

Logic and Scripture

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The Question

Does logic have a place in the study of Scripture?

Modern evangelical theologians have, at best, given a very ambiguous answer to this question. While not entirely rejecting the use of logic - who can? - they nevertheless refuse to face many of the logical consequences of their own teachings, teach many logically inconsistent doctrines, such as the doctrine of two contradictory wills in God, and decry those who insist on a logical construction of the truth as "rationalists".

When their inconsistencies are pointed out they sneer at "mere human logic," and speak of "mystery" or of "incomprehensibility" to cover the fact that they are talking nonsense. What they really mean by mystery is evident when they begin to talk of "paradox," "antinomy," "tension," and of apparent or real contradictions in the Word of God.

What are we to think of all this?

The appeal to mystery sounds very pious to most believers since Scripture also speaks of the mystery. But are these people following the Biblical concept of the "mystery" when they use the word to mean "contradiction" or "paradox?" Does the Bible in speaking of mysteries ever refer to doctrines that contradict each other and are impossible to understand? Can there be truths about God or Scripture teaching that contradict each other?

Along the same lines, does God's incomprehensibility mean that we can believe contradictory things about Him? Is it, at least at times, impossible to understand and make sense of what God says about Himself and about His Word? This would seem to be the conclusion of some of those who so often decry the use of logic and who hold to all sorts of contradictions in God and in Scripture - that rationality is incompatible with God's incomprehensibility.

And finally, is it rationalism to insist that the doctrines of Scripture must be logically consistent with one another? This is the charge made against those who insist that the teachings of Scripture cannot contradict each other. Do they exalt logic over Scripture when they seek to harmonize the truths of Scripture and to fit them into a logically coherent system? Many, of course, would claim that they do.

Logic

Perhaps the reason why the appeal against logic is so successful is that the word conjures up in the mind of modern man, even of the Christian, a cold and barren system of doctrines that have no relationship to life and are utterly without passion or warmth. This view of logic, however, is wrong.

It helps to dispel these wrong notions to remember that we get the word "logic" from the Greek word, "*logos*," translated "Word" in John 1:1-14, and used as a name for our

Lord Jesus Christ. Nor is it any more strange to think of Christ in terms of logic than it is to think of Him in terms of the word. To connect *logos* with speech or the spoken word is only to say that it is through Him that God speaks to us and reveals Himself to us. To connect *logos* with logic is only to say that when God speaks to us through His Son He speaks rationally and intelligibly. That is, in fact, the miracle of revelation - not just that God speaks to us, but that we can *understand* what He says and make sense of it.

James O. Buswell says:

“When we accept the laws of logic, we are not accepting laws external to God to which He must be subject, but we are accepting laws of truth which are derived from God’s Holy Character..... The Bible as a book written in human language claims to speak the truth. If the word truth is not meaningless, it implies the laws of truth, that is, the laws of logic.”

We do not deny, of course, that an operation of the Spirit is necessary for natural man to understand what God says. The problem, however, with the unbeliever is not that what God says is unintelligible or irrational, but that natural man is a fool. He *will not* understand, a bit like a foreigner who pretends not to understand English in order to avoid an unpleasant confrontation with the authorities.

Logic is simply right thinking and the rules of logic the rules for right thinking. If we get that into our minds we will not think so disparagingly of logic. Surely God wants us to think rightly about Him, about right and wrong, and about all other things. By the same token it is sin to think wrongly about God, about His truth, or about morality. To say that right is wrong or that wrong is right is a matter of wrong, sinful thinking. Right thinking, at least about the things of God, is not only proper. It is required of us and wrong thinking condemned (Ps. 50:21, Phil. 4:8).

Right thinking, then, is thinking that is based on the Word of God. It is, first of all, a matter of thinking in harmony with all that the Word teaches. We must think what God thinks. We have His thoughts in the Word. And so, just as in confessing we say what He says, so in thinking we think what He reveals - His own thoughts. That is the problem with the wicked; God is not in all His thoughts (Ps. 10:4). We must, therefore, bring “into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (II Cor. 10:4).

Such right thinking, however, is also rational and makes sense. Right thinking will not only be thinking that is based on the Word of God but thinking that is, therefore, intelligible and rational. Exactly because the “thoughts” of the Word are God’s revelation they are not irrational, senseless, contradictory, and impossible to understand.

We agree with Gordon Clark at this point:

“Does it not seem peculiar, in this connection, that a theologian can be so greatly attached to the doctrine of the Atonement, or a pietist to the idea of sanctification, which nonetheless is explained only in some parts of Scripture, and yet be hostile to or suspicious of rationality and logic which every verse of Scripture exhibits?” (**An Introduction to Christian Philosophy**, p. 72).

Rationalism and Rationality

All this leads us to another important point, a defense of rationality. Rationality is *not* the same as rationalism. When someone insists that it is a contradiction to say that God wants and doesn't want the salvation of the reprobate - that such teaching is impossible nonsense - he is immediately jumped with the charge of rationalism. But he is only being rational. That is something different.

The thing that needs to be made clear is that it is not rationalism to be *rational* and to insist that the truth be rational and make sense. Rationalism is thinking that starts apart from God and from Scripture and therefore always goes nowhere. It is, in fact, rationalism which has lead modern man to the brink of total *irrationality* and anarchy in philosophy, art, science and ethics. In severing his thinking from Scripture he has ended up with nonsense. As Francis Schaeffer says,

“Christianity has the opportunity, therefore, to speak clearly of the fact that its answer has the very thing modern man has despaired of - the unity of thought. It provides a unified answer for the whole of life. It is true that man will have to renounce his rationalism, but then, on the basis of what can be discussed, he has the possibility of recovering his rationality. You may now see why I stressed so strongly, earlier, the difference between rationalism and rationality. Modern man has lost the latter.” (**Escape from Reason**, p. 82).

When, therefore, a theologian seeks to think things through and to reconcile the teaching of Scripture with itself he is not being a rationalist. It is in fact the task of the theologian to systematize the truths of Scripture so that they all relate to one another and do not contradict each other. To throw out logic and rationality is to destroy even the possibility of doing theology. Yet this is what many theologians insist must be done.

The question here, therefore, is not that of revelation versus rationalism, but whether revelation is rational - whether when God speaks, He speaks rationally and intelligibly and in a way we can understand. And, if God speaks in contradictions and paradoxes He speaks irrationally. A contradiction, i.e., a square is round, is nonsense. Someone may believe it, but in that case they can well be accused of being irrational, even insane.

It is such contradictions that theologians defend when they say that God has two wills, that He wants and doesn't want to save all men, that He loves the unsaved and doesn't love them, or that in first loving them and then not loving them He remains unchangeable. To reject such contradiction is not rationalism, it is rationality and a rejection of irrationality.

The Mystery

It is at this point that the whole subject of the mystery arises. In defense of their contradictions theologians say “It is a mystery” and to someone who has given the matter little thought this seems very good. After all, the Bible speaks of mysteries, and in everyday usage the word seems to mean “something we cannot understand.” So the theologian seems perfectly justified in using the word “mystery” to mean, “something impossible to

understand - a contradiction.”

However, that is not the Biblical meaning of the word mystery. In Scripture the word means, “something the natural man cannot understand because he is a fool, but which is revealed to God’s children by God Himself and which can and must be understood by them.” Paul speaks in Ephesians 3:3-5 of the mystery “which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is *now revealed* unto his holy apostles and prophets by the spirit.” Nor is this mystery understood only by the theologians and leaders like Paul, but was given so that “when ye (the ordinary members of the church) read, ye may *understand* my knowledge in the mystery of Christ.”

Even in the common usage of the word, however, the theologians are wrong to stretch its meaning to cover their contradictions and paradoxes. When we speak of the doctrine of the Trinity as a mystery, we do *not* mean, “something impossible to understand - a contradiction.” We do not mean, in other words, that the doctrine of the Trinity is self-contradictory and irrational, only that we do not *fully understand* it.

If the doctrine of the Trinity said that God was one God and three Gods or one Person and three Persons (as Cornelius Van Til says) it would be a contradiction and would be unintelligible. God cannot at the same time be one God and three Gods. But the Trinity means only that God is one God and three Persons. That may be difficult to understand fully, but it is not a contradiction - not a mystery in the sense of “contradiction.”

Nor are the doctrines of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility a mystery in the sense that they contradict each other. If they did we would have to choose between them. Thankfully, we do not. They are a mystery in that we do not fully understand how they are reconciled, but they do not contradict each other. They are not a paradox. As Herman Hoeksema says,

“They would be contradictory if the first proposition denied what is affirmed by the second. But this is not true. The first proposition asserts something about God: He is absolutely sovereign and determines the acts of man. The second proposition predicates something about man: he is responsible for his moral acts. Does the first proposition deny that man is responsible? If it does you have here a contradiction. But it does not. Those who like to discover a contradiction here, usually the enemies of the truth of God’s sovereignty, simply take it for granted that to assert God is sovereign even over man’s acts is to say the same as that man is not responsible” (“The Text of a Complaint” - photocopied reprints from volumes 21 and 22 of *The Standard Bearer*, p. 19).

To say that God loves and does not love the reprobate is not a mystery but a contradiction. It is impossible to make sense of the idea that God loves the reprobate for a while and then ceases to love them and yet remains unchangeable. It is such contradictions that we reject and that ought to be rejected in Reformed theology.

Logic and the Doctrine of God

There is more at stake here than just the question of whether or not we can believe

contradictions as many modern theologians say we can and ought. The very nature and being of God is at stake.

One very basic attribute of God is His simplicity, an attribute about which one usually hears little. **The Belgic Confession** lists this attribute first:

We all believe with the heart, and confess with the mouth, that there is one only *simple* and spiritual Being, which we call God; and that he is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good. (Article 1).

But the attribute is so little known that the language of the Belgic Confession sounds strange to our ears.

God's simplicity means that He is undivided. This is true first in reference to the three Persons of the Trinity - that they are not separate gods, but together one God. It is also true in connection with God's attributes. They cannot be divided from one another, or set one against another. There is, for example, no division or conflict between His justice and His mercy. His mercy will always be just and His justice merciful. There is, therefore, no contradiction or disharmony in God. He is one and undivided in His Person, in His attributes, in His purpose and will, and in His works. His works are never at odds with His purpose, nor His purpose with itself.

This attribute is denied by those who are willing to find contradiction in God's will or between God will and works. Not only do they promote irrationality, they deny His simplicity and are in conflict with what Scripture teaches about God (I Jn. 1:5). To find contradiction in God is to deny God. There are many things about God we cannot fathom, many things we cannot fully understand, but there is no darkness in Him at all.

Logic and the Doctrine of Scripture

The "theology of paradox and contradiction" is also a denial of the doctrine of Scripture. If there is contradiction in Scripture, then Scripture is no longer revelation. A contradiction "reveals" nothing. It makes understanding and comprehension impossible. Nor, if Scripture has contradictions in it is it perfect and infallible. A contradiction, however one looks at it, is an imperfection, a mistake.

The *regula Scripturae*, the rule of Scripture, one of the great Reformation principles, means that there is a consistent line of teaching that runs through Scripture from beginning to end. This, of course, follows from the fact that it is the Word of God. If it were just a series of books written by different men we would expect neither unity nor consistency, but because the Holy Spirit is the author of Scripture, it has both unity and consistency in all that it says. That is implied in Jesus' words in John 10:35, "The Scriptures cannot be broken." To find in them contradictions, whether they be in what Scripture says about God or in matters of historical detail is to deny that they are the infallible Word of God.

This is not to say that we understand every passage of Scripture. There are certainly passages that are difficult for us to reconcile, but anyone who believes in the infallibil-

ity of Scripture would insist that then we simply *do not* understand. To admit that they really are contradictions is to say that there are mistakes in Scripture and that is to deny them their authority as the Word of God.

Logic and Neo-orthodoxy

What is most frightening, though, about the tendency to admit contradiction both in Scripture and in theology is that this is the very heart of neo-orthodoxy. The idea that faith is able to believe contradictions - that it is in the very essence of faith to believe unreasonable things, is the essence of Karl Barth's paradox theology. He described faith as "a leap in the dark" insofar as it accepts all sorts of contradictions: God both elected and reprobated Esau (both loving and hating him); God elects and reprobates all men; God is omniscient (all-knowing) and yet limited in knowledge.

His followers went even further. Brunner flatly denied the infallibility of Scripture by teaching that the Bible is full of inconsistencies and contradictions but that God can and does reveal Himself to us through these things. Theology, according to Brunner, is not concerned with rational, intelligible truth, nor is the Bible a system of truth. According to him the contradictions and discrepancies in Scripture are a matter of God's condescension to us and that the only important thing is to "encounter" God through the Scriptures, not to understand and believe them literally.

Many evangelicals today have taken this same view of faith, of Scripture, and of God. They, too, say that Scripture does not have to be coherent and consistent in every part, that the knowledge of God can be full of paradoxes, antinomies, and contradictions, and that faith, by its very nature is able to accept such contradiction and irrationality without question.

An example that comes to mind is that of the Reformed minister who tried to defend the well-meant offer of the Gospel and common grace by such an appeal to irrationality. He was trying to answer the charge that for God to show love and grace to the reprobate in natural gifts and in a well-meant offer of the Gospel makes God changeable, i.e., He loves them now and stops loving them when He sends them to Hell. In defending himself, this man said that God was unchangeable but as Sovereign could nevertheless "decree for Himself a series of different dispositions." In other words, though He is unchangeable, He could as sovereign decide that He *would change* His attitude toward the wicked reprobate. Put even more simply, he was saying that though God is unchangeable He can change.

This is not very much different from what Barth says:

"We may believe that God can and must only be absolute in contrast to all that is relative . . . but such beliefs are shown to be quite untenable and corrupt and pagan, by the fact that God does in fact be and do this in Jesus Christ. We cannot make them the standard by which to measure what God can or cannot do, or the basis of the judgment that in doing this He brings Himself in to self-contradiction. . . . He is absolute, infinite, exalted, active, impassable, transcendent, but in all this He is the One who is free in His love, and therefore not His own prisoner. He is all this as the Lord, and in such a way *that*

He embraces the opposite of these concepts (italics mine - i.e., He is also relative, finite, passive, able to suffer, surpassed in glory) even while He is superior to them” (**Church Dogmatics**, IV, i, 55, p. 183ff).

What is Barth saying? He is saying that God’s freedom and sovereignty mean that He can be infinite and finite at the same time, exalted and inferior, omnipotent and impotent, immutable (unchangeable) and yet subject to change. Nor is Barth’s reference to Jesus Christ anything but a smokescreen to obscure the fact that He is in fact denying God’s absolute omnipotence, immutability, and infinity. That Christ, in His human nature was limited, changeable, finite, born in time, we do not deny. But that is not what Barth means. He means, as the first part of the quote shows, that it is pagan to think or say that God is absolutely and unqualifiedly omnipotent, omniscient, immutable, and infinite. He must also be impotent, limited in knowledge, mutable, and finite.

If you object that this is blatant contradiction or paradox, Barth will most assuredly agree with you and tell you that is why it is matter of faith - faith does not understand, but simply believes the irrational. That, unconsciously or otherwise, is the same conclusion that many come to today in defending their paradoxes and antinomies.

Interestingly, Barth’s conclusion regarding theology is:

“It can never form a system, comprehending and as it were ‘seizing’ the object” (**Church Dogmatics**, III, 3, p. 293);

which is to say that not only theology but that which it seeks, the knowledge of God, is impossible.

We do not deny, then, that faith must often accept the fact that it does not fully understand. We only deny that faith is such a “leap in the dark” that it can accept nonsense and unreason. If God is God, if revelation is truly a revealing of God, and if Scripture is infallible and unbreakable it cannot be so.

The Danger

The danger here is not small. In many ways paradox theology strikes at the fundamentals. The idea that there can be contradictions in God and in Scripture and that faith can accept these contradictions opens the door to all the errors of the subjectivism with which the church is plagued today. By subjectivism, we mean the teaching that feeling and experience are more important than doctrine and truth. We must not argue for the truth or try to “prove” that it is correct. We can only “feel” that it is correct and accept it blindly. To try and make sense of it, to do theology, to teach doctrine is to destroy all possibility of passion and love and to lapse into deadness. Our feelings and experiences may very well contradict Scripture but that does not make them wrong. Faith demands that we follow them even at the expense of Scripture. So they go on.

In opposition to such error we set ourselves, too, in opposition to all “theology” of paradox and contradiction, whether it be that of Barth, Neihbur and Brunner, or that rather more ignorant version of the same that passes as evangelicalism today.

John Calvin on Logic and Faith see next page...../

John Calvin on Logic, Faith, and Scripture.

“.....I *abhor paradox*” [Calvin: Antidote to the canons of the Council of Trent, canon VI].

“Should I answer that I cannot give any meaning to these monstrous contradictions (Heshusius’ doctrine of transubstantiation), he will meet me with what he and his fellows bring forward on all occasions as a shield of Ajax - that *reason is inimical to faith*. This I readily grant **if** *he* (Heshusius) is to be regarded as a rational animal!But his object in this indiscriminate condemnation of reason, no doubt was to procure license to his own darkness,..... [Calvin’s sarcasm over Heshusius’ principle that reason is inimical to faith, written in his polemics against transubstantiation. See Calvin’s Tracts Vol. 3 p.512-513].

“He (the Lord) knows the boiling restlessness of the human mind, the fickleness with which it is borne hither and thither, *its eagerness to hold opposites at one time in its grasp*.....” **Institutes III X 6**. (Virtually an anticipatory criticism of modern paradox thinking.)

“.....the **efficient cause** of our salvation is placed in the love of God the Father; the **material cause** in the obedience of the Son; the **instrumental cause** in the illumination of the Spirit, that is, faith; and the **final cause** in the praise of the divine goodness.” **Institutes III XIV 21**. (In this Calvin utilizes the Four-fold causality logic of Aristotle, as highlighted above.)

“We must, therefore, expound the passage so as to reconcile it with another, “**Institutes III XXIV 16** (where Calvin is expounding 1 Timothy 2: 4 and refuting those who interpret that passage to mean that God wants to save all men.)