

Chapter 3
Can God Be Grasped by Our Reason?¹
By Eric L. Johnson

"Humans do not know how what is at variance agrees with itself.
It is an attunement of opposite tensions, like that of the bow and the lyre." Zeno of Elea²
"It is good that you grasp one thing, and also not let go of the other;
for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them." Ecc. 7:18

A great battle is being waged in our day for the minds of God's people. It is a momentous intellectual battle, because it concerns the most important of the objects of human thought: the nature of God. There are two ways to go wrong regarding our understanding of God's nature. The first is to believe something false about God (like, God is the same as the universe). The second is to rule out one belief about God simply because it does not comport easily with some other belief about God (like, since God is love, God cannot send human beings to hell). False religions are characterized by the former, Christian heresy by the latter. When examined carefully, many of the objections that constructivists, process theists, and open theists make to the historic Christian view of God are the result of a resolute favoring of one side of the truth at the expense of the other. Let's see how this happens.

The first thing to note is that we should not be surprised at controversies regarding God's nature. The greatest being in the universe is not easy to understand. Believers have always sensed this and have often expressed limitations in their understanding of God. Reflecting on God's omnipresence, David exclaimed, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is too high. I cannot attain to it" (Ps. 139:6). Much later, Zwingli famously suggested, "What God is, we have just as little knowledge of from ourselves as a beetle has of what man is."³ Such limits in our understanding have led to profound differences in what people have affirmed about God.

And such limits raise questions about the human mind's ability to comprehend God.

Some, from both East and West, question whether God can be known at all. Others, including some within the Christian tradition, have suggested that at the very least, God's nature creates a scandal for the human intellect. Tertullian is alleged to have at least implied, "I believe because it is absurd."⁴ Most Christians have been less cavalier, affirming that God can be genuinely understood by the human mind, but also that the finite human mind can only grasp a "portion" of God's infinite being. The history of Christian reflection demonstrates these limits in its many intellectual conflicts involving the nature of God. During the last half of the twentieth century, this diversity has multiplied as the nature of God has been "reimagined" in many novel ways. The purposes of this chapter are to explore how the limitations of human reason may have contributed to such confusion and how best to understand the complexity of the God of the Bible.

Human Reason, Formal Logic, and Their Relation

The ability to use formal logic is clearly one of the human mind's most impressive capacities. But what exactly is formal logic? Logic as a discipline is the study of the methods and principles for distinguishing good from bad reasoning.⁵ Good reasoning is reasoning which has adequate support, demonstrated with deductive and/or inductive arguments. Some arguments, however, are poorly arranged (e.g. a logical fallacy), while others have false premises. Both lead to unwarranted conclusions. Logic, then, consists of the rules and procedures that have been identified for formulating correct conclusions based on appropriate evidence.

Human reason, on the other hand, refers to the human mind's ability to make use of the

rules of formal logic. Reason is the set of mental abilities/structures that permit an individual to "work through" and understand an argument that corresponds to the rules and procedures of formal logic.⁶ However, individual human reason is faced with certain limitations. To evaluate the soundness of an argument, human rationality must rely on working memory capacity (which has to maintain the evidence and previously taken logical steps during the evaluation), the activation of relevant long-term memory structures to provide the conceptual context for evaluation (including both logic rules and prior knowledge), and a host of mental skills which equip the individual reasoner to identify the potential problems being faced in a particular conceptual context, capacities all of which increase throughout childhood and which are more well-developed in some individuals than others.

Reason's ability to use formal logic is essential for human understanding and communication. Without assuming the rules of logic in our thought, nothing could be asserted as true or false, and so all statements would be essentially meaningless. Without logic, no progress could be made in understanding the underlying nature of the world. Science today is essentially the application of logic to our observations of the created order. So the value of logic is inestimable.

The Law of Non-Contradiction

The rule of logic of most interest for our present purposes is the law of non-contradiction (LONC) since many current disagreements about the nature of God relate to perceived violations of this law. The LONC states that no statement can be true and false at the same time and in the same respect.⁷ Put another way, we cannot affirm that something is a certain way and at the same time affirm that in the same sense it is not that way.⁸ For example, the two assertions,

"God is a person" and "God is an impersonal force," together violate the LONC. A genuine contradiction between beliefs demonstrates that at least one of those beliefs is false.

Logicians have identified some propositions or arguments that violate or appear to violate the LONC. The first two concern propositions. *Contraries* are two statements that cannot both be true, though both could be false (e.g. "There are only two divine beings" and "There are twelve divine beings;" for there could be another number, like one). *Contradictories* are two statements such that if one is true, the other must be false, and vice versa (e.g. "God is all-good" and "God is not all-good").⁹ All agree that at this level such violations prove that at least one of the statements is false. However, the other violations are more complex. A *paradox* is a set of arguments or statements all of which seem to be valid (or meaningful) but appear to lead to a contradiction or some clearly false conclusion or sense.¹⁰ One example, a version of the "Liar's Paradox," consists simply of one sentence: "This statement is false." Logicians work at solving paradoxes, and some have been shown not to violate the LONC. For example, Quine distinguished between "veridical paradoxes," *apparent* contradictions that are composed of claims all of which can be shown to be true (e.g. a person can be 23 years old on his 6th birthday--if he was born on Feb. 29) and "falsidical paradoxes," that have been proven to be invalid in some way (e.g. Zeno's paradoxes).¹¹ Other paradoxes still remain to be resolved either way. Paradoxes are valuable to logicians for they can illuminate mistakes in reasoning through the attempt to solve them.¹² However, labeling something a paradox is to recognize the potential violation of the LONC *without assuming that the problem is necessarily a genuine contradiction*. In contrast, the term *antinomy* is reserved for a falsidical paradox consisting of two arguments which individually seem valid but (like contradictories) are mutually exclusive and so

irresolvably contradictory.¹³ For example, one can construct an argument “proving” that the universe began with an uncaused cause as well as an argument “proving” that the world has always been in existence.¹⁴ In such cases, there is no conceivable way that both arguments can be sound (since the universe cannot be both eternal and created). At the farthest extreme lies an *absurdity*, which is a statement that is patently false or meaningless (e.g. “God is and is not”).¹⁵ Absurdities lack intelligibility, whereas both antinomies and paradoxes are at least intelligible. The difference between the latter two is that some paradoxes are *potentially* resolvable, while antinomies are not. The LONC is necessary in our search for truth. First, it shows that contradictories, contraries, antinomies, and absurdities are false. Second, it serves a motivational purpose with paradoxes, since it leads thinkers to recognize the problem with a paradox, and then sets them on the task of attempting to resolve it. As a result, philosophers consider paradoxes more intriguing and fruitful than the other challenges to the LONC. This point is important because some have assumed that to label something a paradox necessarily means it is a genuine contradiction. This just isn’t true.¹⁶

Before moving on, let us add two more terms to our discussion: *concurrency* and *mystery*. Concurrency comes from the Latin “com” (“together” or “with”) and “currere” (“to run”). To say two things are concurrent can mean they intersect, run parallel, operate at the same time, act in conjunction, or exercise jurisdiction over the same matter or area (by different authorities).¹⁷ I will use the term concurrency in a novel way to refer to a set of propositions or arguments in which each member of the set expresses a truth that is extremely different from the others (they seem to run “parallel”), yet all members accurately refer to the same object or event (they intersect). Put another way: a concurrency is the conjunction of extremely different

features of a single entity or event. For example, "Human beings are naturally self-centered," and "Human beings are naturally altruistic." Both propositions are true statements about human beings (I would suggest); however they make very different claims, worded in ways that appear to contradict but, properly understood, do not. So a concurrence is a veridical paradox (like, light is composed of waves and particles). This chapter proposes that some paradoxes regarding God are nothing more than concurrences as defined here.

The term "mystery" originated in the classical Christian tradition to refer to a true proposition about God (or set of propositions) that we have good reason to believe, that nevertheless transcends human ability to grasp it in its entirety, either because aspects of the whole truth are not available to us or because it appears to outstrip the capacity of human reason to demonstrate its logical consistency. "God is love" is necessarily a mystery in the former way, since we cannot fully fathom the sentence; "God is triune" has been understood to be an example of the latter. A concurrence is a mystery in this latter sense. Until a theological paradox is demonstrably solved, the Christian tradition has termed it a mystery in this sense if there is sufficient, supporting evidence.¹⁸ While the "mystery card" should not be pulled out too quickly, the label has long been used within the classic tradition to acknowledge the limits of human understanding, while still rejecting irrationalism and relativism, and we should not fear its use. Looking to Proverbs 8 and John 1, believers have recognized that the rational order of the universe is derived from God's comprehensive understanding of all things. The Christian faith assumes that, though *our* minds can only go so far in knowledge and comprehension, God's intellectual perfection guarantees there are no absolute contradictions in his understanding or in the universe.¹⁹

Scripture and Theology about God and the Limits of Human Reason

Like many topics, Scripture does not address the use of logic directly. Nevertheless, there is much we find there that is indirectly quite relevant. Most of Job consists of a debate between two logically coherent perspectives. Job and his friends all seem to believe that Job's suffering requires a rational explanation. Job's friends conclude that since God is all-good and all human suffering is punishment from God for wrong-doing, Job must have done wrong. Job, on the other hand, started out with those premises, but had another: that he is innocent of wrong-doing. This led him to draw the inference that God may have slipped up. Each side was logically consistent, given its premises. God finally called into question both formal models and concludes the book by arguing the humans are unable to fully understand the ways of God.

That theme is found throughout Scripture. The author of Psalm 139 marvels at the infinite greatness of God. He is omnipresent and omniscient, his thoughts beyond number. Speaking through Isaiah, after calling sinners to repent and be restored, God declared: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."(55.8,9)²⁰ Back in Job, one of his detractors criticized Job's take on his suffering: "Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens--what can you do? They are deeper than the depths of the grave--what can you know? (11:7) And later the wise, but young, Elihu said, "God thunders with His voice wondrously, doing great things which we cannot comprehend." (37:5). The earliest wisdom book in the Bible makes clear our understanding of God has limits.

