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Evangelical Subjectivism: Edward John Carnell and the Logic of God

By common consent the early death of E. J. Carnell robbed contemporary evangelical theology of one of its most promising proponents. Dr. Trembath, who teaches in the Dept. of Theology, University of Notre Dame, has previously contributed to our pages ('Biblical Inspiration and the Believing Community: A New Look', EQ 58:3, July 1986, 245–56), and we welcome his study of an interesting aspect of Carnell's developing thought.

Edward John Carnell is not terribly well known on the theological scene, even within the American evangelical community which formed the audience for most of his professional and literary activity. That is unfortunate, for in many ways he was a pioneer among evangelicals. Probably the most significant trail that he blazed was one which his early death prevented him from seeing as clearly as others who traverse it more comfortably. It is for that very reason, however, that we might profit from considering his accomplishments.

The 'trail' here is Carnell's way of construing the God-human relationship. Writing from within a community which quite uncritically took logic as the ultimate criterion for distinguishing among ways of thinking about God and beginning his own literary career as a devotee of that option,[1] by the end of his life he had developed a way of thinking theologically which instead focussed on human moral activity as the best avenue for thinking

[1] See my book *Evangelical Theories of Biblical Inspiration: A Review and Proposal* (New York: Oxford, 1987), pp. 37–44, and the early Carnell's extended discussion of the ultimate 'systematic consistency' of Christian theology in his *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics: A Philosophical defense of Trinitarian-Theistic Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), p. 100ff.

about God.[2] In this single figure as in few others is represented a wide range, if not two extremes, of philosophical approaches to the doctrine of God: the 'fundamentalist's' reliance upon abstract logic, and the 'liberal's' reliance upon human subjectivity, as critically appropriate ways to understand God. In brief, his later claim is not just that there exists an analogy between human and divine moral activity, but in fact that 'God's person' is the moral and spiritual environment in which humans exist and which they presuppose with each and every moral deed.

The present essay has two primary functions. The first and most important is to retrace Carnell's construction of this way, a method which he called 'the third way of knowing'. The second and less important function is to offer some criticisms of it. If these criticisms succeed in repairing weaknesses in his argument, however, then we shall have discovered an intriguing example by an evangelical of a transcendentalist theology quite characteristic of post-Kantian Catholic Thomism but not at all of American evangelicalism. Such a discovery would hold out hope for ecumenical relations between these two traditions which by so many other indicators usually appear to be diametrically opposed. By extension, the same reason for hopefulness would exist between evangelicalism and any subjectivist theological tradition.

The Third Method of Knowing: Moral Judgements and God's Person

Edward John Carnell (1919–1967) was professor of Christian apologetics at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, from 1948 until his death. He served as seminary president

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[2] I shall accordingly focus all of our attention on the one work which discusses this later avenue, *Christian Commitment: An Apologetic* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957). Usually such a restriction would be unacceptable for a critical essay such as this. However, it is unavoidable in this case because of Carnell's untimely death which, I can only presume, precluded further development of the following subjectivist methodology. To say as I did in the opening sentence that Carnell is essentially unknown on the theological scene is an understatement; aside from the dissertation mentioned below in note 27, he is rarely even referred to in secondary literature. In addition to the 'restriction' caused by his early death, therefore, we are further hampered in the present task by a lack of critical attention from others. Ronald H. Nash has complied a bibliography of all Carnell's published pieces in his anthology entitled *The Case for Biblical Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), pp. 183–186. The list is quite long, which makes this silence about him even more perplexing.

from 1954 to 1959. He enjoyed a near-paradigmatic evangelical education: the son of a Baptist pastor, he earned the B.A. in philosophy under Gordon Clark at Wheaton College, the divinity degree in apologetics under Cornelius Van Til at Westminster Seminary, the Th.D. from Harvard Divinity School (*The Concept of Dialectic in the Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 1948) and the Ph.D. from Boston University (*The Problem of Verification in Søren Kierkegaard*, 1949). He was also professor of philosophy and religion at Gordon College and Gordon Divinity School immediately prior to his appointment at Fuller.

It is Carnell's contention that all adult humans live in 'the third condition of knowing', which he describes as 'a person's self-transcending capacity to make both himself and his decisions an object of thought'.[3] The first two conditions are knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by inference. Knowledge by acquaintance is the name given the mental operation in direct experience; the possibility of direct experience presumes the capacity of direct knowledge.[4] The second condition of knowing, knowledge by inference, is the mental ordering of those images we have acquired from experience. The possibility of this kind of knowing presumes that our mental images in fact correspond to that reality and therefore give us meaningful information about it.

None of the three ways of knowing is isolated in actuality because each comprises only a part of human mental and moral activity. But because they are three distinct methods of knowing, humans are responsible for distinguishing them and using them appropriately. It is both because humans are able to objectify the conditions of their own existence and because they are able to order those objectifications in various ways that they are responsible for doing so. Careful attention paid to the third condition of knowing, says Carnell, will not only show interested persons about themselves, but will in addition show them how they are already acquainted with the person of God. He calls this method knowledge by moral self-acquaintance, for which the condition or presumption is moral responsibility or moral rectitude.

Moral Self-Acceptance and Social Relations

Carnell begins his discussion of the third way of knowing by

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[3] *Christian Commitment*, p. 27, hereafter referred to as *Commitment*.

[4] Carnell here recognizes the ambiguity of 'direct knowledge', but chooses to retain this designation to mean that such knowledge is unmediated except by the five senses; see p. 18.

analyzing personal moral self-acceptance. His method is auto-biographical: he first asks himself to what realities he knows he is committed by inspecting his actions in social situations.[5] Here he finds that he is guided by two criteria which relate moral self-acceptance and social relations. The first is that moral acceptance of others is impossible if they deny our self-worth: 'we are powerless to trust others unless they give evidence of accepting the dignity of our person.' This is because we know intuitively that we are persons of worth, measured not by empirical accomplishments but simply by our own existence. (Realization of this fact does not give us the right to 'lord it over others' since that in itself would constitute our denial of their dignity.) Furthermore, the degree to which we are justified in looking for evidences of other persons accepting our worth is roughly proportional to the degree to which we know them: strangers need only give minimal evidence whereas we expect much more from family. This demand for signs of dignity is not an indication of selfishness, first because psychologically healthy persons cannot disregard how others estimate and approach them, and second because they know that they too are undeniably grasped by the necessity to show such signs of dignity upon meeting others. 'We participate in the moral and spiritual environment from existence itself.'

The second criterion has to do with the conditions which must obtain in situations where others either challenge or affirm our own happiness. Carnell uncovers this criterion by noticing that acts of personal moral self-acceptance allow us to distinguish, for example, between oaths and promises. Oaths and promises differ in that explicitly agreed-upon threats accompany a violation of the former as over against the more implicit and attitudinal sanctions which accompany the latter. The criterion here seems to be that we would find it morally repugnant to demand oaths of friends and family because we share with them an environment which obviates the need for the explicitness of threats. Even if we are not consciously aware of that common environment, we nonetheless live in it. The behavioural habit which distinguishes closer and further relations by the difference between promises and oaths shows that we do in fact inhabit a moral sphere with which we may become familiar if we pay careful attention to our own moral behaviour. And the fact that we expect of others precisely what we know to be expected of us shows that the moral sphere is fundamentally social rather than private.

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[5] *Ibid.*, p. 55ff.

God's Person

Thus far Carnell has shown two different ways by which we can become aware of the conditions of our moral lives, ways which he believes will also help us to become aware of God: 'The more we clarify the moral and spiritual environment, the more we clarify our place in the person of God.'[6] Just as we cannot alter the conditions of the first method of knowing (that is, we cannot change how experiences present themselves to us, but may only account for them differently), and just as we cannot alter the conditions of the second method of knowing (that is, we may utilize different types of interential systems to help us to account for how our propositions relate to the external world, but we cannot dispense with systems altogether), so too we cannot alter the conditions of the third method of knowing. Human existence is bounded by this environment just as it is bounded by the first two. Carnell thus refers to this method as 'the imperative essence' because it inescapably holds us within its conditions while remaining essential to our natures as human beings. Knowledge of the imperative essence may be gained in the same ways that we gain knowledge of the first two types of knowing: by patient and 'humble submission to the realities that hold us when we enter social relations'.[7] As of yet, though, we have not seen *how* the imperative essence grasps all persons, and thus I shall turn to that. Carnell accomplishes this by examining what he calls 'the judicial sentiment'.

The judicial sentiment is that moral faculty aroused within us whenever our own dignity is ignored or offended. When for example we gratuitously help someone, we justly feel abused if they do not at least thank us verbally. The warrant for this response is that our judicial sentiment knows that such acts should be responded to in certain ways, apart from which we are justified in believing that the other party is guilty of an offence of a different nature but still as obvious as we would have committed had we not helped the person in the first place. Furthermore, such moral provocation is seen to be justified when it is confirmed by 'our nobler faculties and the praise of men of character'. That is, our interior feelings of offence are valid if either our best and purest motives, or the testimony of a

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[6] *Ibid.*, p. 66. Precisely what Carnell means by 'the person of God' will become clear later in this section. I shall criticize his use of the designation later in the essay.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 80.

community of moral persons, agree that we have been offended. 'Charging inconsiderate individuals with guilt is merely the reverse side of our demand that our dignity be respected',[8] and thus the inverse realities of guilt and moral offence show our rootedness in the moral and spiritual environment.

A problem arises at this point, however. It is true that we are justified in guarding our own dignity, for were we not there would be no appropriate foundation for our guilt when we offended others. The problem, though, is that we have not been given the consequent responsibility to 'enforce the law' against the guilty party. That is, we can justly accuse that party but we have no moral call to punish it. Carnell calls this dilemma 'the judicial predicament' because it arises out of a valid response of offence that is unable to be completely rectified.

In addition we cannot justify 'taking the law into our own hands'. The proof offered by Carnell here is twofold. We cannot publicly proclaim our inherent *right* to administer justice (since we recognize that we have none), nor can we defend losing control and actually punishing the guilty party (our sense of shame following from such an act would reveal our guilt). Thus we are not allowed to participate in accomplishing what we are morally certain needs to be done; Carnell states that 'we are never permitted to complete the moral cycle in man-to-man relations'.[9] Here is where the reader is brought directly into the presence of the person of God 'as the moral and spiritual environment in which man lives and moves and is'.[10]

God, says Carnell, is the one who does complete the 'moral cycle' that humans are prevented from completing: 'God answers to the judicial predicament'.[11] This is shown from four reflections upon experience, each one analytically included in the preceding one. The first reflection, empirically undeniable by anyone who is genuinely open to the facts of experience, is that we are not the authors of our own existence. Humans are dependent creatures in that we cannot exercise ultimate control over the most important facets of our existence. Second, a part of the existence over which we have no ultimate control (and thus which holds us within it) is the moral and spiritual environment. This is shown each time we are in the presence of others and are confronted with having to respond to them as creatures with moral dignity rather than

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[8] *Ibid.*, p. 91.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 96.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 101.
[11] *Ibid.*

simply as empirical or a-moral objects. Think, for example, of the different moral claims made upon us when in the presence of a person and when in the presence of a pencil. Third, we are inescapably involved in the moral cycle, which once again is the concatenation of 'our own spiritual dignity, the obligation of others to accept this dignity, . . . the guilt of those who abuse or offend us', and the inverse guilt we experience when we abuse others. The legitimacy of this concatenation is revealed by our judicial sentiment which is dormant until it is morally roughed up. Finally, then, the moral cycle terminates in the judicial predicament, which is our inability fully to relieve the offended judicial sentiment even though we know it deserves restitution.[12] This aroused but unmollified judicial sentiment entails the need for an 'administrator of justice' since we really are not able to complete the moral cycle which *needs* completing if guilt and culpability are to have any final resolution and therefore meaning. Thus the transcendental referent of the third condition of knowing is the reality of an administrator of justice, a reality analytically included within the initial observation of being dependent creatures.

God is identified as the administrator of justice, that is, as the one to whom all persons need give an account of their moral offences. Only God has the right to complete the moral cycle because only God is utterly free from both moral offence and self-serving motives, and more importantly because only God is free from any prerequisite obligation to forgive when asked. This means that humans are always in the presence of the person of God, because 'the person of God' is defined as the moral and spiritual environment in which humans live but over which they

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[12] It might be asked here whether Carnell's analysis of 'the offended judicial sentiment' presupposes a retributive theory of punishment. He does not specifically address this point. While it is surely the case that a retributive theory is consonant with this analysis, I do not believe that it is essential to it. All that Carnell is attempting to do here is to show the transcendental conditions of moral acts and responses within a theistic system. To do this he needs to show how an 'excess' of moral stuff remains after humans have completed all that they are empowered to complete, with that excess being the proper responsibility of God. Theories of both retribution and of grace presuppose the existence of this excess. The conceptual difference between them thus is not *whether* such an excess exists, but rather *how* God treats both it and the human sins which generate it. If Carnell is guilty of holding to a retributive theory of punishment, thus, it will be seen from other grounds than these here.

have no ultimate control. It must be emphasized here that God is defined as a 'person' and not merely as the metaphysical condition necessary for the judicial removal of guilt. The reason for this insistence is inherent in something just said, namely, that we do not even allow offended parties to serve as the *ultimate* source of forgiveness, but instead move beyond them to a source more fundamental than they.[14] Such a resolution would hardly be satisfactory were this more fundamental source *less* personal than the offended party itself.

Carnell does not make the mistake of confusing 'being in the presence of' with 'having fellowship with' or even 'being in the *conscious* presence of'. Conscious awareness is not essential to experience since we experience many things which we would find either difficult or impossible to account for systematically, or with respect to which we later find our systematic accounts to be inadequate or wrong.[15] So too, being in God's presence is not dependent upon the conscious awareness of being in God's presence. It is only the 'additional' step of wanting to have fellowship with God that is dependent upon the possession of conscious knowledge of God's person as the moral and spiritual environment in which we live and move and are.

Fellowship with God's Person

Thus far Carnell has simply brought his reader to the point of encountering the moral environment as the person of God, and not of being acquainted with the person of God.[16] Being

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[14] This can be illustrated by reflecting on what happens when a party we have offended refuses to accept our expressions of apology; we now judge them guilty for having violated a personal responsibility which holds us *both* in its grasp.

[15] This calls to mind the well-known aphorism that were a fish able to come to reflective self-awareness one of the last things it would ever recognize about itself would be its existence in water.

[16] He is, however, careful to deny that his scheme is a 'proof of God's existence.' It is not. Rather, it is an uncovering of the conditions of human existence. 'The third method of knowing is a method, not a proof. It is merely a procedure by which one acquaints himself with the realities that already hold him. And the fact that man lives and moves and is in God is one of these realities. Man is held in the person of God from the first moment of moral self-consciousness—though he will never meet God until he is spiritually transformed by this relation.' We might thus call the third way an argument for belief in God, but only provided that we do not mean what traditionally goes by that name which Carnell would locate in the second way of knowing. 'Knowledge by

acquainted with God is as much an advance over an inferential knowledge of God (i.e., the second way of knowing) as the latter is over no knowledge of God whatsoever, and it requires even greater evidences of humility and openness. But how may we begin the transition from inferential knowledge to personal acquaintance? Once we know about God, what path do we take to come to know God?

Carnell responds here by addressing what he calls 'the cycle of friendship',[17] the patterns and progress of friendship among human persons. The cycle of friendship is revealed positively whenever two persons meet, or negatively by its very lack of presence in such circumstances. When friends meet, it is incumbent upon them to exchange greetings, to give evidences of their ongoing friendship, and then to exchange gestures of departure. Those whom we meet and who fail to participate in this cycle are not our friends. To say it the other way around, those are our friends who take the time to exchange these tokens, regardless of how briefly and perhaps even perfunctorily. The feeling of moral incompleteness we have in the presence of those not inclined to exchange these tokens with us is ample proof of two things; first, that those persons are not our friends, and second, that both parties are 'freely required' to give such tokens if friendship is to be maintained.

How does this help us to become acquainted with the person of God? If we know the conditions of growing in friendship with other persons because we know the conditions of offending them, then we also know the conditions of growing in friendship with God once we know that God is a person (which we have seen that we *do* know as the ground of the possibility of resolving the judicial predicament). Just as we know that it is appropriate to feel offended when others treat us as objects, so too we know that God is offended when we treat God as an object. If God is the one who completes the moral cycle, and is thus the one who provides ultimate restitution when we are offended, then God is just in being offended when ignored *after* having completed that cycle on our behalf. But because we thus know how to offend God, we also know how to please God. That is, we know the conditions of

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self-acquaintance' is not intended to constitute an advance in one's knowledge, as for example in the inferential progression from premise to conclusion, but rather is intended to uncover what a person is already in the presence of and committed to, whether consciously or not.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 122ff.

fellowship with God because we are morally responsible for knowing them.[18]

Here, though, we encounter a problem with God that we never encountered with other persons. Until this point Carnell's method has served equally well with God as it has with humans, for what we learned about humans we likewise learned about God. But having learned about God that God's person is the moral environment in which we exist, and that God is co-offended every time that humans are offended, we find that we cannot restore fellowship with God in the same ways that we can with other humans. In the case of humans, we are restored to fellowship when we ask for and receive forgiveness, for their responsibility is to hold our dignity in such regard as to forgive us when they perceive that we are genuinely sorry for the offence we caused them.[19] But, we noted before that they are not able completely to heal the judicial sentiment because God is co-offended every time a human is offended, and no one is able to grant forgiveness on behalf of another. So, we find that we are continually offending God, but never able to engineer forgiveness. This condition is what Carnell calls the moral predicament.

The moral predicament thus has to do solely with the terms of fellowship between God and humans. It is the ultimate moral condition under which humans passively exist; that is, it is the ultimate condition which limits humans who do not exert any effort to have fellowship with God. Furthermore, it refers not only to the human inability to bring about ultimate forgiveness, but also refers to the human inability to feel fully grateful to God as the one who *does* grant ultimate forgiveness.[20] *Trying* to be fully

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[18] A potentially serious objection is relevant here, which is that Carnell's account seems to make God's presence merely conceptually responsive to our own calculated needs (what I earlier called a 'necessary metaphysical condition'). Carnell's response is that he has not at all done this. Such an objection would be relevant were not the starting point of this inquiry the conditions which necessarily hold us within existence itself. But since that is his starting point, then any resolution of the 'predicaments' with which existence presents us must itself be a really existing resolution rather than a merely metaphysically necessary one. The objection assumes that the moral conditions which Carnell has enumerated are either optional or a non-exhaustive list, an assumption which needs to be proved in order to warrant the objection. Until it is so proved, the objection is invalid, and Carnell's account itself is warranted by its rootage in empirical experience.

[19] Of course, if they do not forgive us then the judicial sentiment is healed from our end but broken from theirs. The tables are instantaneously turned.

[20] Thus Carnell also refers to the moral predicament as original sin; cf. p. 199.

grateful to God merely demonstrates our inability to *be* fully grateful; to use Pauline language, such an attempt would be a 'work' rather than a 'fruit' (cf. the contrast in Galatians 5.19 vs. 5.22). 'Here is a pithy summary of the moral predicament: Although it is evil to be morally indifferent to those who do us favours, not only are we not held by a spontaneous sense of gratitude when we contemplate the divine favours, but we have insufficient moral resources to convert ourselves . . . If we were grateful by nature, we would fulfill rectitude out of unconscious necessity, [yet] we have no moral resources to convert ourselves.[21] What this means is that we are not fully acquainted with the person of God if we do not yet have fellowship with God. Knowing somebody personally is only possible if there is fellowship, that is, a deliberate recognition and sharing of dignity. But fellowship, that is, a deliberate recognition and sharing of dignity. But fellowship with God would seem to be impossible since we are by definition unable to contribute anything of positive value to God. How may this impasse be overcome?

It is obvious that the impasse could only be overcome from the divine side, since all human resources to overcome it have already been exhausted. And this is just where Carnell looks for his solution. He first returns to the 'cycle of [human] friendship' to plumb it further as an analogy of divine-human fellowship. We noted in our discussion of that cycle that it is impossible to release evidences of our friendship to those who consistently refuse to give any sign or recognition of our self-worth. That is, others must humble themselves in our presence if we are to be able to have any friendship or fellowship with them. This is not an improper demand of selfishness on our part since we recognize that we must do the same with them. Friendship can only be released after genuine signs of humility and the acceptance of dignity have been exchanged. If only one person is willing to recognize the dignity of the other, the one who refuses is guilty and friendship is stalled or precluded.

Now, if this analysis holds true between and among humans, it ought also to hold true of the God-human relationship since God too is a person. And that is just what helps Carnell out of the impasse. If humans are genuinely humble before God, not only because they recognize the dignity of God as a person but additionally

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[21] *Ibid.*, p. 129.

because they recognize the incomprehensible superiority of God's person vis-à-vis their own, then God, *as* person, could not withhold fellowship from such humility. In fact, Carnell says that God's character actually obliges God to reveal Godself personally to humble persons, in the same way that God's character obliges God to respond to our aroused judicial sentiments by defending our dignity. Although the *necessity* of this obligation might sound foreign to a discussion of God, it is not; the divine person is the moral environment in which humans exist, and thus what is morally inescapable or necessary for us *is* the character of God. 'The minimal elements in fellowship oblige us to believe that God is under the same necessity to extend his life to the humble as he is to withhold it from the proud; and that his eternal approval of the humble is but the reverse side of his eternal disapproval of the proud.'[22]

Here I pause to consider what I take to be a major warrant for Carnell's methodology in *Christian Comment*, for we now have all the elements in place to make such an evaluation. The objection could surely be raised at this point that Carnell is incorrect in saying that *because* something is true for humans *therefore* it is true for God. Does this not make God simply a human on a larger scale? In a word, does not this approach precisely remove the transcendence or divinity of God?

Carnell would strongly reject the point of the objection. The objection assumes that we know exactly what 'the divinity of God' is, because it uses that divinity as the known element against which to contrast Carnell's conception of it. But, he would ask, where did that known element come from? All attempts at answering this question fail, he believes, except for that which begins with the known element of the human subject, and moves from there to consider God. If such a procedure is not followed, then all attempts will fail because they will either beg the question or identify God's character with something which is unknown.[23]

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[22] *Ibid.*, p. 151.

[23] This may be seen in the following way. If it is claimed, for example, that God's character may be simply read off the pages of the Bible, then we would need to know how it is that it is *God's* character that is being read off. Since many characterizations of God are present in the Bible, we cannot be certain of which apply to the God whom we worship unless we have an antecedent (and therefore extrabiblical) clue as to what 'God's character' must be like. Such a response thus begs the question. Alternatively, the procedure which wishes neither to beg the question nor to begin by inspecting human subjectivity is left with nothing to consider as constitutive of the character of God. One must begin somewhere and be ready to defend that choice, even if

The theological rationale for this choice of starting points may be put rhetorically. If one really does reject the possibility that God and humans share a common moral environment, then that means that God's understanding of rectitude *might* be similar to ours but also, of course, that it might not be. Because of a radical lack of commonality, we could never know whether God and we hold any mutual attitudes towards right and wrong. This raises the possibility that God might condemn what we take to be moral, for example, the preservation of innocent human life. If God and humans share no moral turf, then (from our perspective) God's morality might look utterly capricious. But then from God's perspective, so might ours. If we further believe that it is God's morality that will ultimately win out, then we are left with complete moral scepticism, a position which is religiously untenable and indefensible.

Carnell is now ready to begin the penultimate conceptual analysis of the terms of fellowship between God and humans. He has just said that an analogy exists between human-human relationships and the divine-human relationship such that we are able to know more about the latter if we pay sufficient attention to the terms of the former. He noted that the cycle of [human] friendship may only be initiated once both persons evidence humility, i.e., the *quality* of accepting each other's dignity. Were one of them to wait until the other performed a certain quantity of deeds as a condition for extending signs of friendship, then that one would justly condemn the first for breaking the bonds of the moral environment. The possibility of human friendship is thus discerned instantaneously as we intuitively perceive the other one as willing to be humble or not. In the same way, then, God does not require anything of humans other than the humility which recognizes that they cannot initiate anything positive in their relationship with God. Once this 'meekness of spirit' is discerned by God, then everything has been done to restore fellowship between God and humans.

Or has it? If it is true that all we need do is evidence a humility of spirit which genuinely accepts culpability for failing the conditions of friendship (i.e., 'breaking the law'), then does that not imply that it is only the so-called sins of commission which are able to break the God-human bond? What then of sins of

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one intends to stay rigidly on the via negativa. The necessity of choosing and defending one's method is inescapable.

omission? What of those things we unconsciously do or fail to do which we by definition cannot identify and be humble about? Need we feel guilty about them? If not, then need we still feel guilty about the former type of sin? What has happened to our use of 'guilt' as a genuine referent to the reality of the moral and spiritual environment?

Carnell restores the appropriateness of guilt as this kind of sign by distinguishing between 'direct' and 'indirect' fulfillment of the conditions of friendship. That is, there are two ways we may contribute to friendship. The first or direct way is by doing what is morally right, and the second or indirect way is by apologizing either for having done that which is wrong or for not having done that which is right. Either action, when genuinely expressive of heartfelt intentions, is sufficient to satisfy the claims of the moral and spiritual environment. It is especially the latter response to friendship which is relevant to the discussion of fellowship with God because whereas humans (*ex hypothesi*) do not have sufficient resources to contribute positively to a relationship with God, they do have sufficient resources both to recognize and to apologize for not being able to. 'A moral defence of inactivity would be regrettable . . . A knowledge of what we *cannot* do should stimulate a search for what we *can* do.'[24]

Thus, with respect to human-human relation, a genuine apology is sufficient to restore the broken bond of friendship. An apology is genuine when it meets two criteria:[25] when it acknowledges a broken relationship and when it acknowledges an appropriate degree of personal culpability for the fracturing. Once offered, then, an apology cannot be rejected without the rejecting party itself incurring guilt. As has so often been seen in this analysis, the fact that both parties share the same moral and spiritual environment entails that both respond humbly to the terms which that environment lays upon them.

If this much is true between persons, though, may we also say that it is true between humans and God? Carnell would say that we cannot, precisely because we are able to name the offences for which we apologize to others but can never be fully specific with reference to the offences we commit against God. For one thing, our very lack of care about God is itself something for which we need forgiveness, but since it is an essential lack on our part then nothing we do is *not* tainted by it, including our very petitions to

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[24] *Ibid.*, p. 159, emphasis original.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 164.

God for forgiveness. Thus our lack of care for God is not just 'an' offence against God but is in fact the ground of all the offences we commit against God, which in turn accounts for why we could never enumerate all of them. So, at the same time that our guilt before God is increased by our lack of care for God, we are prevented from being able to acquire forgiveness on grounds with which we are familiar from the third way of knowing. This final predicament standing in the way of complete fellowship with God is resolved by Carnell's distinction between apology and repentance.

The difference between an apology and repentance is not merely the difference between whether one can or cannot list all of the offences standing between two parties. An apology, regardless of whether it is accepted by the offended party, always has the same result. As we said earlier, an apology releases the guilty party from the guilt of the offences and places the offended party under the obligation to accept it. Even if the latter transaction does not occur, however, the offending party is released from guilt. (The two are not restored to *fellowship*, though, as that cannot occur without the apology being accepted.) Carnell refers to this as the 'legal security' of an apology which is made explicit when we ask rhetorically 'What more could I have done?' when another refuses to accept our apology.

Such cannot be the case with expressions of personal guilt before God, however. If we apologize to God, we do so with the 'legal certainty' that our offence will be forgiven, that is, with an eye to the conceptual impossibility of non-forgiveness. Repentance, however, is defined with respect to guilt which cannot depend upon the legal certainty of acceptance; repentance 'does not exist until the guilty party despairs of finding a legal way out . . . [It] abandons all hope of forecasted legal security.'[26] No demands or negotiations are present here, but only the knowledge that personal guilt has been incurred without any known recourse. The guilt felt here is unable to be removed by any imaginable means, for it is felt as guilt and not only as vehicle for restoration of fellowship. Removal of such guilt can thus be accomplished by grace and not by necessity since the latter falls within the category of apology with its attendant features of demands placed upon God.

This allows us to envision God's place in this plan. We earlier saw that we rightly judge as guilty those whom we approach in

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[26] *Ibid.*, p. 168.

the spirit of friendship but who respond by rejecting us; the rationale for this judgement is that they have unwarrantedly denigrated our personal integrity which places moral obligations upon them from the mere presence of ourselves to them. God, though, is defined as (among other things) the one on whom we are utterly dependent. God is the one who initiates all of the conditions (physical, cognitive and moral) in which we find ourselves; God is continually present to us in ways which place inescapable moral obligations upon us. Thus our lack of proper response to God, seen and experienced in the moral predicament, places us squarely in the position of the person who spurns genuine gestures of friendship. Just as such a person ought to respond appropriately and is judged guilty when he or she does not, so too we ought to respond appropriately to God and are judged guilty when we do not. Furthermore, this guilt is a radical guilt because of our reflective discovery that we do not even care that we are responding in this way.

As author of our existence, God is also its finisher, a conclusion which is inescapable if we are humbly cognizant of the facts of existence as revealed by patient attention to all three ways of knowing. Our moral responsibilities to others, analytically included within our own sense of self-acceptance and self-worth, lead us to discover that God's person is the environment which makes moral discussions even possible. But God's person is the ultimate environment and not simply a proximate one. It is thus the only possible *final* resolution of the personal guilt which ensues from any fracture of the moral limits within which human beings inescapably exist and act. And in the very nature of the case (that is, since we know that we need forgiveness but know as well that we thereby do not deserve it), that resolution is gratuitous.

The Third Method of Knowing and Subjective Transcendence

Thus far we have inspected the actual progression of Carnell's understanding of God. I shall conclude this discussion of him with a look at his theological method. With no allies among evangelicals of his time that I know of, he commends the appropriateness of beginning with the human subject and moving from there to consider what can be known about God.[27]

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[27] If Carnell is methodologically independent of any in the evangelical world then he is surely independent of those in the Catholic world who during the

Carnell believed that true knowledge of the self could lead to true knowledge of God without asserting thereby the identity of God with any created being. As we have seen, Carnell takes it that this approach is warranted by its sheer unavoidability: 'That which is indispensable to a given condition cannot meaningfully be repudiated by one who stands within the privileges of that condition.'[28]

A humble examination of the environment in which human beings live shows that it is a fourfold environment.[29] First, it is a physical or empirical environment; no proof for this assertion is rendered aside from the impossibility of holding to any alternative. Second, it is a rational environment. The metaphysical condition, of being able to live a stable and ordered life is that things are what they are and are not other things. That is, meaningful physical life presupposes an ordered rationality of the physical universe. If the universe really were the kind of place where what is today a park could tomorrow become a desk, then it is also the kind of place where what is today human existence could tomorrow become human non-existence. This second aspect of the fourfold environment does not yet reveal a reflective knower of it *as* the environment, for it must be true in order for

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same period were developing what is now known as transcendental Thomism. There is no indication that he read any of the works of Maréchal, Rahner or Lonergan. It can be seen from what follows, though, that there exists a discernible resonance between these two theological methodologies, and this in spite of Carnell's traditionally Protestant, pessimistic critique of Thomas (or rather, of scholastic Thomism). Without being able to discuss this in more detail, we believe that Carnell and the transcendental Thomists both arrived at their respective subjectivist methodologies as a result of similar but mutually uninfluenced criticisms of Kant. Carnell's running discussion with Kant is evident throughout *Commitment*, although in his dissertation John. A. Sims says that the later Carnell was influenced more positively by Kierkegaard than he was negatively by Kant. I would agree that the Kantian influence on *Commitment* is primarily negative but would argue that this shows an overall acceptance of Kant's subjectivism with critical interjections at the interstices where the transcendental Thomists were also criticizing Kant. See Sims, *The Problem of Knowledge in the Apologetical Concerns of Edwin Lewis and Edward John Carnell* (Florida State University, 1975), Pt. II. For a critical analysis of Rahner's place within the Thomist and Kantian traditions, see Francis P. Fiorenza's 'Introduction' in Rahner's *Spirit in the World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), pp. xix–xlv.

[28] *Commitment*, p. 109.

[29] *Ibid.*, pp. 42f, 46, 60, 71, 125, 171f. Carnell's four aspects here are intriguingly similar to Bernard Lonergan's four levels of consciousness and intentionality which he names experience, understanding, judging, and deciding/commitment; see Lonergan, *Methods in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1979), p. 14f.

anything merely to exist; even rocks could not exist were there not some order to the universe which maintained their existence as rocks. It is only within the third aspect of the environment that deliberately reflective activity surfaces.

Carnell names this the 'aesthetic' environment because it includes all of the various activities of reflective awareness. This aspect of the environment comes to light by reflection upon what he calls the 'law of uniformity.' By the law of uniformity, Carnell refers to the real impossibility of acting in ways that ultimately violate one's understanding of the structure of the world. For example, some people may say that they do not believe that the universe is regular or ordered. Merely saying this, however, shows that they fundamentally believe that it is, or at least that it is regular enough so that their words will be understood by their audience and that the chairs on which they are all presently sitting will not suddenly disappear. The law of uniformity is in effect a moral extension of the law of non-contradiction; it asserts that 'native actions inevitably betray true beliefs.'[30] We cannot indefinitely live as though our actions did not depend upon, and thus reveal, our understanding of the world we inhabit. This is a morally inescapable consideration because we know that we ought not choose to live with such radical discontinuities in our own lives.[31]

The final aspect of the environment is then the moral or spiritual aspect which I have already discussed at some length. Here I shall simply recall the major points. Human beings are 'spirit' in that they are able to objectify their own various thoughts, intentions and limitations. (That is, they are able not only to experience, but objectify experiences into conceptually recognizable and manipulable forms.) In thus conceptually objectifying experiences, however, they are able to transcend the bounds of experiential existence and come into contact with that which is beyond them. But that which is beyond them is not *simply* beyond them; it is present to them as the ground or foun-

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[30] *Commitment.*, p. 44.

[31] Carnell distinguishes the law of uniformity which grounds the third aspect of the environment from 'conscience' in that the latter is able to be culturally influenced or determined whereas the former is not. The law of uniformity is thus the condition of the possibility of conscience; the possibility of morality expressed concretely through conscience, even if expressed differently in different cultures, presupposes a moral absolute which is itself unconditioned but revealed through every conditioned moral act and statement. See *ibid.*, pp. 233–239.

dation of their existence and the goal of their own possibilities of transcendences as well. Carnell defines God as this ground or foundation by calling God the environment in which people carry on what he took to be uniquely human: moral activity. In every human moral act, then, God co-acts. God's Spirit beckons the human spirit beyond itself as the environment in which all human self-transcendence occurs.

Summary Questions and Comments

We have already noted Carnell's insistence that what is distinctively human is not just the capacity for making moral judgements, but beyond that the capacity for abstracting experiences into concepts, and preferences into reasons, and then being able to compare and contrast those reasons as ways to shape future moral activity. Quite understandably, then, he seizes upon this fundamentally human enterprise as the clearest avenue by which to articulate what Christians mean by 'God'. We did not use 'image of God' language in this essay, but it is clear throughout the whole *Commitment* that Carnell sees the image of God in humans as the primary warrant for reasoning subjectively (i.e., from the human subject to God) in the way that he does. For example, at one point he says that 'Since man is made in the image of God, man shares in the life of God whenever he makes contact with ultimate elements in either the rational, aesthetic, or moral and spiritual environment', and then continues by noting that here he omitted 'the physical environment because it is the field on which elements in the other environments express themselves. For example, by our transcendental participation in the law of proportion, we perceive beauty in nature; and this perception, in some way, is a perception of God.'[32]

I would take this approach to be an appropriate way of thinking about God and of using understandable God-language. Methodologically, that is, the only way in which something that is both coherent and significant may be said about God the unknown is to begin with the known and reason from there back

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[32] *Ibid.*, p. 135. Note the resonance here with Augustine's methodological warrant for his psychological metaphor for the Trinity: 'We are not yet speaking of heavenly things, not yet of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but of this imperfect image, which is an image nonetheless, that is, of man. For the weakness of our mind perhaps gazes upon the image more familiarly and more easily,' *On the Trinity* IX, ii, (2), ET by Stephen McKenna, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 45, p. 271.

to God. Granted that additional criteria will have to be implemented in order to distinguish the creatureliness of everything that is known from the non-creatureliness of God.[33] But provided that those criteria are themselves reflective of the Christian community's understanding of God, there can exist a consonance between what is said about God and the God in whom that community places its trust. And this is a far cry from the opposite method so representative of Carnell's evangelical context, namely, that nothing should be said about humans until everything that can be said about God has been. As I noted earlier, this approach results either in incoherence or in a massive begging of the question.

To commend the approach, though, is not necessarily to commend all of its content. There are three critical observations that I would make about Carnell's theology as I have represented it above. Even when taken together they do not suggest that the transcendental method itself be changed, but only that various elements within it be recast so as to make its use more smooth.[34]

The first observation has to do with Carnell's description of God as the ultimate 'administrator of justice'. As a description this is appropriate enough, especially given the traditional Protestant emphasis on the forensic nature of justification and the resulting predominance of the legal metaphor in evangelical theology. Carnell's use of this metaphor is historically warranted in his community, therefore. It finds even wider warrant in its fundamental sociality. Most conservative Protestant treatises on the God-human relationship take as their primary icon the individual human with God, whether as believer or not. Quite quietly, but nonetheless quite really, this leads to a situation where justification is seen in almost solipsistic terms and consequently where ecclesiology is scarcely a factor at all in justification. Carnell's

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[33] In the *Summa Theologiae*, for example, Thomas introduces his initial treatise on the nature of God with the following methodological map: 'Having recognized that a certain thing (God) exists, we have still to investigate the way in which it exists, that we may come to understand what it is that exists. Now, we cannot know how God is, but only how he is not; we must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist, rather than the ways in which he does . . . The ways in which God does not exist will become apparent if we rule out from him everything inappropriate, such as compositeness, change and the like,' Ia, 3, Introduction.

[34] Had he not died so young, therefore, but instead lived to converse with the Catholics doing similar work in their own tradition, these are some of the areas in which such conversations could have resulted in a more mature understanding of transcendentalism.

subjectivist methodology does not suffer the myopia, seen in much of the 19th Century Protestant thought and 20th Century existentialism, that the notion of individual is coherent apart from that of community. Instead, in taking as his fundamental analogy the moral conditions of human-human relationships as seen especially when those conditions are broken, Carnell reminds us that humans are distinctively human when they transcend their own particularities and encounter others who are signs to them not only of what they are not and thus might become, but additionally of the presence and character of God.

My only question here is whether in selecting those moral activities whose presence is most tangible when breached, Carnell has seized upon the best analogy for articulating and representing the character of God. It would have been more faithful to the Christian tradition as a whole, I think, and thus to the evangelical tradition as well, had he instead used the human activity of love as his ruling metaphor. This would have had the beneficial effect of being more faithful to the Christian notion of God as love, a notion which is only indirectly derived from his treatment of that facet of morality uncovered when morally healthy relationships are fractured. And, it would have had this effect precisely because love is the fundamental dynamic of all human relationships, and thus is *what* is broken in broken relationships. The greater fundamentality of love rather than justice, if I may put it that way, as both the ground of human-human relationships and as the characteristically Christian description of God, provides a clearer correlativity between human actions and the divine character than does Carnell's analogy of fractured relationships and God as the ultimately just resolver of such fractures.

This brings up a second and related difficulty in Carnell's method, having to do with the univocity of God-language. He is quite clear that there exists a 'univocal point of identity between time and eternity'[35] which is apparent in all three spheres of human activity and thus which is presupposed within each of the three methods of knowing. This claim is what grounds his very strong assertion that the person of God *is* the moral and spiritual environment we inhabit. His rationale for this claim is that

> Unless God and man have something in common, it is impossible to make meaningful judgements about God. Hence, if one elects to

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[31] *Ibid.*, pp. 135–142.

> guard God's sovereignty by denying that God and man share some point of identity, he should prepare for the fact that nothing significant can be known or said about God—not even that there is a God, let alone that God is a person. God and man cannot be meaningfully compared unless they have something in common.

He continues by insisting that what God and humans share in the third sphere of knowing, i.e., the demands of moral rectitude, is the same for God as it is for humans: 'it is not improper to say that God is perfectly held by standards that hold an upright man imperfectly', the sole difference being that whereas these standards are external to humans they are internal to (or better yet, identical with) the character of God. He concludes his defence of this point of identity by distinguishing between essence and environment. God and humans share the latter but not the former, and thus there is no possibility of confusing this structure with pantheism. 'The third method of knowing safeguards God's transcendence not only by showing that creation is dependent on God for its being, but also by showing that creation is judged by a norm which flows from the very substance of the divine character.'

In spite of his spirited defence of this point, I would argue that the form of language most appropriate for theology is not univocal. The incompleteness of Carnell's position becomes apparent when he illustrates the difference between essence and environment by noting that 'beings of incompatible orders can share the same environment without sharing the same essence, as when human beings and brutes breathe the same air. Man's essence consists in personality expressed through moral and rational self-transcendence, while that of the brute does not.' I disagree that this analysis holds for humans and animals for both an analytic and a theological reason, and would maintain instead that these show a failure to demonstrate the point of identity between humans and God that Carnell would have us believe.

The analytic reason why I reject this analysis has to do with Carnell's claims that animals and humans are 'beings of incompatible orders' but that they can nevertheless 'share the same environment' by (for example) breathing the same air and drinking the same water. But it is precisely in those aspects that they are not beings of *incompatible* orders. With respect to breathing and drinking they are beings of the same order. It is with respect to moral abstracting and conceptualizing that they occupy *in*compatible orders. The fact that they are compatible in some aspects is irrelevant to the aspects where they are not, and thus the fact that a univocity of language is permitted with respect

to breathing and drinking does not entail that a univocity of language is permitted with respect to moral functioning. But if this be the case, then the analogy fails to show how univocal language exists between beings of incompatible orders.

The theological reason for why I reject the appropriateness of univocal language about God is also my third and final criticism of Carnell. It has to do with one of his more puzzling thoughts, namely his designation of the moral and spiritual environment as 'the person of God'. Initially this appears awkward because we rarely think of environments as persons, and indeed, this very terminology seems to beg for the interpretation which sees God merely as metaphysical terminus of the process by which guilt is (non-personally) resolved. Carnell rejected this interpretation as we saw, but we shall profit by considering in more detail his discussion of 'person'.

Carnell's definition of person, which he takes to include divine as well as human persons, is 'freedom expressed through moral self-consciousness.'[36] For him this means that person is defined neither strictly empirically on the one hand nor strictly intuitively on the other. Instead, considered externally person is defined as that in whose presence feelings of moral significance and dignity are elicited from us, and considered internally as that which grounds our undeniable certainty that various offences committed against us are moral in addition to physical and/or logical. Person, in other words, is the ground of the possibility of moral activity. It is presupposed by the third condition of knowing and thus by the first two as well.

In addition to these elements, the person of God has the characteristic of being that 'to whom violators of our dignity must [ultimately] give an account'. We have already seen how Carnell reasons to this conclusion and will not repeat that except to note again that apart from this analysis, he believes that there is no way to establish the possibility of moral life since 'Man is left with nothing but tastes and feelings to guide him through social tensions.' If 'person' is presupposed by any and all moral activities, then the offended judicial sentiment of a person ultimately requires resolution by a (necessarily) personal tribunal which no human is authorized to grant. Hence God's person as that tribunal.

As I hinted in my previous objection, I believe that Carnell has

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[36] See his discussion on pp. 107f. and 139ff.

here gratuitously identified God's person with the moral environment in which human beings function essentially, that is, where that which is essentially personal is revealed. To me it appears a straightforward misuse of language (although if it is that, then it is more than *just* that) to say that a moral environment can function as a centre of freedom, rights and dignity. This can be established using Carnell's own transcendental subjectivist method. We know that there is a distinction between our own person and the moral environment we inhabit, and we know this as a result of reflecting upon the conditions which apply equally to us and to those who offend us. Were there no such distinction, then the notion of moral offence would have to be merely person-relative in a way that our common sense tells us it is not. That is, we would be faced with having to believe either that we need not be held by the moral conditions which grasp others, or that they need not be held by those that grasp us, whereas reflection upon situations of offence reveal identical responsibilities regardless of the 'direction' of the offence. But if it is the case that we know that our persons are distinct from the moral environment we inhabit, and if it is further the case that God must be personal since anything less would not allow for moral offences to be ultimately rectified, then by Carnell's own reasoning God's person must be distinct from the moral environment. Otherwise we have no linguistic right to call God a person at all.

I said at the beginning of this essay that criticisms made of Carnell's position would not be such that it would need to be rejected *in toto*. Here we can see why. The content of what Carnell says about God in this particular instance is inconsistent with his method. It is not always the case that method supercedes content, granted, but it seems to in this case precisely because there is much less warrant for the material claim than for the method itself. In addition, there are critical warrants against the content, as we have just shown. The net effect of this final criticism is that the transcendental method itself is affirmed but that Carnell's material claim about God's person must be made religiously appropriate by distinguishing more clearly than he did between person and environment.[37]

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[37] I have deliberately refrained from saying what *I* mean by 'God' since that would take us too far afield in this type of expository treatise. However, as an indication of how I might proceed, I would diverge from Carnell inasmuch as he focuses upon justice or restitution as the point of identity between humans and God. Instead I would focus upon the theme (or 'attribute') of love. The reason for this choice may be stated in various ways, but in general it is that

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to show how Carnell analyzes the God-human relationship. We have seen that he begins by showing that human beings live in a fourfold environment. He then inspects the conditions which must obtain if appropriate existence in that environment is to be accounted for. The specific avenue taken is transcendental; he initially addresses how humans are able both to know and to grow in knowledge, and then proceeds to show that such activity and growth are best accounted for by uncovering the moral foundations of acts of knowing. From this point, Carnell concludes that God's 'person' is the necessary condition for accounting for the ultimate unity of all intellectual and especially moral self-transcending acts.

My purpose in tracing through Carnell's argument was not simply conceptual. Rather, in portraying an evangelical consciously comfortable with a theological method which can best be described as transcendental subjectivism, it was also to show that there is good reason to be hopeful about the immediate future of theological ecumenicity among those communities where such a method is explicitly commended, especially Rahnerian Catholicism. For better and for worse, American evangelical theology is

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love is presupposed by justice and is therefore logically more fundamental than justice in any moral approach to theology. That is, justice cannot be broken without breaking a prior presumption of love between and among persons. If love is as intrinsic to God-human and human-human relationship as is implied by the two great commandments of Jesus, then it is also thereby the clearest mediator to the character of God which Christians can think of. To say the same thing more systematically, it is the fundamental dynamic of human and divine acts of self-transcendence. Here there seems to be a genuine ambiguity within the Christian tradition concerning the identity (or not) of God and love, unlike the identity which Carnell asserts between God and justice. Catholic transcendentalists have tended to identify God and love more than they have distinguished them, but have also insisted that such an 'identity' does not constitute a univocal point of identity between God and the created world. Human love is the most basic experience of self-transcendence whose ground is God, and which is thus a response to the mystery of the self-transcending God. Strictly speaking, then, love itself is our point of contact with God without being a point of identity with God. Rahner says for example that 'In the case of this unity [of the love of God and of neighbour] the important thing is to understand . . . that the one does not exist and cannot be understood or exercised without the other, and that two names have really to be given to the same reality if we are to summon up its one mystery, which cannot be abrogated,' in 'Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God,' *Theological Investigations* VI, p. 232.

not known for its innovativeness. However, if a methodological consonance is evident between evangelicals and others at this fundamental level, then there is reason to believe that theology (and by extension, hopefully, the church as well) has transcended boundaries which need no longer be perpetuated.