

PLACING REASON ON THE STOOL OF WONDERMENT

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The title of this paper comes from a passage in Kierkegaard's book, *Philosophical Fragments*.

This is a passage in which Kierkegaard discusses the tension which arises when human reason encounters God (whom Kierkegaard here describes as The Paradox). The tension is inevitable because, in this encounter with God, reason runs up against the limits of its powers. 'The offended consciousness,' Kierkegaard says, 'holds aloof from the Paradox and what wonder, since the Paradox is the Miracle! This discovery was not made by the Reason; it was the Paradox that placed the reason on the stool of wonderment....'¹

Kierkegaard is often accused of being totally opposed to reason, of wishing to banish it from the scene. As the perceived opponent of reason, Kierkegaard is seen to be responsible for many modern ills, from the errors of Don Cupitt to the excesses of the charismatics.

The view that Kierkegaard is totally opposed to reason goes along with the view that he has no interest in what is objectively the case, that he is exclusively interested in the feeling of the individual. It has to be said that those who interpret Kierkegaard in this way do not have great difficulty in finding apparent support for their views from his writings. On page 115 of the *Postscript*² Kierkegaard writes 'every trace of an objective issue should be eliminated'. On page 201 he says, 'objectively, there is no truth'. Specifically in relation to Christianity Kierkegaard maintains, on page 116, that 'Christianity protests every form of objectivity... objectively Christianity has absolutely no existence'. Again, Kierkegaard includes a whole chapter in the *Postscript* which has in its title the statement, 'Truth is subjectivity'.

In defence of Kierkegaard, it has to be said that he felt called to attack a philosophical tradition in which he saw reason being given a place of excessive importance. Kierkegaard attacked Descartes as following this line, and also Kant but he reserved his most persistent attacks for Hegel. In Kierkegaard's view of Hegel, Reason was working everything out, Reason was well on its way to a

¹ *Philosophical Fragments*, Princeton, 1967, p. 65

² *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Princeton, 1968.

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comprehensive account of everything, Reason was banishing all mysteries. Particularly offensive to Kierkegaard was the way in which, as he interpreted Hegel, Christianity itself was to be granted a place, not because it came to us by the sovereign grace of God, but because a flat headed German philosopher had found a place for it in his philosophical system.

No doubt Kierkegaard was at times unfair to Hegel, but in order for us to interpret Kierkegaard fairly we have to appreciate that phrases like 'objective truth' have a very specialised sense in Kierkegaard's writings. They represent something which Kierkegaard perceived to arise from within the overall view which Hegel and others were promoting. Thus, when Kierkegaard rejects what he refers to as 'objective truth', he is signalling his rejection of a whole package. He is not stepping outside the ongoing philosophical debate and saying to us plainly that all that matters is the feeling of the individual.

He is not saying to us that he is unconcerned about what is objectively the case. When Kierkegaard says, 'objectively, there is no truth' he is saying that the way of access to what is objectively the case does not for us lie through the philosophical system which Hegel represented. He is saying that Hegel's system, which claimed to hold the key to everything, for us actually leads nowhere. The kind of rarefied knowledge which it offers us is not actually available to us at all.

Robert Bretall, in his Introduction to *A Kierkegaard Anthology*,³ deals with these points as follows: 'The advent of Christianity posed a new problem for philosophy, a solution of which was reached in the medieval synthesis of St Thomas Aquinas: faith and reason were harmonised by carefully delineating their respective spheres. This synthesis was broken up by the centrifugal and individualistic forces of the Renaissance, with the result that reason (in one form or another, patently or disguised) tended to gain the upper hand. This was true of the English Empiricists almost as much as of the great continental Rationalists, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibnitz; only in the radical scepticism of David Hume does the element of "belief" (very much secularised in form) come to assert itself once more. Kant put an end to the pretensions of the older rationalism, but with his doctrine of the thing-in-itself and the Transcendental Ego paved the way for a new and bolder rationalism – that of Hegel. It was against this that Kierkegaard reacted so violently, and for this very reason he sometimes swings to the opposite extreme and appears to be a fideist who would cut himself off completely from the intellect and its

³ *A Kierkegaard Anthology* ed. Robert Bretall, Princeton, 1973.