Much later, in the book of Romans, after discussing God's mysterious dealings with the

Jewish people, Paul exclaimed, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable (*anexereunetos*) his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out (*anexichniastos*)! Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor?" (Ro. 11.33-34). Elsewhere Paul prayed that "the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension (*nous*)" might guard the hearts and minds of the Phillipians (4.7). And in Ephesians, Paul wrote of the unfathomable (*anexichniastos*) riches of Christ (3.8).²¹ From Old to New Testaments, God and his understanding and salvation are perceived as "beyond our capacities," transcending humanity's ability to fully grasp him.

None of these passages refers to the LONC; they simply show that human understanding of God has limits (though these limits can be pushed when aided by God). Yet there is no reason to assume that these statements do not bear in some way on the logical tension we find in human thought about God. Rather it seems likely they refer to all the limits that our understanding experiences before an infinite God, including the paradoxes we find in God's revelation.²²

Concurrences in Scripture and Theology

Scripture also contains many examples of concurrences. The most obvious may be Proverbs 26.4,5. "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes." Each verse is meaningful, but laid side-by-side they present contradictory admonitions. Of course each verse gives a reason for its own exhortation that points towards a harmonization. But that does not remove the obstacle of apparently contradictory commands laid side-by-side. Why would the editor include both, and even put them next to each other? Perhaps because together they argue for the need for a higher understanding: the wisdom to know when to do what.

Jesus often used paradoxical language in his teaching. "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Lu. 9:24). "...The greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves" (Lu. 22:26). He used metaphors in contrary ways that created cognitive dissonance. One time he said, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Mt. 10:37); yet to Peter he said, "Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword." After healing a blind man, he said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind" (Jo. 9:39). He challenged his hearers to love their enemies (Mt. 5: 44) and hate their parents and children (Lu. 14:26). These sayings are not impossible to understand, but they show that the very *Logos* of God made use of paradoxical language in striking ways.²³

Paul also taught paradoxes. "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Co. 12:10b). "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Ph. 2:12b-13). And some of his teaching is reminiscent of Jesus' paradox about living through dying, with a Christ-centered twist: "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Co. 3:3), "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And the life that I live..." (Ga. 2:20), "Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God" (Ro. 6:11). Concurrences pervaded Paul's understanding of the Christian life.²⁴

Many Scriptural paradoxes are only detected when we compare Scripture with Scripture. Systematic theology, as traditionally conceived, is the attempt to organize and harmonize the chief teachings of Scripture,²⁵ a task that can only be accomplished with the aid of formal logic.

As a result, when systematization is attempted, concurrences leap out. We turn next to consider some specific examples of concurrences regarding the nature of God and his relation to the creation. (Many, many other paradoxes have been identified in the creation itself. For a discussion of examples, see this endnote.²⁶)

Concurrences in God and His Relationship to the Creation

One of the greatest puzzles regarding God concerns his infinitude. How can a single being be infinite? Christians have long asserted that our knowledge of an infinite God can only be partial.²⁷ *Finitum non possit capere infinitum* (the finite cannot grasp the infinite). Since he is qualitatively of a different order, we have no suitable gauge by which to measure him so as to describe him. His being is “off the scale.” Moreover, his infinite being outstrips our finite capacities. This alone is not a paradox, but God's infinitude itself leads to concurrences in our understanding of Him. For example, the consciousness of an omniscient, omnipresent being does not have a single, attentional focus (like humans), but is “spread out,” as it were, over all of creation (and time), knowing all things at once. How is it that God can focus his “attention” on all things simultaneously? Similarly, through prayer believers interact with God as a singular person who acts in relation to them sequentially. Yet, God is interacting simultaneously with millions of people, like some kind of multiple person or set of persons. This is due to the one God's immensity, but for humans this paradox of God's personal but omnipresent relationality strains our comprehension.²⁸

A concurrence is also found at the very heart of the Christian revelation of God: God is triune, three in one. Yet this seems, on the face of it, like a simple contradiction. With regard to God, $3 = 1$. Theologians have struggled with the doctrine of the trinity since it was first

developed, helped by the semantic distinction between person and being or essence: God is one Being but three persons. But simple labels do not dissolve the complexity, and many have believed that the trinity presents a logical problem that cannot be solved. Louis Berkhof, clearly no irrationalist, overstated what nonetheless has been a common intuition in historic Christianity that humans "cannot comprehend it and make it intelligible. It is intelligible in some of its relations and modes of manifestation, but unintelligible in its essential nature."²⁹ Some early Christian reflection on the biblical teaching showed signs of trying to reduce the logical tension in the direction of oneness (Arianism or modalism) or threeness (tritheism),³⁰ but the Church resisted a simplistic logical solution and formulated the classic trinity doctrine, a pluralistic monotheism. In response to the trinity doctrine, Jews, Muslims, and Jehovah Witnesses believe the Christian religion is fundamentally irrational.

They may have also been thinking of the incarnation, which Kierkegaard called the "Absolute Paradox." How could an omnipresent being be located somewhere in space, and how could an eternal being do something novel and enter time and history? How could the Creator become a creature? And how could the self-existent, living God die? The incarnation creates problems for human reason because the terms "God" and "human" are in all other uses mutually exclusive.³¹

The incarnation is in a class by itself, but there are many, other concurrences in the relation between God and humanity. How could the eternal God create a temporal order? When did he begin to do this? God is beyond time and unchanging, and yet He also participates fully in history, interacting genuinely with humans.³² How does God work through humans (so that their good works are really from Him), and yet humans accomplish nothing without their own

effort?³³ Scripture teaches that God permits evil, yet he is also wholly opposed to sin.³⁴ We are also told that God loves all people and wants none to perish, and yet God hates sinners who are called the children of wrath.³⁵ With regard to salvation, Scripture teaches that God chooses those who come to life, and yet humans must themselves believe in Christ to be saved.³⁶ Similarly, God has foreordained all that happens, yet human prayer moves God to act in certain ways so that God and humans genuinely interact in time.³⁷ And while God knows and has planned the future, normal, adult humans are free agents who form their own plans, intentions, and actions, for which they are held responsible, without in any way being divinely constrained or coerced.³⁸ In all these cases, our understanding is faced with paradox.

God's nature, particularly his infinity, and his relation to the creation pose problems for the LONC. But do the problems presented above consist of contradictories or contraries and so are incoherent (or absurd)? Classic Christians have argued they are merely mysteries (that is, veridical paradoxes), fundamentally rational and meaningful (since God understands, affirms, and reveals all the pieces of these puzzles). Admittedly, persons holding to different sides of these paradoxes have periodically "squared off," validating one side of the paradox at the cost of its "opposite." But the greatest teachers of the Classic tradition have generally sought to preserve the unity of revealed truth.³⁹

Historic Christianity and Concurrences

Over the centuries concurrences in Scripture and in theological reflection have pushed Christians to acknowledge the limitations of human reason to adequately address such problems. For most of the classical and medieval periods, the paradoxical quality of many of these features of the Christian faith were appreciated, but not highlighted as much as in the post-Reformation

era. This may have been due originally to an apologetic concern. Greek and Roman culture so valued human reason (and logic) that church fathers like Augustine would have wisely emphasized instead the reasonableness of Christianity (against the Skeptics). Later, Aquinas was of course much influenced by Aristotle (and the rules of logic he described). As a result neither of these worthies of the classic tradition underscored the paradoxical form of some truths the way some later Christians have.

In light of these influences, it seems surprising that they both so fully accepted and worked on paradoxical doctrines like the Trinity, the incarnation, and the relation between human freedom and divine sovereignty. Their solution (and that of most classical Christians) was to refer to such topics as "mysteries," understandable to a point, but ultimately transcending our ability to fully comprehend them.⁴⁰ Augustine presented Scripture on both sides of these paradoxes and insisted that the Christian was bound to both.⁴¹ In some places, he went so far as to pit concurrences in God against each other in order to magnify the greatness of the God of the Bible.⁴² In some cases, Aquinas presented the logical problems in the Christian doctrine of God as logical objections to what he was teaching and then offered formal solutions, demonstrating that Christian truth is not opposed to reason.⁴³ While in other cases, he simply stated that the whole truth in these matters was beyond reason.⁴⁴

Bonaventure likewise affirmed both sides of the same paradoxical truths as Augustine and Aquinas.⁴⁵ Like Augustine, he also explored some of the paradoxes of the faith for the sake of advancing our wonder and admiration of God. For example, in one treatise he movingly points to paradoxes in the life of Christ, such as the contrast seen in the humility of God lying in a manger and in the majestic God being overwhelmed by suffering on the cross.⁴⁶

Perhaps the first Christian to make concurrences in Christian theology a major theme in his writing was Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) who argued that God is a "coincidence of opposites." Being infinite, God transcends and contains within himself a set of intellectual concurrences or contrasts. He is both the greatest being (maximum) and yet he is fully present at the smallest level (minimum). In him maximum and minimum are one. Since human reason must be governed by the LONC (and other rules), Nicholas asserted that human reason is confounded by this God. As a result, Nicholas believed we can have no more than an "approximate" (though genuine) knowledge of God.⁴⁷

Luther also took concurrences in Christian thought seriously. Influenced by the nominalism of his day, Luther's reformational protest can be seen as a prioritizing of God's words over the philosophical speculations of the middle ages.⁴⁸ Consequently, he seemed to relish making paradoxical statements that would scandalize human reason. Much of his theology consists of a rich juxtaposition of concurrences: God as hidden and revealed, the believer as simultaneously sinner and saint, and the relations of the law and the gospel and the letter and the Spirit; such that critics have disparaged his work as containing logical contradictions.⁴⁹ This glorying in concurrence is seen most powerfully in his "theology of the cross" where Luther claimed God reveals himself in all his hiddenness: the majestic Son of God slain in weakness and humility, "omnipotent in impotence."⁵⁰ His language was sometimes guilty of overstatement. But Luther reveled in such apparent "contradiction" because he wished to magnify the wisdom of God above the mind of humans; he reckoned the Word of God a higher standard than the rules of logic, and faith in God's word a higher human activity than reason.

Calvin wrote often of the limitations of human reason when considering God and his

relation to humans. To cite one example, in his discussion of the relation of God's decree to human responsibility, sin, and personal faith he noted that logical objections have often been made regarding God's predestination: it makes God a tyrant and the author of sin and would seem to excuse sinners; yet sinners are brought to judgment, so it seems unfair to judge sinners for actions that were foreordained.⁵¹ Nonetheless, since the Bible teaches these truths, Calvin argued, we must submit to them regardless of the offense they seem to cause our reason. Closer to Augustine in how he treated such problems, Calvin did not so highlight the paradoxical nature of Christian doctrine like Luther, preferring to use the classical notion of mystery for such truths.⁵² He simply argued that God's nature and judgments are beyond the reach of human reason. Paul "teaches how unworthy it is to reduce God's works to such a law that the moment we fail to understand their reason, we dare to condemn them." "Monstrous indeed is the madness of men, who desire thus to subject the immeasurable to the puny measure of their own reason."⁵³

Also influenced by Augustine, the Christian thinker Blaise Pascal was likewise disposed to respect reason's limits.⁵⁴ "The last proceeding of reason is to recognize that there is an infinity of things which are beyond it. It is but feeble if it does not see so far as to know this. But if natural things are beyond it, what will be said of supernatural?"⁵⁵ This great mathematician was keenly aware of the value of formal logic, but he recognized that the complexity of reality could not be grasped by a simplistic use of that logic. "The two contrary reasons. We must begin with that; without that we understand nothing, and all is heretical; and we must even add at the end of each truth that the opposite truth is to be remembered."⁵⁶

More radical is the approach of Soren Kierkegaard. He was admittedly profoundly

influenced by Hegel (though perhaps as much by reacting against Hegel's system as positively). But as a result, more so than perhaps any Christian in history, his work is pervaded by an unusual interest in paradox. In light of Hegel's efforts to take paradox seriously (and likely Luther's love of paradoxical thought), Kierkegaard brought it into the center of his understanding. That the eternal God could become a historical being struck Kierkegaard as absurd and incomprehensible to human reason and provided an intellectual scandal with only one way out: a leap of faith in the gospel.⁵⁷ A related paradox concerned how humans can stake their *eternal* well-being on a historical person like Jesus and an historical event like his death. Kierkegaard believed paradox lurked nearby much of significant human understanding.

Kierkegaard's notion of paradox is of course controversial, and many philosophers have argued it is incoherent.⁵⁸ To say that the incarnation involves a genuine contradiction, an unresolvable paradox, an absurdity, would seem to suggest that Christianity is fundamentally irrational. As stated above, an absurdity is meaningless, nonsensical; yet clearly the notion of the incarnation has meaning. Kierkegaard himself spent a great deal of time demonstrating (we might say, negatively) the "hidden rationale" of the incarnation and the compelling sensibility of committing oneself to the historical person of Christ and his death. So upon closer reflection, it would seem that Kierkegaard himself did not believe that the paradoxes of Christianity were genuine contradictions. Rather, he used the terms "paradox" and "absurdity" to highlight the scandal and challenge that Christian truth presents to human reason. Though Kierkegaard's use of the term "absurdity" was an unfortunate overstatement, it served to highlight the limitations of reason to resolve all the mysteries of the faith, and the superlative value of a faith beyond and (in some ways) against human reason.⁵⁹

A number of twentieth century theologians built on Kierkegaard's appreciation of paradox, forming a movement known as neo-orthodoxy, that included the likes of Barth, Bruner, Bonhoeffer, Otto Weber, and Reinhold Niebuhr, and influenced the Catholic Hans Urs von Balthasar, and in the present, T.F. Torrance and Eberhard Jungel.⁶⁰ The most important was Karl Barth. Reacting against the rationalism and historicism of liberalism, Barth pursued theological paradox with unusual (and notorious) thoroughness. Throughout the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth seemed to enjoy juxtaposing the complementary, yet concurrent truths of Christianity, including the nature of the trinity, Jesus Christ the God-man, God as one yet consisting of many perfections, the relation between God's freedom and nature, God's eternity and temporality, the relation of grace and obedience, and the Scripture as the word of God and of human beings.⁶¹ Barth clearly saw himself as an orthodox theologian, and liberals continue to reckon him as such (as a critique), though those more orthodox have pointed out some significant aberrations. Like Kierkegaard, he was not as careful to defend the role of logic in theology as he should have been, and his views on the fall of humankind, the nature of Scripture, and the final state of unbelievers were suborthodox. However charity would note he was moving away from liberalism towards Scripture throughout his life (a pattern analogous to Augustine's), and his painstaking use of logical argumentation throughout the *Church Dogmatics* make clear Barth was no irrationalist or relativist. For Barth, theology meant a "rational wrestling with mystery."⁶²

Though strongly opposed to both Kierkegaard and neo-orthodoxy (but influenced by the continental theologians Bavinck and Kuyper), the conservative twentieth century evangelical apologist Cornelius Van Til similarly made much of the apparent paradoxes of the faith. Van Til

argued that some truths exist in a necessary, corollary interrelationship, for example, God's control over all human actions and human responsibility. These pairs of truths he called "limiting concepts," since each side of the intellectual tension was "limited" by the other, corollary truth in order to obtain the fullest, most accurate understanding of reality. To hold solely to either side, to the exclusion of its "opposite," was to end up in serious intellectual error.⁶³ He believed such paradoxes were inevitable for finite human reason and that their ontological grounding was found in God himself who is three-in-one.

Two of Van Til's students, John Frame and Vern Poythress, have developed their own theological models ("perspectivalism" and "symphonic theology" respectively) which make the acceptance of concurrences fundamental to their theological method.⁶⁴ But many other evangelical theologians have argued for some appreciation of mystery and paradox in theology, including G.C. Berkouwer, Thomas Oden, Donald Bloesch, J.I.Packer, D.A. Carson, Millard Erickson, and Wayne Gruden.⁶⁵

This very selective historical survey shows that many in the Christian tradition have recognized concurrences within Christian faith and thought, both Catholic and Protestant, ancient and contemporary.⁶⁶ Of course, specific positions lie on a continuum. Some (like Augustine and Aquinas) wrestled with concurrences without calling much attention to them, referring to them as "mysteries;" while others (like Kierkegaard) so emphasized paradox that they have raised questions about the intelligibility of their position. Within these boundaries, however, lies a historic Christian orthodoxy that has insisted on the ultimate rationality of Christianity and the essential role of logic in understanding the faith combined with a recognition of the limits of human reason, one of which is its typical inability to do full justice to the

concurrences there are in God's nature and his relations to his creation.

Examples of How a Misuse of Formal Logic Has Distorted Models of God

Reason has been consistently highly esteemed in the Christian tradition as an essential tool of understanding, along with other sources including sensory experience, intuition and personal experience, testimony, and Scripture. However, in the Enlightenment (combined with the scientific revolution) modern thinkers began to come to trust in reason (together with publicly verifiable, empirical research) as the primary adjudicator of truth, overturning all other criteria (at least until the advent of postmodernism and its precursors). The effects of this emphasis have been destructive for theology since this move has meant that modern understandings of God have been constrained by what can be comprehended by finite human reason. All too often, enlightenment reason has formed premature conclusions about what is logical and what is contradictory, resulting in a rejection of “contrary” evidence that seems to contradict other, preferred evidence. Examples abound in contemporary thinking about God.

A Process God

Since classical Christian theism became more self-reflective and began developing philosophical sophistication in the early church, it has asserted that God is absolutely independent of his creation. He is self-existent and self-sufficient and does not derive anything ultimately from the creation he made. Process theologians, however, have argued that this assumption is not logically compatible with God's involvement in and concern for the goings-on of his creatures, particularly humans. For example, Schubert M. Ogden complains that there exists "an irreconcilable opposition between the premises of this supernaturalistic theism and the whole direction of our experience and reflection as secular men."⁶⁷ To begin with, secularists

require "logical self-consistency as one of the necessary conditions for the truth of any assertion."⁶⁸ He then gives two examples of what he believes to be hopeless contradictions in classical theism. First, this tradition has long maintained both that God freely created all things, and yet that everything he does is a function of his simple, eternal, necessary being which would seem to exclude all contingent events like a novel creation. Similarly, the classical God has created humans to serve and glorify him, and yet because this God exists in perfect bliss, he is completely unaffected by all that we do; our sin or suffering do not touch him, so that he must be wholly indifferent to our welfare. Ogden terms these "antinomies" and suggests they are incoherent because "they both deny and affirm that God's relation to the world is real and that he is relevant to its life because it is relevant to his."⁶⁹

Ogden offers another vision of God, what he called in the 60's "a secular faith," which cuts loose the self-sufficiency notions of God from the relational, offering a God who he says is genuinely related to our life so that we and our actions make a difference in his actual being. He goes on to say that it is logically impossible to speak of the significance of human actions without this kind of God.⁷⁰ Notably, he accuses classical theism of onesidedness. Since it focused exclusively on God's transcendence, it is therefore required to deny that God is really related to our life at all. Ogden acknowledges that classical theists call God Father and refer to their relationship with him. But this can be nothing more than appearance, since God's relationality is logically incompatible with his aseity, something classical theists themselves prove when they speak of the "anthropomorphic" qualities of God. "God is not *really* relational, he merely looks like he is;" so ultimately God is entirely untouched by us. Instead, Ogden argues for a "dipolar God," one who is both supremely relative to us (relational) and

supremely absolute (a necessary being with some non-changing features, e.g. God transcends the creation and God is love).

Admittedly, some classical theists have not always evenhandedly held on to both truths in some theological concurrences. Nevertheless, at its best the historic Christian tradition has always sought to hold the truths that God is genuinely interested in our lives, saddened by our suffering, delighted by our holiness, disappointed and angered by our sin; and at the same time that he lives in transcendent, unalterable blessedness. More dangerously onesided, Ogden eliminates the logical tension of historic Christianity by jettisoning one entire side of the paradox, so that the preferred, relational side is exalted at the expense of God's independence and transcendence. The absolute pole of the "dipolar God" is severely truncated, since this panentheistic God is unable to know, plan, or change the future apart from the independent actions of human creatures (though admittedly the process God is not quite as large a distortion as the God of pantheism). Ultimately, the construction of the process God was constrained by a rigid use of formal logic, resulting in a God bigger than us, but tragically smaller than the God of the Bible.

A Feminist God

Feminists have had many difficulties with the God of historic Christian theism. Sallie McFague is one of a number who want to maintain an identification with the Christian tradition, but critique it from the standpoint of secular feminist canons of justice.⁷¹ In addition, a simplistic use of formal logic likewise distort her conclusions regarding God's nature. Although, on the one hand, she is loathe to explicitly reject any model of God (given her thesis that such models are nothing more than *our* constructions of God), much of McFague's major book,

Models of God, is an extended critique of the God of historic Christianity as patriarchal, monarchical, hierarchical, exclusive, and triumphalist. She opposes this model because it advances a view of God as distant from and uninvolved with the world, and promotes attitudes of militarism and dominance on the one hand and passivity on the other, justifies escapism from responsibility, focuses on sin and obedience, undermines an appreciation for the non-human world/environment, and "condones control through violence and oppression."⁷²

How can this litany of evils be laid at the door of historic Christian theism? Much of the force of her critique is derived from her contrasting the repudiated features of the historic Christian model with other, more favored aspects of God from within the Christian tradition and her allegation that these two sets of traits are logically incompatible. The favored set of traits includes God as nurturing, caring, and empathic, centering on God's identification with all of creation, including those who suffer. These traits promote a destabilizing but justice-promoting message of unqualified love working to befriend the needy, the outcast, and the oppressed. She advocates a nonhierarchical model of God that sees God as acting "through persuasion and attraction," a co-participant in human history with the cosmos as God's body. According to McFague, these two sets of traits are fundamentally opposed. The former is a "direct assault" on the latter.⁷³ If we accept the historic interpretation, she says, "we not only accept a salvation we do not need but weaken if not destroy our ability to understand and accept the salvation we do need. The triumphalist mythology makes impossible the interpretation of the way to our salvation on several points."⁷⁴ She admits her portrayal of the historic Christian model could be a caricature, but insists that her allegations "are the direct implications of its imagery."⁷⁵ "This is the logical implication of hierarchical dualism: God's action is on the world, not in it, and it is a

kind of action that inhibits human growth and responsibility." It "implies the wrong kind of divine activity in relation to the world, a kind that encourages passivity on the part of human beings."⁷⁶ McFague's rigid use of logic drives a wedge between these two "models."

Most troubling is the panentheism of McFague's model, which results in a blurring of the Creator-creature distinction, a non-negotiable postulate of orthodox Christianity. But her main problem for our purposes is her bias towards the God-traits of unqualified love, nurturance, and care. This favoritism presses her analysis into the caricature she senses but still affirms, because her rigid use of the LONC makes it impossible for her to reconcile God's rule over humanity with his care for humanity, his supremacy with our well-being, and his holiness with his love. She understands these two sets of characteristics to be ultimately contradictory, mutually exclusive, and undermining of each other.

An Open God

Though there are sympathies between the foregoing models and the open view of God, the latter offers an understanding of God closer to historic Christianity since it posits definite personhood to God (contra McFague) and maintains a strong Creator-creature distinction (contra both McFague and Ogden). Nevertheless, open theism also departs from the historic Christian view of God. Here, we shall limit ourselves to considering one open theist's treatment of the relation of God's sovereignty to human actions.

Christians within the historic tradition have wrestled with this topic for centuries. This is because, as noted above, Scripture teaches both that God foreknows all that happens, and yet God and humans can genuinely interact and humans are responsible for their actions, all of which provides a challenge for human reason. Open theism, however, departs from both the

Augustinian/Calvinist and Semi-Pelagian/Arminian/ Wesleyan resolutions of this paradox by asserting that God can neither determine nor know the future, free choices of humans.

Why do open theists hold this novel position? In the case of John Sanders, one reason is his rigid use of the LONC. John Sanders points to the teachings in the Bible regarding God being grieved, changing his mind, resorting to alternative plans, and being open and responsive to what humans do, and says these teachings are logically incompatible with the view that God knows the future and especially with the Calvinist view that he has ordained it. "These sorts of things make no sense within the framework of specific sovereignty. If God always gets precisely what he desires in each and every situation, then it is incoherent to speak of God's being grieved about or responding to the human situation."⁷⁷ "My principle argument against exhaustive sovereignty is that it rules out certain experiences, decisions and actions that the Bible and many theists attribute to God."⁷⁸ If God has determined the human actions that shall come to pass (as Augustinians/Calvinists affirm), then it seems to follow logically that humans are puppets of God and God cannot feel genuine sorrow over human sins and suffering or joy over their obedience. Logic, he believes, forces us to opt for either a relational God or a God who determines the future. "One simply cannot have it both ways: either God controls everything and the divine-human relationship is impersonal, or God does not control everything and so it is possible for the divine-human relationship to be personal."⁷⁹

There is a logical tension here, and Christians have held a continuum of positions on this issue. Whereas open theists favor the relational passages of the Bible and distort the foreknowledge and sovereignty passages, hyper-Calvinists, at the other end, have distorted God's general love for all.⁸⁰ However, both sets of truths have a Scriptural basis. When the open

theist (or anyone) opts for one member of the pair as providing the true hermeneutic key, the other set of Scriptures ends up being either distorted or ignored.⁸¹ This is demonstrated by Sanders in his remarkable omission, in a book on providence, of any reference to the book of Job. There God is revealed as expressly permitting (through the instrumentality of Satan; ch. 1 and 2) and even causing (42:11) the suffering of Job (which somehow included sin: the killing by the bandits).

As in the other alternative theologies we have examined, the understanding of God put forth by open theism is truncated by a rigid use of logic unable to do justice to evidence that appears to contradict its favored set of truths. In the face of the preponderance of scriptural evidence on both sides of such issues, the opponents of historic Christian theism must do more than assert that one line of evidence/argument contradicts another line of evidence/argument. Such an "argument" does nothing more than highlight the concurrence.

At the same time, sometimes those within historic Christianity have also been guilty of emphasizing one member of a concurrent pair over the other. In fact, all these alternative theologies do the Christian tradition a service by pointing out when God's sovereignty or simplicity or impassibility are so emphasized that the "opposite" truths are reinterpreted or ignored. Nevertheless, a study of the great sermons and writings of the Church down through the centuries would show that its teachers have affirmed a rich, complex view of God: a sovereign *and* relational God who genuinely grieves, sorrows, and delights in his creatures while ruling over all their affairs.

The Development of Reason

We have seen that a simplistic use of formal logic can get in the way of understanding

God in all his fullness, this in spite of formal logic's indispensable role in understanding. How is it that the human use of logic can become a barrier to understanding? To help answer this question we will have to consider how it is that the human use of formal logic develops.

Jean Piaget, the great, Swiss, cognitive-developmental psychologist, devoted his life to tracking the development of reason over the course of childhood and adolescence into its mature form in adults. As a result of his studies, Piaget⁸² found that the ability to think logically develops over time in fairly discrete stages of increasing complexity,⁸³ with the ability to use formal logic beginning to develop in adolescence.⁸⁴ The first stage we could call "preformal" or "presystemic." (Piaget actually distinguished two childhood stages he called preoperational and concrete operational. But here we will treat them as one stage.) Presystemic thought is the thinking of the child (and most adults when we don't need or want to think more complexly about a topic). School-age children have a limited ability to think logically. For example, they can draw inferences regarding material reality (the size and shape of objects) and relationships between objects (stick A > stick B, stick B > stick C, so stick A > stick C). However, preadolescents cannot think *abstractly*; they cannot think about their thoughts, they cannot relate thoughts to each other and assess their logical consistency, and they cannot organize their thoughts into a coherent system. Rather, their belief system contains internal contradictions, which they are unable to recognize, because they have not developed the cognitive ability to identify immaterial objects (like thoughts).

Piaget found that adolescents begin to develop the ability to think abstractly or systemically--what he called the stage of "formal operations." They can think about their thoughts (second-order mental operations), so they can organize and compare those thoughts,

and evaluate their logical consistency. As a result, they are able to develop a "system" of beliefs which do not contradict each other.

Piaget believed that the ability to use formal logic was the most complex form of thinking possible for humans. However, post-Piagetian researchers have noted significant differences in how formal logic is used by adults, distinguishing between “systemic” and “metasystemic” thinking. Systemic thinkers have a hard time grasping what happens when systems themselves change (e.g. historically) and when variables (and systems) interact with each other (like in the weather or in complex social interactions); they struggle in real-life problem-solving contexts where people don't have all the information necessary to solve the problem in a clear-cut way (e.g. should I change careers?); and most importantly for the concerns of this chapter, rigidly systemic thinking seems unable to synthesize a number of single systems or perspectives into a larger picture, a "meta-system."⁸⁵

As we have seen, some things in the universe have concurrences, features that seem very different and are hard to harmonize (e.g. light seems to be composed of particles and waves). Faced with such concurrences, a systemic thinker typically applies the LONC *prematurely* and *unwisely* (crying "contradiction" *too soon*) and works out a one-sided solution that undermines the conceptual tensions, too quickly eliminating the contrast in order to provide superficially coherent, but simplistic, understanding. As a result, there is no motivational impetus to develop more complex thought structures that allow one to hold the truths in tension. The strict, systemic thinker is "embedded" in the thought structures of a simple system.⁸⁶ This impatient formalizing agenda ends up obscuring the side of the concurrence not favored or valued.

To be fair, this *early* formal logical thinking is partly a result of the “egocentrism” that

afflicts much adolescent and young adult thinking that predisposes them to assume that how the world looks to them (now) must be the way the world is. This egocentrism, combined with their formal logical abilities, leads them to prematurely conclude that something is a genuine contradiction in spite of evidence for both lines of evidence. Researchers in adult cognitive development have identified a later, more complex kind of reasoning that transcends these limitations (without abandoning formal logic), that characterizes more mature thinkers. Some have termed this *metasystemic* thought.⁸⁷

According to these researchers, metasystemic thinkers are able to think about their formal operations, and so transform their understanding of systems (performing *third-order* operations) and synthesize the truths of multiple systems of thought that were initially perceived to be contradictory at the level of “single-system” thought. Rather than viewing these concurrences as genuinely contradictory, leading to an either-or affirmation of only one of the options, the metasystemic thinker sees such concurrences as a call to integrate the options into a fuller, richer understanding.⁸⁸ This happens as the genuine insights of the different systems are rationally understood and accepted, resulting in the forging of a new “synthesis” of ideas/systems that compose the “metasystem” (*without* regressing into preformal thought and affirming invalid, unsubstantiated, irrational conclusions).⁸⁹ This stage requires more complex reasoning and metacognitive skills:⁹⁰ first, knowing when to temporarily “suspend” the demands of the LONC in order to fairly assess all the evidence, and secondly, if the evidence is sufficient, being able to affirm both sides of the concurrence as true, in the absence of an actual harmonization of them according to the LONC. At first, this requires living with a certain amount of disequilibrium, given that the two (or more) bodies of evidence appear to contradict. Yet each horn of the

dilemma must be accepted as true for each to be taken seriously. Only then will one embrace both lines of evidence. Gradually, the evidence causes the metasystemic mind to develop mental structures that permit the cognitive dissonance created by formal logic to give way to a metasystemic “resolution,” in which both members of the pair of concurrence are accepted and “given a place” within one's belief system. As each perspective is elaborated, a “region of discourse” or “local logic” may develop within which a coherent understanding is formed that conforms to its body of evidence, without necessarily resolving how these different “regions” logically relate to each other (at least for now).

However, another constructive option is also available. Upon recognizing the paradox, one can pursue a formal logical solution to the apparent contradiction (as logicians and thinkers continue to do in many fields, e.g. physicists who try to harmonize the wave/particle dual nature of light or Christian philosophers who seek to demonstrate the logical consistency of the trinity or the incarnation using formal calculus). This task involves documenting the logical links between the two different regions of discourse.

Harmonizing the LONC and Metasystemic Thought Through Reason

Obviously, the initial metasystemic move is risky, for the LONC is essential for understanding. But in some very important cases, a hasty application of the LONC may automatically rule out certain sectors of evidence. Part of reasoning skill, then, involves being able to identify those intellectual contexts/topics that require metasystemic thought: when the evidence demands it, and so, where reason decides on the basis of rational considerations that it is warranted. Therefore, a more mature reason uses both formal logic (including the LONC) and metasystemic reasoning.⁹¹ This more mature reason, trained through learning about complex

reality, comes to develop a metasystemic reasoning rule: *no line of reasoning/set of evidence can overturn any other reasoning/set of evidence if, after careful investigation and reflection, both appear independently plausible, even when they appear to be logically inconsistent (unless they constitute an antinomy or absurdity).*

Needless to say, that parenthetical statement is important. Metasystemic thinking cannot justify genuine irrationality. Nonsense is nonsense, and antinomies and absurdities must be rejected. But in some important cases, sense can at first look like nonsense and can be prematurely rejected. As the noted logicians Cohen and Nagel recognized: "Great care must be exercised in making sure that what appear to be contrary instances are really so in fact."⁹²

Let us return to an example from physics. There are two lines of experimental evidence that are mutually exclusive, one of which shows light to be made up of particles, and another to be composed of waves. These two sets of results appear to be contradictory. Perhaps eventually, through further research and reflection, physicists will be able to formulate a formally coherent, unified model of a "wavicle." Until then, they currently simply affirm both bodies of reasoning/evidence without understanding how they cohere. Metasystemic reasoning makes it possible for us not to *foreclose* on truth simply because *at present* we cannot come up with a coherent solution.

Metasystemic thought is also *practically* important since few people have been endowed with a high enough intelligence to be able to resolve the logical paradoxes that face adult thinkers (and believers). Actually, most adults faced with such problems resort to presystemic (i.e. prelogical) thought, holding beliefs without rigorous logical reflection, and so holding paradoxical beliefs without recognizing the contradiction (e.g. most Christians believe in the

trinity without really grasping the logical difficulty). However, some highly intelligent people (having extraordinary memory and logical abilities that permit them to comprehend complex concepts and long chains of reasoning) can work towards rigorous formal solutions to metasystemic problems. This is highly desirable when it can be done, but relatively few people have such abilities. Moreover, some metasystemic problems have not yet had completely satisfactory logical solutions (e.g. God's sovereignty and human responsibility), and it may be the case that they will never be solved logically to our satisfaction. It may be that the chains of reasoning required for such problems, though within God's competence, are too great for any human mind. Metasystemic thought allows persons who recognize the problem of concurrences revealed by the LONC but who have not solved them logically to nonetheless submit to the authority of *all* the available evidence in the absence of a formal logical harmonization, at least for now.

Let us compare the cognitive dilemma of a paradox with the problem of coming upon a gorge during a backpacking trip (using the two opposing cliffs as an analogy for two concurrent truths). The gorge, unfortunately, is filled with a thick fog, so that the bottom cannot be seen from above. In hiking (and thinking), we have three (analogous) choices. First, from the one cliff we can reject the hope of bridging the gap, of getting to the other side, since "they are not (logically) connected" and "it is (intellectually) dangerous." (This is the option taken by the rigid single-system thinker who rejects one or the other truth.) Second, since the cliffs are just barely within jumping distance, we can jump from one side to the other (concluding that the evidence for the other part of the concurrence is strong enough to warrant belief, even though we cannot see how it is connected to the "cliff" we started from. This is something both presystemic

and metasystemic thinkers can do, with the latter recognizing the logical difficulty of the jump.) However, a third option is possible for some: climbing down from the one cliff into the fog, crossing the stream at the bottom, and climbing up to the top of the other side. This is of course much harder than jumping, not everyone is able to do that kind of rigorous climbing (an elaborate string of formal argumentation), and there is the possibility that no (formal) passageway can be found (in this life). But all we know suggests that it should be possible (since, if both members of the pair are true, God knows the formal solution), and there is every reason for capable Christian thinkers to work on these problems.

So how shall we answer the title of this chapter, Can God be grasped by our reason? The answer is, as you might suspect, both yes and no. Yes, God can be surely grasped by our reason which is able to understand whatever scripture teaches about God and develop a coherent understanding of each of the “sides” of biblical teaching. However, God cannot be *fully* grasped by our reason which may be unable to trace out how both “sides” of biblical teaching about God are logically related to each other. Tragically, a simplistic use of formal logic may lead human reason to reject certain revealed features of God which seem contradictory to other revealed features. God can be better grasped by a wiser, metasystemic reason that uses the LONC with discernment, holding off on a premature conclusion that a concurrence is a genuine contradiction, *if the evidence demands it*, until such a time as the gifted among us provide a fuller, formal understanding of God that incorporates all the evidence available to us or until God increases our capacities considerably in the age to come. And yet, the wise lover of God is content to defer such conclusions indefinitely, if the evidence demands it, since she suspects that some of the mysteries of an infinite God must necessarily transcend the finite capacities of the

created mind to grasp them.

A Rationale for Divine Concurrences

There are good reasons to work towards a formal solution of paradoxes regarding God's nature and his relation to us. However, there are also at least two good reasons for appreciating paradoxical truths as they are.

A Moral Good of Divine Concurrences

First, what if God has set up the universe, including our minds, in such a way as to promote our humility? What if he built an intellectual hurdle into the relation between the structure of reality and our own understanding to foster humility. He created the normal adult mind to be able to think formally. But a *created* mind must have finite attentional and memory capacity. Moreover, let's suppose he "set" the human mind's capacity at "average" intelligence (having a distribution from extremely mentally impaired to extremely gifted), but set in such a way that most would recognize these apparent contradictions in reality and in God's own nature, forcing us to "lay down our mental lives" and confess we cannot solve all of the world's intellectual problems. They are within our grasp to recognize, but beyond our capacity to solve. Concurrences (or offenses, to use Kierkegaard's term) are meant to reveal, to make clear to us our sinful tendency to put our selves (here, our intellectual selves) in place of the priority to be accorded to God and his revelation (particularly the Bible, which is *ipso facto* symbolic of his authority). The cognitive problem we are confronted with in metasystemic dilemmas, then, is not just the finitude of human understanding, but also the problem of the sin of pride. Could we "figure God out" completely we would be more inclined to exalt ourselves and our "divining" reasoning powers, and less likely to submit to God and his challenging revelation. Concurrences

lead us to seek the “foolish” wisdom of the Holy Spirit (1 Co. 1,2), manifested in an inner peace in the face of the disequilibrium that such concurrences create and an unwillingness to foreclose on truth. Concurrences, then, may help to lead us into virtue. But there is a higher reason for these mysteries.

The Aesthetic Good of Divine Concurrences

The best reason to appreciate mysteries is aesthetic: such concurrences reveal a beauty to our minds. The beauty of God is a central theme of Jonathan Edwards. In one of his sermons, "The Excellency of Christ," he laid side-by-side some of the greatest paradoxes in the person and life of Christ in order to promote our worship of Him.⁹³ Beginning with Rev.5:5,6, where Christ is said to be both a lion and a lamb, Edwards played with these contrary descriptions, and extended the contrast into theological considerations. As God, Edwards wrote, Christ is infinitely great, yet as man he suffered shame and abuse. "Such a conjunction of infinite highness and low condescension, in the same person, is admirable."⁹⁴ Christ was of infinite majesty, as well as transcendent meekness; he had the deepest reverence for God, yet he was equal with God. Utterly self-sufficient as God, he lived on earth in dependence on God and vulnerable to abuse by sinners. These contrasts, Edwards felt, reveal the supreme beauty of Christ. The greater the contrast of qualities in the same person, Edwards thought, the greater that person's beauty and excellence.

Grasping such wondrous contrasts, because they challenge our reason, lead us to worship. In addition, there is a kind of cognitive depth and richness that occurs as each member of the concurrence is allowed to "play off" the other. Christ's majesty is especially beautiful when seen in relation to his humiliation. And his majesty casts a glow on his humiliation that

makes it that much more gorgeous, and so on. The more we simplistically eliminate theological paradoxes, the more we obscure God's revelation and water down the faith, and rob ourselves of reasons for worship and a deeper insight into God's infinitely great glory.

Many theologians in our day have insisted that they can scale the greatness of God with their own intellect. But in so doing they have had to reject the God of biblical revelation (or at least some "side" of that God). The primary error of certain "hyperlogicians" is to think, "God and reality cannot be any bigger or more complex than my formal reasoning can comprehend." Avoiding such hubris, and using a chastened, wiser reason, may we submit our minds to *all* the revelation we have been given and so accept the mysteries that exist in God's nature and his relation to us, learning better how to give glory and praise to our infinitely excellent God.

Endnotes

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1. The author wants to thank Doug Huffman, Merold Westphal, C. Stephen Evans, Ronald Nash, and Lyle Larson for their help in identifying weaknesses in earlier drafts. Special thanks are due to James Spiegel for extraordinary efforts to improve this piece. Its remaining problems are the fault of the author.
 2. *Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. John Burnet (Cleveland: World, 1957), 136.
 3. Ulrich Zwingli, *On True and False Religion*, Ed. Samuel M. Jackson & Clarence N. Helks, (Durham, NJ: Labyrinth, 1981), p. 61.
 4. Though he never put it quite that way. Cf. Etienne Gilson, *Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*. (New York: Random House, 1955), 44-45.
 5. Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, 7th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1996), 3.
 6. This is what the psychologist Piaget termed "formal operations." Cf. Barbel Inhelder and Jean Piaget, *The Growth of Logical Thinking: From Childhood to Adolescence*, trans. A. Parsons and S. Milgram. (New York: Basic Books, 1958).
 7. Cf. Robert S. Tragesser, "Principle of Contradiction," *A Companion to Epistemology* (London: Blackwell, 1992), 366; Cohen and Nagel, *Logic*, 181-2.
 8. F.H.Bradley, *The Principles of Logic*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1883), 147.

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9. Wesley C. Salmon, *Logic*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 101-102; P.F. Strawson, *Introduction to Logical Theory* (Strand, England: Methuen, 1952), 16-19.
10. John Etchemendy, "Paradox," *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 558-9.
11. W.V. Quine, *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 3.
12. John van Heijenoort, "Logical Paradoxes," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 5. (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 50-51. For a list of paradoxes and their attempted solutions, cf. Glenn W. Erickson and John A. Fossa, *Dictionary of Paradox*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998).
13. Robert S. Tragesser, "Antinomy," *A Companion to Epistemology* (London: Blackwell, 1992), 17-18. Van Heijenoort describes an antinomy as the most extreme form of paradox in which two propositions are equivalent, yet one is the negation of the other. Cf. "Logical Paradoxes," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 45. Quine wrote that an antinomy is "a self-contradiction by accepted ways of reasoning." W.V. Quine, *The Ways of Paradox*, 5.
14. Immanuel Kant coined the term "antinomy" in his exploration of this and other logic problems. *Critique of Pure Reasons*, trans. N. K. Smith, (New York: Macmillan: 1929).
15. Cf. Robert s. Tragesser, "Absurdity," *A Companion to Epistemology* (London: Blackwell, 1992), 8.
16. Besides the above, more analytic, discussion regarding paradoxes, more programmatic works that approach paradox constructively from a Continental standpoint can be found in Howard P. Kainz, *Paradox, Dialectic, and System: A Contemporary Reconstruction of the Hegelian Problematic*, (University Park: PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988); Howard A. Slaatte, *The Pertinence of the Paradox: The Dialectics of Reason-In-Existence*, (New York: Humanities Press, 1968). Mention should probably be made of their Continental roots. Beginning at least with Kant's work on "antinomies," Continental philosophers have typically been more willing to confront the limitations of human reason than have Anglo-American philosophy. Kant demonstrated that formal logic can be used with different assumptions to derive exactly opposite conclusions. Radicalizing Kant's comparatively modest investigation, Hegel concluded that Mind (*Geist*) itself was composed of such rational tensions, and he argued that the development of Mind is best understood as a historical unfolding of dialectical themes into a higher synthesis or reconciliation of opposites. *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie (New York: Macmillan, 1931); *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. W.H. Johnston and L.G. Struthers, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1929). Though his overall system was a significant departure from classical Christianity, more than any previous thinker in the Western tradition, he took seriously the logical tensions that exist in human thought.
- Though there are few doctrinaire Hegelians today, in one way or another, his insights into the often paradoxical nature of human thought was quite influential. Marx, Bradley, Nietzsche, Dewey, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Ricoeur, Derrida, and Foucault all have made use of dialectical modes of thought and argument, for good and for ill.
17. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam, 1974).
18. The theological usage of "mystery" has a long history in the classic tradition, but it differs from Paul's use of the term *mysterion*, which referred to a truth that had been concealed for ages, but had come to be revealed in Christ through the gospel. Cf. P.T. O'Brien, "Mystery" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 621-3.
19. Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), 238; Alvin Plantinga, "Divine Knowledge," In *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge*, edited by C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 56-7; Jonathan Edwards, "Notes on the Mind," In *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, edited by Wallace Anderson, (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1980), 341-2;

Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1955), 36-39.

20. This doesn't mean that we must be logical but God can be illogical, as has sometimes been alleged. The cause of this exclamation in context is the "scandal" of God's offering forgiveness to *simmers* (who humans might suppose God would simply destroy). The argument moves from the particular to the general: God can forgive sinners (the particular) because (in general) his ways and thoughts are not equal or identical to ours. So a useful principle is being stated: God's understanding transcends ours. We are being encouraged not to assume that just because something makes sense to us, that we necessarily have the fullest understanding. His greater understanding brings in other considerations that may show our perspective to be deficient.

21. Though Paul also *prays* that the Ephesians "may be able to *comprehend* with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge (*gnosis*), that you may be filled up to all the fulness of God," (3.18,19). Paul prays that his readers might know that which is beyond knowledge. It seems we can move towards greater understanding of God, even if a *full* understanding is not possible.

22. There appear to be at least four ways that God's nature and relationship to the creation strain human understanding. First, there are single truths that deal with infinity in some way and so outstrip our ability to fully grasp them. Such things would include the notion of an eternal being and an infinite being, and God's omnipresence and omniscience (including his knowledge of all numbers and all possibilities, all possible relationships, art works, speeches, etc., yea, all possible worlds). Second, and related to this, is an appreciation of the immensity of his understanding and knowledge of everything about the creation, the physical laws of the universe, the functioning of the brain and every living cell, his knowledge of every subatomic particle in the universe and every one of the billions of stars in the billions of galaxies in the universe, as well as the inner goings-on of every human heart, etc. Genuine mystical experience of God provides a third awareness of God that transcends our mind's rational capacities (cf. 2 Co. 12.4). And a fourth type is the focus of this article: the existence of *pairs* of truths that appear contradictory since they represent extremely different aspects of God or his relation with human beings. In each of these ways our understanding of God experiences limits.

23. Many other puzzles in Jesus' teaching are discussed by Ralph W. Sockman in *The Paradoxes of Jesus*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1936).

24. Cf. also Edmund B. Keller, *Some Paradoxes of Paul*, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1974).

25. Cf. e.g. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, I* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 2; W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology, I* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, no date), 19-20.

26. In mathematics a number of paradoxes are related to infinity. In an infinite set of numbers, there are as many odd numbers as there are both odd and even numbers, and there are as many total integers as there are total fractions. Similarly, there are as many points between 0 and 1 inch as there are in the universe. In geometry, an infinitely large circle would have a circumference as large as its diameter. Such assertions seem counterintuitive since one member of the pair being compared seems self-evidently larger than the other; nevertheless, it can be proven mathematically that these pairs are equivalent. (Bill Eppright, personal communication). Probably the most important paradox in modern mathematics was "the incompleteness theorem" presented by Gödel in 1931. He formally proved that it was not possible to develop a formal system of simple arithmetic without including at least one contradiction. As a result, Gödel demonstrated that number theory was necessarily incomplete and that elementary mathematics therefore cannot be completely formalized in one system (let alone, more complex mathematics). W.V. Quine gives this as a prime example of a veridical paradox in *The Ways of Paradox*, 16-18.

There are also many examples of paradoxes within logic, some of them going back to the early days of Greek philosophy. As suggested above, solutions have been developed for many of these paradoxes, however, this whole area continues to be an area of intense activity. Western philosophy has wrestled for centuries on such paradoxes as the One and the Many, the relation between being and change, beings and concepts, and essence and

existence. Though thinkers often "take sides" on such issues, such polarities seem fundamental to the structure of things and, let us say, isomorphically, the structure of our minds.

One of the great puzzles of modern physics is the nature of light. A set of experiments have been performed that demonstrates that light is composed of particles and another set that shows light to be a wave. Physics since Newton and into the 20th century was divided into those, following Newton, who affirmed a particle theory of light and others who maintained that light was a wave. It was assumed, using formal logic, that light could be only one or the other. But physicists now affirm that light has both properties, defying what a simplistic application of the LONC had led researchers to expect. Quantum mechanics research has revealed another sort of paradox. When attempting to measure the behavior of certain subatomic particles, researchers are unable to measure both speed and location (called Heisenberg's Indeterminacy Principle.) If physicists set up their equipment in one way, they can measure its speed; if in another way, they can establish its location; but never both. There appears to be a fundamental limit to what humans are able to observe, a phenomenon that seems counterintuitive to reason. Time, also, offers mysteries. Is time a sequence of discrete events or is it an ongoing, continuous, flowing process without parts? It's hard to say. (Steven Ratliff, personal communication) Such paradoxes have provided constructive challenges for physicists. In the words of Niels Bohr, There is "no progress without paradox." Alan Lightman, *Dance for Two* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 32.

Many features of human reality have paradoxical features. Humans have both immaterial and material qualities (mind and body), but it hard to see how they relate. Clearly, humans are brain-dependent beings, yet some features of human life seem irreducible to brain events, e.g., the experience of color, emotion, and consciousness itself. In another vein, the human soul seems to be composed of a set of identifiable immaterial structures (reason, memory, emotional states, etc.), yet the soul is experienced as an ever-changing stream of consciousness and purposive activity, never fully defined by a finite set of thoughts and memories. Also, adult humans are to be treated as responsible individual beings, yet they also act as followers, members of the crowd, influenced by other humans. Some have argued that the best way to help disadvantaged minorities is to give them special privileges to help them overcome their poverty while others argue that all humans need to take responsibility for themselves in order to better themselves. A similar quandary: are minorities helped more by emphasizing our commonality or our diversity?

Other paradoxical problems: Human knowledge is forged within a subject-object dialectic. The object exists outside the subject, yet to know it, the subject must "internalize" features of the object. Scientists typically emphasize the need for objectivity and universally agreed-upon techniques for determining the object's nature, literary critics typically focus on the subject's internal representations of reality. Each option seems rationally justified, though by itself, it is only a part of the truth. And can we ever *really* know another person? There seems to be a paradoxical tension between knowing *about* another and the sense that there is something indefinable about the other that is beyond our grasp.

If the universe created by God (a finite reality, infinitely lesser than God himself) is pervaded with paradox, it seems probable that we will find features of God's own nature and dealings with us that likewise challenge our capacity to understand them comprehensively.

27. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 337. Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), ch. 1.

28. Polytheism is at least partially related to finite humanity's (sinful) response to God's immensity.

29. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939), 89. See also Robert L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Presbyterian Pub., 1878), 179. "I pray the student to bear in mind, that I am not here attempting to explain the Trinity, but just the contrary: I am endeavoring to convince him that it cannot be explained." More optimistic are contemporary Christian philosophers like Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983); and Peter van Inwagen, *God Knowledge & Mystery*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), ch. 8, 9; who have worked hard to elucidate the logical coherence of the trinity doctrine.

30. Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 176; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic*

Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939), 82. Gerald L. Bray, "Tritheism," in *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 695.

31. For a discussion of the various charges of incoherence made against the doctrine of the incarnation, see Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate*, (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986) ch. 1.

32. Ex. 3:14; Ps. 102:26,27; Is. 40:28; 57:15; Ro. 1:23; 1 Ti. 6:16; ! Ti. 1;17; He. 1:11,12; Ma. 3:6; 1 Sa. 15:29; Ro. 1:25, 9:5; 2 Co. 11:31; Ge. 6:6; Ex. 32:14; Jb. 2:3. A true contradictory here would be "God is in every sense an eternal being beyond time" and "God is in no sense beyond time and is solely a temporal being."

33. Jo. 3.21,27; Jo. 15.5; 1 Co. 15.10; Ep. 2.10. A true contradiction would be "God is working through me" and "God is not working through me." Ph. 2:12,13 is the *locus classicus* text.

34. Jb. 1,2; 42:11; Is. 45:7; Ge. 50:20; 1 Jo. 1:5; Ja. 1:13. A true contradictory in this context would be "God hates sin" and "God loves sin."

35. Compare Jo. 3:16; Mt. 5:44,45; 2 Pe. 3:9 and Ps. 5:5; Ep. 2:3. (The reader is encouraged to figure out the true contradictories for this and the following concurrences.)

36. Compare Ac. 13:48, 16:14; Co. 3:12; and Jo. 3:16; Ac. 16:31; Ro. 10:9; Re. 3:20.

37. Eph. 1:11; Dan.2:21; Ps. 33:10; yet God delights in human prayer (Pr. 15:8) and responds to our requests (cf. his interaction with Abraham, Ge. 18:22-32; and Moses, Nu. 14:11-20: "The Lord replied, 'I have forgiven them, as you asked.'")

38. Ps. 139. 4, 16; Ac. 2.23; 4.27,28; Pr. 16.1, 4; 20.24; 21.1,2.

39. It should be mentioned somewhere that there are two cosmic contrasts which are fundamental to Christianity and cannot be reconciled in some "higher" harmony. First, there is the Creator-creature distinction, which teaches that the creation is not to be identified with the Creator (as pantheism teaches and panentheism implies—the creation is "God's body"). Second, there is the absolute opposition between the holy God and sin: "God is light and in him is no darkness at all." (1 Jo. 1.5) No Taoist "Yin/Yang" harmonization of God and sin is rational according to Christianity.

40. Augustine refers to the trinity as a mystery: "On the Trinity," p.137, p.206; "Faith and the Creed" p. 639; the incarnation as mystery: "Enchiridion," p.488, p.549; "The City of God," p. 432; and God's sovereign grace and human freedom as mystery: "The Spirit and the Letter," p.358; "Nature and Grace, Against Pelagius," p. 376; "The Gift of Perseverance," p. 1280, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4,5. (Durham, NC: Sage Digital Library, 1995).

Aquinas refers to the mystery of the trinity in the *Summa Theologica*, I.q.32,a.1.; I.q.46,a.2.; *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1. (New York: Random House, 1945), 317; 453; and the mystery of the incarnation: I.II.q.103.a.2.; II.II.q.1.a.6. *Basic Writings*, vol. 2, 911,1064.

41. For example, "...When you feel that you do not understand, put your faith in the meanwhile in the inspired word of God, and believe both that man's will is free, and that there is also God's grace, without whose help man's free will can neither be turned towards God, nor make any progress in God." Augustine, *On Grace and Free Will*, *Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 5. (Albany, OR: Sage Digital Library, 1996), p. 1088.

42. Cf. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. F.J. Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1942), I.iv. "O Thou, . . . utterly hidden and utterly present, most beautiful and most strong, abiding yet mysterious, suffering no change and changing all things: never new, never old, making all things new, bringing age upon the proud and they know it not; ever in action, ever at rest, gathering all things to Thee and needing none;...ever seeking though lacking nothing.

Thou lovest without subjection to passion, Thou art jealous but not with fear; Thou canst know repentance but not sorrow, be angry yet unperturbed by anger. Thou canst change works Thou hast made but Thy mind stands changeless. Thou does find and receive back what Thou didst never lose; art never in need but dost rejoice in Thy gains, art not greedy but dost exact interest manifold."

43. Cf. e.g. Aquinas' discussion of divine government, evil, and chance in the *Summa Theologica*, I. VIII. p.103, a.7, and a.8. *Basic Writings*, Vol. I, p.959-61, and the relation of prayer and providence in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, ch. 95 and 96. *Basic Writings*, Vol. II, 184-189.

44. Aquinas believed that to attempt to prove the trinity by natural reason detracted from the faith, first, since faith itself is concerned with things that exceed human reason; it is therefore belittling to it to have to prove such truths with the inferior faculty. Second, proving with logic what belongs to faith will lead to the presentation of arguments that are invalid and result in ridicule by unbelievers who can see the fallacies. Let us be content, he says, that "what faith teaches is not impossible." Cf. I.II.q.32.a.1. 317-8.

45. Cf. *Breviloquium*, Erwin E. Nemmers, Trans. (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1946), Part I, chapters 2-6 on the trinity, 8 on predestination, and 9 on providence.

46. "The Tree of Life," *Bonaventure; Classics of Western Spirituality*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1978), 117-176.

47. Cf. Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 2, (New York: Doubleday, 1963), Ch. 15. Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955), 534-540.

48. Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), p. 86.

49. Ebeling sees such paradoxes as central to Luther's theology, pp. 141-149. According to Ebeling, in Luther's thinking, each member of a pair of contraries "has its own limits. In fact one might be even more precise and say that one is not merely inevitably tolerated in conjunction with the other, but rather is accorded its own proper function as a result of this conjunction and distinction." p.142

50. Ebeling, p. 241.

51. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. II*, Trans, F. L. Battles, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), III.xxiii. pp. 947-964.

52. E.g., the *mystery* of the trinity, I.xiii.17; of Christ's two natures, II.xiv.1; of faith which is a gift, III.ii.33; and of salvation, III.ii.41.

53. III.xxiii.4. p. 952. Calvin's confidence in scripture led him to embrace concurrent truths regardless of the problems they posed for reason. "Doctrines that are clear in themselves, but logically incompatible with one another, are placed side by side because Calvin finds them so in Scripture. He developed each doctrine as he found it to its logical end, no matter how violently the conclusion might be controverted by some other theme similarly developed. In this pursuit Calvin was one of the most relentless of theologians and was sometimes called upon to borrow words from Augustine or Bernard to express his own wonderment before these antinomies (sic) of his thought that were to him none other than the mysteries of God's will." Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, expanded. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 37. Yet Calvin refused to accept that these truths were genuine contradictions. He was no irrationalist, but valued human reason (within its limits), and used it vigorously to solve logical problems where possible. "While Calvin as an exegete was a virtuoso at harmonizing surface inconsistencies in Scripture, he never conceived of his theological task as an effort to harmonize the deeper paradoxes of Scripture or to explain what he regarded as its central mysteries." op. cit. p. 40.

54. Cf. *Pensées*, trans. W.F.Trotter, (New York: Modern Library, 1941). #229, 230,231,233, 268-284, 416-424.

55. #267.

56. #566.

57. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. H.V.Hong & E. H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 561.

58. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Soren Aabye Kierkegaard," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 4, (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 339; Robert Merrihew Adams, "Kierkegaard's Arguments Against Objective Reasoning in Religion," in *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

59. For a defense of this interpretation of Kierkegaard, cf. C. Stephen Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997); and *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992). Also, Cornelio Fabro, "Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard's Dialectic," in *A Kierkegaard Critique*, Howard.A. Johnson and Niels Thulstrup (eds). (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962).

60. Cf. Emil Bruner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1952), 170-75; Reinhold Niebuhr, , *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2 (new York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941); 204; Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics* vol. 1, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 379; T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 139. Most important on this theme in the present is Eberhard Jungel's *God as the Mystery of the World*, trans. D.L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983).

Unfortunately, some neo-orthodox (e.g. Niebuhr, p. 204) revealed a tendency towards irrationalism by sometimes seeming to speak of paradoxes as if they were genuine contradictions. This kind of careless, sophomoric approach among some has done much to discredit the value of paradox in Christian understanding among others in the twentieth century.

61. Cf. *Church Dogmatics: Vol. 1*, trans. G.T. Thomas and H. Knight (Edinburgh, T.&T. Clark, 1956), ch. 2, sec. 15, for a general discussion of the mystery of God's revelation; vol. 1, ch. 2, sections 8-13 and 16 on the trinity and the incarnation (sec. 13); *Vol. 2*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, W.B. Johnston, H. Knight, and J.L.M. Haire, (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1957), ch. 6, sec. 29 on the divine perfections; *Vol. 2*, ch. 6, sec. 31 on divine freedom and necessity; *Vol 2*, ch. 8 sections 36-39 on grace and obedience; and *Vol. 1*, ch. 1, sec.4 on Scripture.

62. *Church Dogmatics, Vol. 1*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh, T.&T. Clark, 1975), part 1, 368.

63. Cf. *Common Grace and the Gospel*, (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 11, 38, 174; *Defense of the Faith*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 44-46. John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995), ch. 13. Van Til has been castigated by some logicians for being an irrationalist. A sympathetic reading of his work reveals that he was deeply committed to the fundamental rationality of the universe and of God. God himself, he wrote, was Absolute Rationality. (One can as easily make the claim of this complex thinker that he was too much of a rationalist!, as did Herman Dooyeweerd, "Cornelius Van Til and the Transcendental Critique of Theoretical Thought", in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E.R. Geehan, [Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971], 81-89).

64. John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987); Vern Poythress, *Symphonic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987).

65. Cf. G.C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), 117; Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 405-6; Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 1 (Harper& Row, 1978), 127; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; 1994), 34-35;

J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1967); D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical perspectives in tension* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981).

However, it would be misleading not to acknowledge that some twentieth century evangelicals have argued against paradox. Carl F.H. Henry, for example, is deeply opposed to such language, feeling that to use it in reference to Christian truth compromises its essential intelligibility. *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 3, (Waco, TX: Word, 1979), 232-236. Coming from a similar standpoint, Ronald H. Nash rejects the views of Kierkegaard, Bloesch, and Van Til as pious nonsense. cf. *The Word of God and the Mind of Man*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 91-112. Even the evangelicals cited above differ significantly in how they approach paradox, from Grudem who is much closer to Henry and Nash in how he explains paradox than to Bloesch who uses paradoxical language without proper qualification.

66. There have, of course, been numerous defenders of paradox who are no friends of classical Christianity. Tillich and Bultmann, as well as many post-modern theologues, have defended dialectical/paradoxical, and (in the latter case) relativistic thinking, while departing significantly from Christian notions of God. The fact is both orthodox and non-orthodox have appealed to paradox.

67. *The Reality of God and other essays*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 17.

68. Ibid.

69. p. 18.

70. p.47.

71. *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1987).

72. p. 77.

73. p. 54.

74. Ibid.

75. p. 65.

76. p.68.

77. *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p.213. He goes on: "How can God be grieved if precisely what God wanted to happen did happen? If specific sovereignty is true, then it is *incorrect* to speak of God's getting upset with human sin because any sin is specifically what God wanted to come about. It is *inconsistent* to affirm exhaustive sovereignty and also claim that God wants to give us something but does not give it because we fail to ask him in prayer. ...this does not *comport with* my reading of Scripture or my understanding of prayer." (italics mine)

78. p. 212.

79. p. 215. Sanders criticizes how Packer (and others) have used the notion of an "apparent" contradiction to refer to a problem that is intrinsically logically irresolvable *to us*. First, ignoring philosophical work on paradox, he says that something either is or is not contradictory; there is no in-between status. Second, Sanders believes that to say some truths are contradictory to us, but not to God, is irrational, because it is unknowable and no one can possibly confirm its truth-value. Similarly, Sanders asks how we could possibly be sure that something that is contradictory to us is not also to God? But both these points suppose we are not within our epistemic rights to affirm something is true by faith. Lastly, Sanders argues that we cannot appeal to apparent contradiction since to affirm a contradiction to us

defies the rules for intelligibility that all humans must conform to if we are to engage in meaningful discourse with one another. This too ignores contemporary work on paradox.

Sanders' dismissal of Packer's position as irrational and unintelligible is specious in the extreme. As we have seen, many problems in math, logic, physics, psychology, and sociology have been discovered that are "apparently contradictory" for at least a while (and some are still unresolved), and time must pass between the recognition of paradoxes and their resolution. In fact, their future resolution depends on the hope that one can be found. One need not be necessarily irrational to hold out for a resolution one day, whether in this age, or as Packer and others suggest, in the age to come. Perhaps the real problem for Sanders (among others) is ethical: he is not patient enough. Perhaps the most virtuous response to two lines of substantial evidence/argument for now is a humble acceptance of both of them until they are constructively resolved in a way that preserves both truths.

Packer is following the majority of classical Christians who assume that God is fully rational and that the universe contains no genuine contradictions (square circles or colorless red cars) and concludes that there are therefore no genuine contradictions for God. So Sanders' accusation of unintelligibility simply amounts to a straw man. Packer's position would be unintelligible if he believed that genuine contradictions exist for God too, or that we could not assert anything meaningful about God. But why is it necessarily unintelligible to be agnostic about the reconciliation of two sets of arguments? Sanders is criticizing those who insist on submitting to Scripture whatever it says, and so are unwilling to allow our present finite understanding to overturn clear lines of evidence/argument. This is no more irrational than the child who believes that Christ died on the cross for her sins, even though she does not understand the logic behind the substitutionary atonement. Indeed, perhaps the Christian faith involves just the sort of submissive acceptance of transcendent truth that one finds in a child.

80. Cf. John Gill, *Body of Divinity*, (1839, reprint, Atlanta, GA: Turner Lassetter, 1965), p. 472, where he argues that the world of Jo. 3:16 does not refer to all individual humans (since Christ did not die for all of them), but to the world of Gentiles, so as to make clear the gospel's application to non-Jews. Gill is as logically consistent as the Open Theists. Both, however, have to distort or obscure passages that do not fit into their rigidly logical scheme.

81. Another consequence of hyperlogicism is that the positions of opponents get misrepresented. Sanders e.g. repeatedly reads into his opponents conclusions they would reject. Cf. p.212, where he suggests that when a woman is raped and dismembered, those who hold to meticulous providence believe that God wanted that to happen, without qualification. Yet, as he surely knows, reformed Christians have long sought to safeguard both God's holiness and his love for sinners with language like "the two wills of God" and "permission". Such language has problems, but Sanders is guilty of the grossest of distortions when he represents that the position of meticulous providence entails that God wants women raped. But rather than accuse him of deliberate misrepresentation, we should understand his interpretation is justified, even required, given the lens of his simplistic system.

82. Jean Piaget, *Judgment and Reasoning in the Child*, M. Warden, trans. (Paterson, NJ: Littlefield, Adams, & Co., 1959); *The Language and Thought of the Child*, M. Gabain, trans. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1926); Barbel Indhelder and Jean Piaget, *The Growth of Logical Thinking*, Anne Parsons and Stanley Milgram, trans. (New York: Basic Books, 1958).

83. Some psychologists have raised questions about just how stage-like these differences really are, arguing that the same processes are evident at every stage or that domain-specific learning demonstrates non-universal mental structures. Nevertheless, many developmentalists accept the notion of stages of cognitive development since each stage is characterized by an identifiable level of complexity that appears to be qualitatively different from earlier ones. See ch. 1 in Patricia H. Miller, *Theories of Developmental Psychology*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1993).

84. However, subsequent researchers have found that not all humans end up being able to think using formal logic. Even by the college years, only about 50% of college students give consistent evidence of using formal logic (at least as understood and assessed by Piaget). E.T. Pascarelli and P.T. Terenzini, *How College Affects Students*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991).

85. Michael L. Commons, Francis A. Richards, and Cheryl Armon, (Eds.), *Beyond Formal Operations: Late adolescent and Adult Cognitive Development*. (New York: Praeger, 1984); John M. Rybash, William J. Hoyer, and Paul A. Roodin, *Adult Cognition and Aging: Developmental Changes in Processing, Knowing, and Thinking*. (New York: Pergamon, 1986).

86. Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). Kegan describes cognitive development as the movement from being mentally embedded in a simpler subject-object balance to a higher-order (more complex) subject-object balance. For the systemic thinker the object is the propositions or beliefs that the subject analyzes from the standpoint of one's own system of logically consistent beliefs. He calls this kind of thinker, the institutional self. The move from the institutional self to the interindividual self involves a shift in subject-object understanding in which the object becomes the higher-order set of "systems" of propositions or beliefs, with the subject viewing them from the standpoint of the evolving metasystem. This explains why the strict systemic thinker cannot understand metasystemic relations. They simply transcend the thought structures of the early formal operational cognitive system.

87. Michael L. Commons, Francis A. Richards, and D. