Carnell uses reason as related to the values of
life first to examine, try, and verify contradictory, philosophical, and religious claims. So reason has then both a verificational and an expository use in the approach I am recommending. It is both/and, not either/or.

And what about the basis of faith? Van Til’s approach asks the non-Christian to presuppose the existence of the God of the Bible without evidence or argument. There is no reasoned basis for the beginnings of faith. One is expected to make a voluntary leap of trust without a reasoned ground. Surely Carnell must have known that in using the method borrowed from Brightman, he was taking into his hands a dangerous tool to use in the defense and particularly in a philosophical defense of Christianity. Does not every method grow out of a system? Is not every system the fruit of its method? This partial representation of Carnell’s method as empirical fails to incorporate its logical and existential aspects. It also fails to acknowledge that Carnell’s starting point is as different from the Boston personalists as heaven is different from earth. One could as effectively but fallaciously argue that Van Til’s method is suspect because derived from idealists like Hagel, Bradley, and Bosanquet.

Surely in adopting the method of idealists, Van Til must have known that he was taking into his hands a dangerous tool in the defense of Christianity. These idealists denied an Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, the uniqueness of Christ’s incarnation, and the literal truths of Scripture in general. Ignore Van Til’s starting point as he ignored Carnell’s and he is equally guilty of borrowing a method from non-Orthodox writers. But enough of this! Of course, the fallacy of guilt by association proves nothing against Van Til, neither does it prove anything against Carnell. Because a method is used by non-Orthodox philosophers, it does not necessarily lead to the destruction of Christianity. Rather on Carnell’s approach one asks a non-Christian to accept the reality of the God of the Bible on the basis of its coherence and viability which can be justified ahead of time. I conclude that the strongest criticisms leveled against a verificational approach are based on misinterpretation or fallacious reasoning.

Let us now try to understand Carnell’s approach to apologetics in greater detail. He distinguishes a temporal starting point from a logical starting point. The temporal starting point in a conversation with a non-Christian picks up at any interest the other person happens to have. After brief references to weather and sports, the cost of living or changes in the neighborhood,
inquire about a person’s views of society’s moral crisis or one’s religious background or philosophy, worldview, or way of knowing. And as differences in belief systems then become clear, it is time to make known your logical starting point.

The logical starting point as distinct from the temporal is not the self-authenticating feelings of Christian or other mystics. There are several reasons for this. First, feelings support contradictory truth claims. You have mystics on all sides of the issues as to whether God is personal or impersonal, totally transcendent or totally imminent, etc. Second, feelings are incapable of criticizing themselves, and third, belief in the feelings being self-authenticating may bring psychological certitude, but not objective truth epistemologically. Four people with certitude, having become one with Bromine, Allah, or Krishna, may have and have had upon occasion some very harmful experiences. For those four reasons then it is impossible to accept the view that the logical starting point can be self-authenticating.

The logical starting point of a verificational approach is not the sense data of pure empiricism either. No one has a mind that is empty or tabula rasa. It is unrealistic to think that one can be completely objective in any field, let alone morality and religion, which involve personal commitment. David Hume and others who tried a pure empiricism ended with skepticism, and a mere empiricism can provide only disjointed impressions with no adequate account of universal or necessary laws of logic. A strict empiricism can neither confirm nor disconfirm the existence of a God who is Spirit.

A rational empiricism heading an innate causality at best can confirm only a finite God. If God is more than finite, the method of rational empiricism could never test that claim. And if God is not infinite, the different types of evidence may require a number of different finite gods as causes. The logical starting point is then the hypothesis of God’s existence as revealed in the Jesus of history and the teaching of Scripture. It is not merely the God of the Bible, for special revelation came both in the historical person of Jesus Christ and in the teaching of Scripture. The logical starting point is the coordinating ultimate that gives being, meaning and value to the many things encountered in space and time. The logical starting point should resolve the problem of the one and the many. Philosophers who start with a single ultimate have difficulty explaining the world’s diversity, and those who start with a multitude of elements have difficulty accounting for
the world’s unity.

The Christian answer to the ontological problem of the one and the many is the one God who exists in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The answer to the problem of the one and many is a multiplicity in unity as in Trinitarianism. The starting point epistemologically, then, is the means through which the triune God is apprehended in space and time, the Jesus of history, and the teaching of His apostles. The logical starting point of the God of Jesus and Scripture is not an axiom as in the approach of Clark’s rationalism, nor a self-authenticating presupposition as in Van Til’s approach, but a hypothesis to be accepted or rejected only after testing by adequate criteria of truth.

Hypotheses are used because they are characteristic of everyday life of science and philosophy. The day starts out with two hypotheses of going on a family picnic. If the weather is good, we can go to the mountains for that picnic. If the weather is inclement, we will not go. We make the decision between these hypotheses by listening to the weather prophets and by looking at the sky ourselves. We act on the hypothesis that bests fits the relevant evidence.