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claims. Here as elsewhere he was a "corrective" providing the emphasis which was needed at the time; but his considered view point was not fideistic. He himself was capable of the most abstract thinking: in the *Journals* he speaks of using the understanding in order to believe *against* the understanding, and this was precisely his aim...'.⁴

I am not saying that Kierkegaard made this as clear as he could have done, but he did care about what is objectively the case. It is, after all, the objective Paradox which places Reason on the stool of wonderment. From an overall view of his life and writings it is clear that Kierkegaard personally took the facts of gospel history with absolute seriousness, from the time of his conversion on 19 May 1838 to the time of his death on 11 November 1855.

That Kierkegaard did give a place to the understanding is clear from the following quotations scattered throughout the *Postscript*; 'the subjective thinker is dialectical enough to interpenetrate (his life) with thought' (page 413). 'The dialectical is combined with the pathetic to create new pathos' (page 493). The point of being a Christian 'cannot be to reflect upon Christianity, but only by reflection to intensify the pathos with which one continues to be a Christian' (page 537).

All this does not add up to a picture in which reason is banished from the scene, having no role to play.

Obviously it is not possible here to discuss this in detail. But I would like in a limited way to explore whether or not Kierkegaard's reference to reason being placed on the stool of wonderment has a message for us, both in relation to the philosophical tradition of which Kierkegaard was so critical, and to some ways in which that tradition may have affected the thought and life of the church.

In the last chapter of his book *The Problems of Philosophy*,⁴ Bertrand Russell has a paragraph which I would like to read here in slightly edited form. 'The value of philosophy is to be sought largely in its very uncertainty. The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason. To such a man the world tends to become definite, finite, obvious; common objects raise no questions, and unfamiliar possibilities are contemptuously rejected. As soon as we begin to philosophise, on the contrary, we find that even the most every day things lead to problems to which only very incomplete answers can be given. Philosophy, though

⁴ Oxford Univ, 1967

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unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raised, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they may be; it removes the arrogant dogmatism of those who have never travelled into the region of liberating doubt, and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect.' ⁵

If one were to judge only on the basis of this paragraph, one would think that there was a lot in common between Russell and Kierkegaard. Russell is here acknowledging that, when our capacity to philosophise serves us well, we see one aspect of a thing but also other aspects which may appear to be in conflict with the first. This is a perplexing but a liberating experience, which enlarges our vision and enriches our minds. Here, reason is serving us, not ruling over us, requiring that everything brought to its notice be reduced to conformity with a closed, rationalistic system.

I am afraid, however, that Russell does not keep to the spirit of that paragraph throughout the book. I am thinking of his account of how we know.

Russell refers to two types of knowledge – knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. Knowledge by acquaintance is the kind of direct knowledge we have, for example, of the sense data through which we have an impression of an external object. Knowledge by description involves knowledge of truths and the application of this knowledge to the objects of which we have knowledge by acquaintance. It seems to me that, in so far as Russell's account of these two types of knowledge is to be accepted, we should take the view that knowledge of any kind is in fact impossible without a coming together of elements represented by knowledge by acquaintance on the one hand and knowledge by description on the other. I would further suggest that it is through such a combination and interaction that our minds are kept open and that the sense of wonder of which Russell speaks is kept alive.

But this is where Russell's book proved a disappointment for me. Instead of allowing that knowledge comes from a dynamic interchange between the two types of knowledge which he describes, Russell insists that 'All our knowledge, both knowledge of things and knowledge of truths, rests upon acquaintance as its foundation.' ⁶

Because it is so relevant to this age-old search for a systematic account of how we know, and because it forms part of the immediate

⁵ *The Problems of Philosophy*, p. 91

⁶ *The Problems of Philosophy*, p. 26

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background to Kierkegaard's work, I would like to read the following quotation from Rodger Scruton's book on *Kant*: 'Leibniz belonged to the school of thought now generally labelled rationalist, and Hume to the school of empiricism which is commonly contrasted with it. Kant, believing that both philosophies were wrong in their conclusion, attempted to give an account of philosophical method which incorporated the truths, and avoided the errors of both. Rationalism derives all knowledge from the exercise of reason, and purports to give an absolute description of the world, uncontaminated by the experience of any observer. Empiricism argues that knowledge comes through experience alone; there is therefore no possibility of separating knowledge from the subjective condition of the knower. Kant wished to give an answer to the question of objective knowledge which was neither as absolute as Leibniz's nor as subjective as Hume's.' Later on in the same chapter, Scruton outlines how Kant came to correlate elements from both the rationalist and empiricist positions: 'Neither experience nor reason are alone able to provide knowledge. The first provides content without form, the second form without content. Only in their synthesis is knowledge possible; hence there is no knowledge that does not bear the marks of reason and of experience together. Such knowledge is, however, genuine and objective. It transcends the point of view of the man who possesses it, and makes legitimate claims upon an independent world.'⁷

This may look hopeful. In the view of Kierkegaard, however, Kant's effort to combine the insights of rationalism and empiricism proved a failure. On page 292 of the *Postscript* he speaks disparagingly of 'Kant's misleading reflection which brings reality into connection with thought'. As indicated earlier, Kierkegaard's position is not that there is a complete divorce between reality and thought. What he is objecting to in Kant is his claim to give a complete account of how we know, a systematic and potentially exhaustive correlation of reality and thought. Kant makes this claim in the preface of the first edition of the *Critique*: 'In this enquiry I have made completeness my aim, and I venture to assert that there is not a single metaphysical problem which has not been solved, or for the solution of which the key at least has not been supplied.' In terms of the title of this talk, what did Kant do? At one stage, it looked as if he had Reason under control. However, he allowed her to slip off the stool of wonderment and to usurp the throne. From there, she required the banishment of all mysteries as she did, too, in Russell's case, though in a different way.

⁷ *Kant*, Oxford, 1982, pp.14, 17

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What, then, is Kierkegaard's own attitude towards theories of knowledge? Is he actually a sceptic? Kierkegaard is not a sceptic, but he is sceptical about epistemological theories which claim to explain to us how we know. Kierkegaard felt called to hold up before us how little we understand about how we know. This difficulty in understanding how we understand comes over clearly from the following quotations from the *Postscript*: 'To abstract from existence is to remove the difficulty. To remain in existence so as to understand one thing in one moment and another thing in another moment is not to understand oneself. But to understand the greatest oppositions together, and to understand oneself existing in them, is very difficult' (page 316).

On page 134 he speaks about 'the dialectic involved in every conflict between the ideal and the empirical, a dialectic which threatens every moment to prevent a beginning, and after a beginning has been made threatens every moment a revolt against this beginning.'

I may to some extent be importing my own thinking into what Kierkegaard says, but it seems to me from these and other extracts that Kierkegaard's account of what goes on when an existing individual thinks is as follows: the existing individual realises that there are two aspects to his situation. He can reach out to the realm of reason on the one hand, and on the other hand he can reach out to what is in the world around him – things which are accidental and subject to change. As these two realms meet in the individual, they set up a tension and the natural desire is to seek relief from this tension in some way or other. Though it would be somewhat anachronistic to express the view in this way, I believe there is basis in Kierkegaard's writing for saying that he would view foundationalism, whether of a rationalist or an empiricist kind, as a sophisticated effort to eliminate this tension. But the individual who faces himself honestly does not seek escape in either of these directions. He knows that a system which concentrates either on the realm of reason or the realm of experience, to the neglect of the other, will fail to reflect his situation as it is. He knows that, in order to retain whatever knowledge he has, he requires to wait on at his lonely post between these two realms. As he does so, he increasingly awakens to a sense of his existence as an individual who stands out from his surroundings and from all others. He is also sensitive to the limitations of his powers and of his situation, a sensitivity which constantly threatens to intensify to the point of crippling any further effort towards progress.

Kierkegaard's constant emphasis is that man is a synthesis of finite and infinite, of the temporal and the eternal. Man is like the driver of a wagon which has two horses to pull it, the one a Pegasus and the other a worn out jade: 'eternity is the winged horse, infinitely fast,

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and time is the worn out jade' (*Postscript*, page 296). Kierkegaard is not suggesting that, whereas both rationalist and empiricist systems are flawed, he is trying to produce a system in which these flaws will not appear. In fact, instead of trying to produce a system in an attempt to account adequately for all the facts, Kierkegaard delights to linger around those areas where it can be most powerfully felt that no existential system is possible.

In his book *Escape from Reason*, Frances Schaeffer writes, 'The man who follows Hegel, Kierkegaard, is the real modern man because he accepted what Leonardo and other men had rejected, he put away the hope of a unified field of knowledge.'⁸

When Schaeffer uses the phrase 'real modern man,' I take it he is referring to the man who is perhaps a sceptic in epistemology, a relativist in ethics, and an agnostic or an atheist in religion – a man who despairs of discovering any objective purpose in life. There would be differences of opinion about the degree to which Kierkegaard is responsible for producing that particular modern man. But the point I would take up, in response to Schaeffer's comment, relates to a modern man of a different type, who seems to me to be very much alive, to be exercising a controlling influence on the education given to our children and young people. This is the kind of modern man who has practically substituted science for religion, who believes that, if there is any explanation of why we are here, we must look to science for that explanation. This is the kind of modern man whose advent Kierkegaard foresaw. Kierkegaard lived in a time when science and technology were already advancing rapidly. He foresaw the boost which man's pride in his powers of reason would receive by these and future advances. As he attempted to provide an antidote to this nascent arrogance Kierkegaard sought, to use Schaeffer's phrase, 'to put away the hope of a unified field of knowledge.' By this I mean that, as the expectation was gaining strength around him that human reason, or 'science' as it might be called, was soon to be able to extend itself over the various areas of knowledge available to us, and explain the interconnections between everything, Kierkegaard fought against this tendency practically to bow down and worship human reason. 'Even the act of eating' he wrote, 'is more reasonable than speculating with a microscope upon the functions of digestion... A dreadful sophistry spreads microscopically and telescopically into tomes, and yet in the last resort produces nothing qualitatively understood, though it does, to be sure, cheat men out of the simple

⁸ *Escape from Reason*, 1968, p. 42

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profound and passionate wonder which gives impetus to the ethical – the only thing certain is the ethical – religious.’⁹

Perhaps it was partly in recognition of what Kierkegaard tried to do here that Wittgenstein said of him ‘Kierkegaard was by far the most profound thinker of the last century. Kierkegaard was a saint.’¹⁰

Following in the spirit of much of Kierkegaard’s work, Wittgenstein said once about Hegel, ‘Hegel seems to me to be always wanting to say that things which look different are really the same. Whereas my interest is in showing that things which look the same are really different.’¹¹

Again, Wittgenstein is very much in sympathy with the spirit of Kierkegaard’s work when he says, ‘the whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena. Thus people today stop at the laws of nature, treating them as something inviolable, just as God and Faith were treated in past ages. And in fact both are right and both wrong: though the view of the ancients is clearer in so far as they have a clear and acknowledged terminus, while the modern system tries to make it look as if *everything* were explained.’¹²

Schaeffer laments Kierkegaard’s putting away the hope of a unified field of knowledge. But, in the preface to his *Philosophical Investigations*, written in 1945,¹³ Wittgenstein says that he had hoped to produce a book in which the results of his investigations would be welded together into a whole, in which his thoughts would ‘proceed from one subject to another in a natural order and without breaks’. However he goes on, ‘After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realised that I should never succeed. The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them on in any single direction against the natural inclination. And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. For this compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss cross in every direction. The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of these long and involved journeyings.’

Are Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard not sticking with things as they are, whereas Schaeffer is dealing with things as he would like them

⁹ *The Journals*, quoted in *The Postscript*, Editor’s introduction, page XV

¹⁰ *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed Rush Rhees, Oxford, 1984, p. 87

¹¹ *Recollections*, Introduction p. XV

¹² *Recollections*, p. 88

¹³ Oxford, 1958

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to be? In fact, is Schaeffer not describing them as many philosophers and theologians have wished them to be? They perceive tensions and contradictions, and their philosophical or theological project is an attempt to produce a system in which these conflicts and tensions will not appear. Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein either did not attempt, or renounced attempts to produce such a system, perceiving any system to be an illusion.

In the second part of this paper, I would like to bring some of the questions raised in the first part to bear on some areas of theology and the life of the church.

Are there any areas where there is evidence of conflict, where we have tended to eliminate that conflict by forcing through a system which emphasises one aspect of things at the cost of another? I would think that this is a question which could be put in relation to the long standing debate between Calvinism and Arminianism. It seems clear that there are many passages of Scripture which highlight the fact that God knows all things and controls all things, in creation and redemption.¹⁴ But there are other passages which pick up the human perspective and which press home our responsibility with vigour and without qualification.¹⁵ I think I would be right in saying that, instead of leaving these conflicting emphases in balance, some Calvinists have tended to bring considerations from the realm of divine foreordination to bear in the realm of human choice and responsibility. The same point can be made about some Arminians. They have brought considerations from the realm of human responsibility to bear in the realm of divine foreordination. Both have felt the need to produce a unified system. To achieve this, they have been prepared to give undue prominence to the element they favour and virtually to sacrifice the other. Both have arrived at these positions, not through patient submission to the apparent conflict presented in Scripture, but by forcing through a system of their own in order to eliminate that apparent conflict.

Does tension not also arise in the area of worship – a tension between word and spirit? Is it not possible that extreme applications of the Regulative Principle represent an attempt to legislate this tension away, in favour of the word? On the other hand, does the charismatic movement spring from a gut rejection of systems, of whatever colour, which are perceived to have ruled the life of the church for a very long time? And is this movement an attempt to force a redressing of the balance in favour of the spirit? And could it represent a correct perception of a lack in the church, though offering

¹⁴ e.g. Ephesians 1:4-6, 11

¹⁵ e.g. Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

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a remedy which is flawed and which tends towards the opposite extreme?

Perhaps something of the same point could be made in regard to experience, though I will do nothing more than to quote from the paper by Derek Tidball in the book *Christian Experience in Theology and Life*: 'We desperately need to consider the theology of experience. Our heritage from the Reformation onwards, through the Enlightenment and into the twentieth century has lead us to emphasise the word, doctrine, right belief, and the cerebral aspects of the faith. Little attention has been paid to the theology of experience except by those such as Harvey Cox or Morton Kelsey who do not have an evangelical concern for Biblical truths. Indeed Kelsey shows how little attention is paid to the whole question of experience generally by theologians of whatever colour. It may be that our rejection of Schleiermacher and our fears about the woolliness of Otto have reinforced our negative approach to the area. But these surely are precisely the reasons why an evangelical theology of experience ought to be constructed.'¹⁶

Following on Derek Tidball's comment, and looking back over the whole of this paper, I find it interesting that Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones thought it necessary to give an entire address at the close of the Puritan Conference in 1960 on the words of First Corinthians, Chapter 8: 'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.' Dr Lloyd-Jones felt it necessary to say, 'There can be no question at all, it seems to me, that the peculiar danger that threatens those of us who meet annually at this conference is the danger of pride of intellect and pride of knowledge.'¹⁷

What Paul opposed, and what Lloyd-Jones perceived to be a great danger at a time of revived interest in the Puritans, was a growth in knowledge of detail which lacked the balance of a pervasive sense of how little we know. This is what I take Kierkegaard to have expressed in his own way on page 182 of the *Postscript*: 'When subjectivity is the truth, the conceptual determination of the truth must include an expression for the antithesis of objectivity, a memento of the fork in the road where the way swings off.'

Does Scripture provide anything corresponding to what Kierkegaard describes as 'the antithesis of objectivity'? Is there anything in Scripture which may provide an antidote to that disease of which Dr Lloyd-Jones said he saw the first signs in 1960?

¹⁶ Ed. I. Howard Marshall, Edinburgh, 1988

¹⁷ *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors*, Edinburgh, 1987, p. 25

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I would suggest that Scripture as a whole does indicate an antidote, in that the revelation of God's will is contained in the unit which is made up of the Old and the New Testaments. This means that what comes to us today is something in which are combined both what was given and retained for centuries (the O.T.), and what represents a lively investigative response to what God had given (the N.T.). Both these elements seem to me to be spelt out for us in Hebrews chapter eleven, where the example of Old Testament believers is introduced to illustrate the more explicit teaching of the New Testament on faith. In verse one of chapter eleven, faith is described as the *hupostasis* of things hoped for, the *elenchos* of things not seen.

Hupostasis literally means foundation, but (following Guthrie's commentary) ¹⁸ it has been used already in the Epistle in two senses. In 1:3 it has the sense of 'nature' or 'essence', but in 3:14 it has the sense of conviction. I wonder if one could draw on both senses here, giving the following picture. Something of the essence of the things of God is present in faith itself, and because of this the person who has faith has strong conviction about the things to which they relate. What about the second key term? *Elenchos* seems to refer to the process of subjecting claims to rigorous examination, exposing what is false and confirming what is true. From this background it derives both the sense of proof or demonstration and that of being sure as a result of having gone through a process of proof. (This term was used by Plato to describe the dialectal methods practised by Socrates, and it is at least possible that the term was used in Hebrews with an awareness of this background.)

Both these aspects seem to me to form part of the scriptural account of faith and of the knowledge of God which faith involves. *Hupostasis* points to that aspect of faith in which it is most clearly seen that the basis for believing is supplied by God. *Elenchos* points to that aspect of faith in which we subject God's revelation to the closest scrutiny, we ask questions about its nature and implications. Both *hupostasis* and *elenchos* take in the fact that faith involves a being sure, though they point to different factors involved in our coming to be sure.

It is very difficult to see how these two elements in faith combine. It is difficult, in fact, to the point that it looks as if these two aspects of faith are in conflict. I wonder if there is an analogy between the two factors involved in faith and the two types of knowledge which Russell speaks of. Is there some correlation between the *hupostasis* element in faith and Russell's knowledge by acquaintance, and between the *elenchos* element in faith and Russell's

¹⁸ *The Letter to the Hebrews: Introduction and Commentary*, Leicester, 1983, p.225

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knowledge by description? In both cases, there is the element of the given in relation to which we must to some extent be passive. But there is also the active aspect of knowledge and of faith, in which we analyse what we have been given in order to come to a personal appreciation of it.

And there is another element in this description of faith which I feel to be very important. *Hupostasis* is presented in relation to 'things hoped for' and *elenchos* in relation to 'things not seen'. There is more than a suggestion here that faith is not something complete in itself and finished. On the contrary, it seems to be part of the nature of faith that it reaches out beyond itself.

In Lloyd-Jones's paper, one of the signs of false knowledge which he picks out is a lack of balance. In terms of this discussion, the situation described by Lloyd-Jones comes about when an imbalance is introduced in favour of the *elenchos* aspect of faith. When believers are in this state of imbalance there is an appearance of great cognitive activity. It may seem that great progress is being made in understanding the faith, but there may be little progress in reality. The cognitive side of faith has taken precedence, and most of the activity is directed towards reducing the revelation already received to a coherent system. This process involves little ongoing interaction between the church and God's revelation. It is carried out by forcing through to their logical conclusion those principles that have been lifted from revelation and adopted as the guiding principles of theology.

How do we prevent such an imbalance, or even an imbalance of a contrasting kind, from arising? I cannot offer any formula. But if we remember that the just shall live by faith, and if we give due place to the conflicting factors which are in the nature of faith, and if we resist the temptation to adopt a system by which the tensions essential to the life of faith are resolved, will we not be living nearer to the Spirit from whom our spiritual life derives? And we will have succeeded in keeping Reason off the throne, and on the stool of wonderment.