

THE LAW OF NONCONTRADICTION

The law of noncontradiction is the foundation upon which all rationality is established. It is as crucial for theology as it is for all other intellectual disciplines. It creates the dimensions and prescribes the limits of all common ground for discussion. It is the necessary precondition for any and all science. The law may be defined:

A cannot be A and non-A at the same time and in the same relationship.

Aristotle defined the law by saying: "The same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject in the same respect."⁵

The definition of the law is crucial. It does not say that A cannot be A and B at the same time. Because of diversity and the multifaceted character of reality many things may have more than one attribute. We can predicate more than one thing of the same object at one time. We can say that an object is both blue and square. There is no contradiction in predicating both. But a thing cannot be square and not square at the same time and in the same relationship. Something square today could be round tomorrow if it undergoes a transformation, but it cannot be square and round at the same time, and in the

same relationship. An object may have many sides, one of which is square, another round. When viewed from one angle it appears square and from another angle it appears round. The qualifier "in the same relationship" applies here. The object may have a square aspect and a round aspect but not at the same time and in the same relationship (or from the same aspect).

The law of noncontradiction is a principle of rationality and as such is neutral with respect to content. By itself, it carries no brief for or against theism, as it is empty of content. If we declare that two and two are four, we are merely observing that there is a rational mathematical relationship between two sets of twos on one side of the ledger and a four on the other side. The two sides balance in a formal relationship of coherency. The primary role of the law of noncontradiction in particular and logic in general is the provision of a guide to coherency and of a formal test for truth claims. Logic monitors the formal relationships of propositions.

Logic confronts us with a critical, ontological question. Is logic limited to the realm of the formal or does it have a material, existential import? Aristotle maintained that the law of noncontradiction is more than a law of thought because it is first a law of being.⁶ Must we accord ontological status to logic as Aristotle affirmed?

We were once engaged in dialogue with a group of Christian philosophers who were disturbed by our insistence on the rationality of Christianity. They obviously were agitated by the focus on reason and logic, protesting that such categories represented the unwarranted intrusion of pagan Greek thought into Christianity. We pressed the conversation by asking whether a statement can be formally valid and materially false. In other words, could a proposition meet all the tests of abstract logic, be formally valid, and at the same time correspond to nothing in existence. The philosophers agreed that this could be the case, citing the unicorn as an example. They allowed that the mind, as Locke supposed, has the ability to combine, relate, and abstract simple ideas to the point of constructing concepts of things which have no counterpart in reality. The concept of a unicorn violates no law of logic, but its rational conceivability does not guarantee its existence. The philosophers granted that statements could be formally valid but materially false.

The next question proved more difficult. Can something be materially true and formally false? The difference between the two questions is formidable: the second question asks if the real can be irra-

tional or absurd. Does reality correspond to coherent categories of rationality or does reality itself violate the law of noncontradiction?

The philosophers hesitated. Silence was followed at last by awkward and reluctant answers. After we had repeated the question several times, anomalies in science were proffered examples of how reality does in fact violate the law of noncontradiction. One man appealed to light, which under certain conditions behaves as a wave, but under other conditions behaves as a particle. Is light then a wave or a particle? Some have sought to overcome the difficulty by defining light as a "wavicle." What does this mean? Does it mean that a wavicle is a *tertium quid* or that light behaves as a wave on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and as a particle on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, resting on Sunday? If a wave and a particle are mutually exclusive categories, then can light be both at the same time and in the same relationship? It is possible that waves and particles are not mutually exclusive ideas but are aspects of some deeper entity, which pushes science to new paradigms to resolve the anomaly.

Anomalies have functioned in the past as stimuli for new scientific paradigms which have unlocked previous impasses. The one paradigm that science cannot afford to follow, however, is that of irrationality. If it is determined that light is actually contradictory, rigidly and irresistibly contradictory, then science is finished as any and all knowledge becomes impossible. A single datum of irresolvable contradiction destroys both sides of the scientific method, deduction and induction. If contradiction exists in real entities, then deduction becomes functionally useless and induction functionally impossible. Induction depends on individuation for its very possibility. No individuation of anything is possible if it and its contrary can both be true. If we assume the "reality of the contrary" to any word denoting anything, then language itself becomes meaningless gibberish. Russell's attempts to avoid this problem by the rejection of ordinary language and the creation of an artificial ideal language substituting symbols for words, ended in failure.⁷ So did Paul Tillich's attempt to transcend the limits of human language and get to the God "beyond God." Helmut Gollwitzer rightly observed, "There is nothing beyond theism but atheism."⁸ If a universal affirmation or universal categorical proposition can be affirmed together with its contradictory, then language, whether ordinary or artificial, is impossible. When Tillich declared that God is neither personal nor impersonal but is the "ground of personality," he achieved not a transcendent breakthrough of the lim-

its of logic and language, but nonsense. The next question a student would ask Tillich is, "Is the Ground of personality personal or impersonal?" Impersonality includes everything outside of the category of personality; there is no *tertium quid*.

After this excursion into a discussion of anomalies and variant scientific paradigms, our philosopher friends finally granted that something cannot be materially true and formally false. They were quick to add, however, that the logic which applies to the material phenomenal world does not necessarily apply to the noumenal or metaphysical realm of God.

In evaluating the contemporary religious revolt against logic, Ronald Nash discusses a common strand of thought within both neo-orthodox theology and evangelical theology, citing examples in Emil Brunner, Karl Barth, T. F. Torrance, Donald Bloesch, Herman Dooyeweerd, Cornelius Van Til, and Al Wolters: that human logic cannot be extended to a transcendent God. Human logic is restricted to this side of the ontological boundary between God and the created order.⁹ Nash cites Alvin Plantinga's reaction to this kind of theological agnosticism:

This kind of thinking about God begins in a pious and commendable concern for God's greatness and majesty and augustness; but it ends in agnosticism and in incoherence. For if none of our concepts apply to God (or if none of our inferences extend to God), then there is nothing we can know or truly believe of him—not even what is affirmed in the creeds or revealed in the Scriptures. And if there is nothing we can know or truly believe of him, then, of course, we cannot know or truly believe that none of our concepts apply to him. The view . . . is fatally ensnarled in self-referential absurdity.¹⁰

Our religious philosopher friends were undaunted by the specter of a self-referential absurdity and persisted in their claim that God's logic is different from human logic. They defended this claim on the basis that God is "wholly other" (*totaliter aliter*), borrowing a chapter from Karl Barth and his rigorous denial of an *analogia entis* between God and humans. We asked our friends how they knew anything at all about this wholly other God. They quickly replied that they knew of Him via His own self-revelation. But how could this God reveal anything about Himself to us if He is utterly dissimilar from us and His categories of thought are as wholly other as His being? If God is totally ontologically dissimilar, then neither He nor we have any refer-

ence point for meaningful or intelligible discourse. Communication between totally dissimilar beings is manifestly impossible. When our friends grasped this point they declared, "Perhaps we shouldn't have said that God is *totally* other."

We labor this illustration merely to note that in certain Christian circles there is a persistent allergy to rationality. It is often motivated by what Plantinga calls a "pious and commendable concern for God's greatness and majesty and augustness." The fear is that reason makes God subject to a law which is greater than Himself, making God answerable to Aristotle, rather than Aristotle to God.

But Aristotle did not invent logic or reason. Aristotle was no more responsible for the invention or creation of logic than Columbus was for inventing or creating America. Aristotle defined the logical relationships of propositions which had been functioning since the origin of human speech. Aristotle's logic was isolated from the rest of his philosophy and referred to as the *organon*. An *organon* is simply an "instrument." For Aristotle, logic was the necessary tool or instrument by which human beings can have meaningful discourse; by which science can be intelligibly carried on. When the laws of logic are violated, intelligible communication ceases.

The Christian faith affirms logic not as a law above God but as an aspect built into Creation which flows from His own character. According to Gordon Clark, "The law of contradiction is not to be taken as an axiom prior to or independent of God. The law is God thinking."¹¹ He goes so far as to paraphrase the prologue of the Gospel of John as follows:

In the beginning was Logic, and Logic was with God, and Logic was God. . . . In Logic was life and the life was the light of men.¹²

Clark expects Christians to be shocked by this paraphrase, but says, "Why it is offensive to call Christ Logic, when it does not offend to call him a word, is hard to explain."¹³

There are times when the contradiction is used by thinkers to elicit a certain effect of wonderment or awe from the listeners, pointing to an alleged profundity. Think of the Zen definition of God as "one hand clapping" or Barth's purposeful use of contradiction to underscore the difficulty of penetrating the question of the origin of evil, calling sin the "impossible possibility." Talking in contradictions is nonsense, regardless of how transcendently profound it may sound.

Noncontradiction, Paradox, and Mystery. Another factor which, among Christians, provokes antipathy to the law of noncontradiction is the assumption that the content of Christianity contains contradictions. Outlaw contradiction and Christianity will be banished with it: this is the fear. Three critical doctrines of the Christian faith are thought to contain such contradictions: the Trinity, the person of Christ, and the issue of God's sovereignty and human freedom. These doctrines are understood by some devout persons as containing irreconcilable antinomies within them.

A cursory glance at these questions dispels the idea that they contain contradictions. The classical formulation of the Trinity asserts that God is one in essence and three in person. Hence God is one in A and three in B. We need not be able to comprehend the fullness of the divine mystery to see that the formula is formally sound. If we declared that God were one in essence and three in essence, or one in person and three in person at the same time and in the same relationship, we would have a bona fide contradiction. We have unity in one sense (essence) and diversity in another (persons).

The same applies in reverse to the person of Christ. The classical formula in Christology is that Christ has two natures in one person. That is, He is one in person and two in nature or essence. The perplexity arises here because we are accustomed to finding a ratio of one nature to one person. Christ represents an inductive anomaly (as He does in other ways as well, most notably in His sinlessness). Induction does not lead us to expect to find dual-natured persons; but no formal law precludes the possibility. There is nothing contradictory about Christ's being unitary in A (person) and dual in B (nature.)

The problem of divine sovereignty and human freedom is primarily linguistic and conceptual. If by "freedom" absolute autonomy is meant, then we are faced with a contradiction which no system of logic can resolve, either on this side of the Boundary or the other. Divine sovereignty and human autonomy cannot coexist. Of course Scripture nowhere teaches human autonomy in the absolute sense. From Creation onward the freedom of action which the creature enjoys is limited. It is never *ex lex* (outside of, or apart from law), but always *sub lego* (under law). Creaturely pursuit of autonomy is identified with lawlessness, the mark of the Antichrist. If God is indeed sovereign absolutely, then pure autonomy cannot exist outside of Him. Yet human language, at least ordinary language, recognizes the distinction between freedom and autonomy, which is a matter of de-

gree. For humankind to be free and God to be sovereign requires that humans have the power of action and that God have a greater power of action. Human freedom is here limited by God's sovereignty; God's sovereignty is not limited by human freedom. By way of analogy we can think of a child living in the home of her father. The child is free and the father is free. But the father is "freer" in the sense that his power and authority stand over and sometimes against the volitional activity of the child. Sovereignty and freedom are not mutually exclusive unless we conceive of them as coexisting in creature and Creator with an equal ultimacy, which is dualism. Humans naturally have the ability to make choices, but these choices are always accountable to a sovereign God.

The desire to retain the legitimacy of contradiction within the scope of the Christian faith is sometimes provoked also by a confusion of three categories of thought—contradiction, paradox, and mystery. These three classes are sufficiently similar to create confusion, yet sufficiently dissimilar to warrant distinction.

Since we have already discussed contradiction we will proceed to paradox and mystery. The term *paradox* comes from the Greek prefix *πάρα* ("para") which means "alongside" or "beside," and the Greek root *δοκείν* (*dokein*) which means "to think," "to appear," or "to seem."¹⁴ A paradox is that which, when placed alongside of or beside a contradiction "seems" or "appears" to be identical with the contradiction. The similarity to contradiction has engendered confusion in English usage, which is reflected, for example, in *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary's* list of definitions for "paradox":

1. a statement contrary to common belief [rare].
2. a statement that seems contradictory, unbelievable, or absurd but that may actually be true in fact.
3. a statement that is self-contradictory in fact and hence, false.¹⁵

Note that entry 2 preserves the classical definition while entry 3 allows the use of "paradox" as a synonym for "contradiction." We are concerned here with the classic meaning of paradox, the "seeming contradiction," which, under closer scrutiny can be resolved. We appreciate Gordon Clark's more vivid definition of the paradox as "a charley-horse between the ears."¹⁶

The Bible abounds in paradox; it was a favorite pedagogical device of Jesus. Statements like "He who is least among you all is the

one who is great" (Luke 9:48 RSV) frequently fall from His lips. It is one thing to say the Bible is full of paradoxes, but quite another to charge (as some have loosely used the term) that the Bible is full of contradictions.

Mystery is crucial to Christianity. Though Christianity is not a mystery religion in the ancient esoteric sense, the Bible and church tradition make use of the term. The term *mystery* derives from the Greek *μυστήριον* (*musterion*). Within the New Testament the term frequently refers to that which once was hidden but is now revealed.¹⁷ It is also used in the New Testament, as well as in later church history, to refer to those elements of the things of God which remain hidden or concealed from us, to which some refer by the phrase *deus absconditus*. At certain points the Latin Vulgate translated the Greek *musterion* by the Latin *sacramentum*,¹⁸ from which we get the English term *sacrament*.

Webster lists eight entries for "mystery" including

1. something unexplained, unknown, or kept secret.
8. In theology, any assumed truth that cannot be comprehended by the human mind but must be accepted on faith.

We would quibble a bit about entry 8. Why, for example, is theology singled out as a discipline containing mysteries while physics is spared? Who has yet unravelled the mystery of gravity or the most perplexing mystery of motion which plagued Einstein as much as it did Zeno? Or we might protest mildly about the word *cannot* in the definition, reminding the lexicographers that "has not" does not necessarily imply "cannot." But these are indeed quibbles. Christianity does have a doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God based on the maxim *finitum non capax infinitum* (the finite cannot contain, or grasp, the infinite). There are present mysteries concerning which we expect to gain future revelation, yet we do not expect ever to transcend our own finitude.

The category of mystery allows for matters which are beyond the present reach of reason. But there are also matters of infinity which are not and will never be penetrated by the finite. In this sense they are transrational. There is a critical difference, however, between the transrational and the irrational; it is the difference between the mystery and the contradiction. In terms of truth claims the distinction is

important. Though the presence of mystery does not do much for verification, it does not carry the import of falsification. The contradiction, on the other hand, formally and firmly, falsifies.

It is illegitimate for the Christian thinker or any other thinker to take refuge in mystery by incorporating contradiction within it. A mystery *may* be true; a contradiction *cannot* be meaningful at all. Mystery and contradiction may be related to each other not as contradictories but as contraries in which both cannot be true but both might be false. If a contradiction masquerades as a mystery, the rules of inference must be applied to expose the hoax.

The Law of Noncontradiction as a Universal Prerequisite for Life. We have tried to show that the law of noncontradiction is nonnegotiable to Christian faith, Christian apologetics, and Christian philosophy. We said earlier that its nonnegotiability extends beyond the borders of Christianity, is universal. All people hold to it in *fact*, though some do deny it. But the denials are forced and temporary.

We are reminded of Francis Schaeffer's observation of the behavior of John Cage. An apostle of chance and indeterminacy, Cage sought to express the incoherence and irrationality of reality by composing music through the tossing of coins randomly. But he could not *live* by his own conclusions. By avocation, Cage is an exceptional amateur mycologist, whose special delight among fungi is the mushroom. But he soon learned the perils of random mushroom collecting and said, "I became aware that if I approached mushrooms in the spirit of my chance operations, I would die shortly."¹⁹

Cage's realization is an example (perhaps unintentional) of the application of the law of noncontradiction. He understood that certain varieties of mushrooms cannot be poisonous and nonpoisonous at the same time and in the same relationship. He knew that a repeated and enduring application of the denial of the law of noncontradiction would be fatal. We all know that. When we approach an intersection in our car and see a truck speeding toward the intersection, we assume that there cannot be a truck coming and not a truck coming at the same time and in the same relationship, and we judiciously apply our brakes.

The law of noncontradiction as a necessary presupposition or prerequisite for thought and life is neither arbitrary nor subjectivistic. It is universal and objective. What is subjective and arbitrary is the forced and temporary denial of it.

The Biblical Assumption of the Law of Noncontradiction. Though not a textbook in logic, the Bible assumes the validity of the law of non-contradiction on every page. Like any other document, it depends on the *organon* of logic for intelligible discourse. A perusal of biblical literature, especially the didactic epistles of the New Testament, reveals a high incidence of the word *therefore*, indicating a conclusion which follows logically from stated premises. As one would expect, the syllogism is rarely if ever found. On the other hand, Scripture is replete with enthymemes, a syllogism with one of the premises implicit. Gordon Clark cites Romans 4:2 as an enthymematic hypothetical destructive syllogism; Romans 5:13 as a hypothetical constructive syllogism; and 1 Corinthians 15:15–18 as a sorites.²⁰ The declarative sentences of the Bible are logical units with subjects and predicates, having an assumed logic embedded in them.

With the rise of neo-orthodoxy and existential patterns of theology it has become fashionable to extol the virtue of contradictions. Emil Brunner argues that

God can speak to us His single, never contradictory Word through the priestly writings of the Old Testament as well as through the prophetic or the New Testament writings, even though these several writings are very various and in part contradictory, just as He can speak His single, never contradictory Word through the contradictory accounts of Luke and Matthew.²¹

Here the alleged contradictory contents of Scripture represent no barrier to Brunner's perception of the "single, never contradictory Word" of God. We are delighted that Brunner shrinks at attributing contradiction to God, but are perplexed by his faculty of discerning the noncontradictory Word in the midst of the contradictory words. This approach certainly frees Brunner from every form of Docetism with respect to Scripture, but throws him back into the grasp of Docetism's parent—Gnosticism.

If the Word of God is heard in contradiction, why would God ever hold anyone culpable for mistaking His commands for their contradictories? The Bible describes the fall of the human race in terms of a trial hanging on a contradiction. Adam and Eve were told by the Creator that if they ate of the forbidden fruit, they would surely die. The serpent declared that they would not die. God said, "If A (you eat), then B (death would inevitably follow as a consequence)." The

serpent's counter claim was that, "If A (you eat), then non-B (no death would follow)." Here is a clear example of contradiction. If the non-contradictory truth of God can be conveyed via contradiction, why was Adam considered blameworthy for choosing one option rather than its contradictory? If contradiction is virtuous, indeed the "hallmark of truth" as the existential theologians suppose, then Adam should not only be excused but rewarded for recognizing the Word of God in the words of the serpent, in that they carried the hallmark of truth. If such were possible, Adam's fall could not and should not be regarded as a fall but as a great leap forward.

Biblically the contradiction is the hallmark of the lie. Without this formal test of falsification, the Scriptures (and any other writings) would have no means to distinguish between truth and falsehood, righteousness and unrighteousness, obedience and disobedience, Christ and Antichrist.