The scientific method also makes use of hypotheses, refining our everyday procedures. After years of research with anything but a blank mind, the scientists tests possible explanatory proposals. These hypotheses are tested by their adequacy to account coherently for the given data in laboratories and field trips under controlled conditions. Scientists test hypotheses in a limited field like geology, astrology, physics, or biology.

Philosophers seek to take into account the data from everyday experience and all the fields of scientific experience. They look for the pattern of meaning that gives significance to everything in the universe. The history of philosophy surveys the influential hypotheses that have been proposed to explain human experience. It is no more presumptuous for a Christian to propose a pattern of meaning to give significance to all of life’s experiences than for a non-Christian humanist, materialist, or idealist to do so.

Two dangers need to be avoided in philosophical hypothesis making. Some fear proposing any hypotheses at all; other hypothesis-happy souls have a complete lack of fear. One must go beyond the facts if he is ever to know anything conceptually. Knowledge is the meaning of the data, not the data themselves.
“One who does not go beyond the facts,” said Huxley, “will seldom get as far as the facts.” Logical positivists illustrate the danger of staying so close to the facts that they cannot appreciate their significance. We cannot appreciate the perspective in a large painting if we are so close our noses rub on it. On the other extreme are the hypothesis-happy souls who are too far from the picture for their imagination to fit its givens. Their imagination sets forth hypotheses too extensive to be verified.

The rationalists who sought to geometrize reality forgot that the imagination must be relevant as well as free. A good hypothesis is free enough to explain the facts and yet restrict it enough to explain the facts. Put in a brief formula, knowledge equals the given data plus conceptual interpretation. One chooses the simplest hypothesis; that is, the one with the fewest ultimate principles to account for the data and the fewest unexplained special cases.

The Golden Rule applies in hypothesis making. Non-Christians are invited to produce as many as they wish if they will simply allow the Christian freedom to set forth his or hers. If Christians want non-Christians to listen to their case, they must return the favor, and non-Christians who want us to take their worldview seriously should attend carefully to a Christian’s worldview.

What are the advantages of starting with hypotheses? Well, hypotheses in this spirit provide a tactful way of reasoning with others of different cultural backgrounds. We do not assume that they must agree with us to start with; we simply ask that they consider our position. We do not claim to be the only ones who see the facts objectively, but we ask them to join us in the process of testing their hypotheses and ours by some objective criteria.

You may ask whether we have any adequate basis for talking with non-Christians when our worldviews seem to be so radically different. We can communicate with non-Christians because there is common ground. There are some synthetic starting points which provide a foundation for mutual understanding and respect. On what bases can Christians and non-Christians engage in meaningful dialogue on such meaningful controversial issues? Although radically worldviews are held, both are human and therefore share several aspects of common ground. Although many suggest that all religious knowledge is relative, we have some common convictions as a foundation on which we can reason together. After some difficulties in counseling and
communicating the faith to ardent non-Christians, however, it is easy to despair of any common ground. A motto on my desk reads, “Every story has three sides: yours, mine, and the facts.” Unfortunately, many people have despaired of ever finding the facts. That was the problem of a medical doctor with whom I talked. This distinguished specialist said, “I used to think there were three sides in counseling a married couple—her side, his side, and the truth. If I could only discover the truth and tell them, that would solve the problems. Now I do not think there is a third side, the truth. Each has to forgive the other and that’s it. They wouldn’t accept the truth if they heard it!”

Well, we must not despair as this doctor did of ever finding the truth. We will not ever find it in this life as God sees it with complete objectivity and wholeness, but we can progress in knowing the truth in part, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13, “Now I know in part.”

How can we then discover these points of contact that enable us to reason together and make progress toward the truth? We can proceed by analysis of what makes our shared experiences in this one world meaningful. Let me mention, then, a number of points of contact or points of common ground with non-Christians that make apologetic reasoning possible and even fruitful. First, whatever else non-Christians may doubt, they cannot doubt their own existence as persons, and neither can Christians. With Augustine, both say, “I doubt, therefore I am.” And both can say with Descartes, “I think, therefore I am.” This knowledge of the inner self as doubter, thinker, and believer is knowledge in the mind that is not first in the senses. Hence, none can remain reductive empiricists. Empirical theories of knowing are of value for the physical world, but not adequate for the inner world of values or of intimate personal experience of one’s own self.

Furthermore, as we think about ourselves, all know that they are finite and dependent, but of greater worth than any collection of things. We all know that we ought to respect the rights of others to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Every human being knows he or she ought not to lie, cheat, steal, or murder. This knowledge may be covered over and suppressed, the conscience may be seared, but underneath we know that God has written on our hearts these requirements of His law. The negative commandments are simply negative ways of asserting our human rights to life; therefore, we should not murder.
A further analysis in the second place of what makes life meaningful reveals that non-Christians as well as Christians are innately aware not only of themselves, but of moral values like justice. We all acknowledge a difference between right and wrong conduct—an obligation to treat others fairly, responsibility as moral agents, and a sense of guilt when we do evil. Each has a conscience and a sense of accountability for wrong doing, however suppressed. Everyone who is unfairly oppressed cries out, “That’s unjust; that’s unfair!” In doing so, people in every culture of the world recognize a universal and necessary principle that we ought to treat one another fairly. Justice gives people what they deserve and as persons with worth far above things, they deserve care and consideration.

And that leads to the third point—we sense in common a need for caring or love. If we come to the place where we think there is no one in the world who cares, we are in very serious condition. The obligation to respect the rights and dignity of other persons, however different from us, seems to be inscribed on our hearts. We ought to be considerate of the old lady trying to cross the slippery, icy street. We ought to be considerate of persons with allergies to certain kinds of foods. We take into account for the particular problems of individuals through consideration. Beyond that, we care about their well-being as we do our own in love. We all know that we ought to treat others as we would be treated.

Let me add a fourth point. We all know whether believers in Christ or not, that we ought to be intellectually honest. The military schools have an honor code. You may have heard this apocryphal story that the problems at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs have become so difficult with the honor code that they’ve been thinking of changing the mascot from a falcon to a cheetah. Excuse me. All right, we know we ought not to plagiarize a term paper in college. We know that a person ought not to publish an alleged best seller from confessional tapes when there were no such tapes.

In the fifth place, when we get into an argument about the justice of a given event, we know we must account for all the relevant facts. Explained on a scientific level, these facts are the same for both Christians and non-Christians. Although the non-Christian’s concepts of ultimate meaning are radically different, the facts to be explained are the same. Three levels of meaning are distinguished. First, the ultimate or metaphysical level; for example, a rosebush in and of itself. Second, there is
the scientific level which objectively examines and classifies the rosebush in Latin terms. And third, there’s the purely personal level of significance as a loving husband gives a dozen roses to his wife for their wedding anniversary. The Christian and the atheistic scientists, whatever their differences metaphysically and personally, have common ground on the scientific level. The actual physical nature of the rose is the same for both.

Difficulties arise when the scientific specialist in a limited field tries to speak authoritatively as a philosopher or a metaphysician. Again, difficulties may arise when Christians will not face up to the evidence for data that seems initially not to fit in their framework. But when both sides get down to the descriptive task, they have much in common.

On the basis of facts—as well as inner principles of value, such as justice and love—we have grounds for communication. There is one further point of common ground, and that is logical consistency. The explanation of facts, the explanation of our unjust treatment, must be coherent. It must be consistent. Unfortunately, a good many people have given up the quest for logical consistency. One cartoon character is portrayed as saying, “There is no such thing as the truth and that is the truth.” We do find consistent truth, and it is that consistency of ideas together that fit reality and provide the guidelines to the God who is there. Truths that are logically valid supply the highway, the map, I should say, to the destination we all seek, an authentic grasp of what is real.

The key to reality, to use another analogy, is truth. Have you ever lost the key to your house or your car? It is a bit frustrating to have the power of a four-banger Subaru and have locked yourself out, having put your key in the trunk with your coat. And it is tragic that many people today have despained of finding truth in morality and religion. After the tragic events in Guyana, when over 900 people died at the request of Jim Jones, two Yale University professors wrote the New York Times. Harold J. Morowitz, professor of molecular biophysics and biochemistry said, “In the light of the cult tragedy in Guyana, I am reminded that the almost desperate effort to understand cults in the United States has ignored a fundamental flaw in our educational system that renders young people so vulnerable to these irrational movements. Because we are interested in transmitting to our children the beliefs of their parents and teacher, we omit from school curricula training in methods of establishing the validity of ideas. The primary question of how do we know the things that we know is simply
not dealt with.

“The most important inquiry is confined to specialized college courses in epistemology and the vast majorities of students never confront the issues. As a result, we have a large cohort of young people set loose in a rapidly changing and confusing world without any conceptual tools for evaluating the extraordinary amount of information they experience daily. If a cult leader comes along and states with great charisma, ‘I am god, or I am the voice of god,‘ many do not know how to evaluate the validity of the statement. Since education has largely been an appeal to authority, teacher, encyclopedia, textbook, cultists simply replace one authority with another. The difficulty is that to have given students know how to question cult leaders would also have provided them with an intellectual framework to question the established mores, religions, and political systems of their elders.

“I believe that we have reached the point where it is far worse to leave our young people exposed than it is to teach them how to formulate meaningful answers. They are already beset by doubts. We need to show them how belief can be rationally established. We need to come back to the criteria of justice and love, facts, and consistency in accounting for these data.”

A second letter from a Yale professor pointed up the urgency of this issue, which has been underlined more recently by the tragedy in Waco, Texas. “I agree with Professor Morowitz,” John Smith said, “that the tragedy of the people’s temple in Guyana sharply focuses the need for some measure of rationality when it comes to fundamental beliefs. The problem, however, is far more difficult than he seems to think and it is certainly not going to be solved by teaching courses in logic, epistemology, and the philosophy of science.

“The fact is that the dominant philosophical outlook of those who have been teaching these subjects in recent decades has helped to create the problem. The rational and meaningful have been so narrowly defined that religious, ethical, and metaphysical beliefs have been excluded from the domain of reason and cast on the junk heap of the meaningless and the emotional where no critical evaluation is possible. An entirely new approach is called for; the easy acceptance of cult figures by the young does not happen merely because they have been deprived of a theory of knowledge and verification or because they have not been taught how to deal with an extraordinary amount of information. This diagnosis
completely overlooks the kind of belief involved in cultism. Such belief is basically religious or quasi-religious since it involves finding a purpose, a path to self-fulfillment and a faith that makes life worth living. Our highly secularized society regarding religion is merely a primitive and passing stage in human development that has now superseded has created a dangerous, spiritual vacuum.

“Young people who reject the American gospel of wealth and power, which conceals this vacuum for their parents, are sensitive to the emptiness surrounding them. The disparate in genders readily leads to their acceptance of the charismatic fanatic because they believe he can deliver them from the nihilism of our time. The religious concern remains a permanent one, if not fulfilled in devotion to what is inherently sacred, morally acceptable, humane, and intelligible, it will fall victim to the demonic.

“Critical evaluation is essential, but it will have to be made in terms appropriate to the nature of moral and religious belief. We cannot verify beliefs that matter most in the way we determine the acidity of a solution. What is needed is a philosophical analysis, an interpretation of religion, aimed at distinguishing between the divine and the demonic, the honest person of faith and the charlatan, the prophet and the false prophet, no one acquainted with the subject denies that this is as difficult to do as it was in the days of Socrates. Our massive neglect of what he considered the most important thing, the care of the soul, leaves us even less prepared in understanding what religion is and means we may also come to understand what secularization means and why it poses one of the most urgent problems of our times.”

We cannot limit our testing of moral and religious claims to sense data, but we must function rationally in relation to these areas as others and not allow contradictions. How would you define a contradiction? We contradict ourselves when two assertions affirm and deny the same thing at the same time and in the same respect. Alleged contradictions in the Bible often are imagined and alleged. But when you examine these supposed numerous contradictions, the two contexts are not speaking of the same thing; if they are, it is not at the same time or in the same respect. Some people have been so obtuse as to allege contradictions when two different angels may be spoken of in connection with the resurrection of Christ, or angels in different numbers at different times during the forty days of Christ’s resurrection appearances.
Some have alleged contradictions in the Bible because at the beginning it said that everything that was created was very good. And then by Genesis chapter six, humans had become so evil that God would destroy the earth with a flood. Clearly, there is a difference between the time before the Fall and after humanity’s fall into rebellion against all that is right and valuable. And then there are differences of respect. Some people alleged a contradiction in Trinitarianism, but God is one in respect to being and three in respect to persons. The doctrine is not that there is one God and that there are three gods; that would be contradictory. The doctrine is not that there is one person and that there are three persons, which would be contradictory. But we have avoided contradiction in asserting oneness and threeness in two different respects, and it is necessary then to keep those respects clear.

In Carnell’s criteria of truth that grow out of the common ground, he appeals to logical consistency, to factual adequacy, and to existential viability. We must have logical consistency because God cannot deny Himself. And our theory—if it be true—must fit the facts, for all facts fit together in the world and true ideas about them must fit together. Theologically, everything in existence is created by God and sustained by Him; therefore, if we have the truth about these matters, our ideas will correspond with God’s and will fit together. But we ought also to have hypotheses about existence which are viable; that is, we should be able to live with them and by them consistently. We ought to be free from hypocrisy. Authentic commitment is important because if we have the truth it will lead to reality. It is crucial, then, that in a day of moral crisis in our high schools, in our pizza parlors, and in our train travel that we have a commitment to truth that stands up in face of conflicting claims. It is truth morally and truth intellectually, and our truth requires us universally and necessarily to live by it, whatever our upbringing. However difficult our experiences may have been in childhood, we need to grow up and accept accountability for our beliefs and our conduct. Only as we do that can we have hope for our society today.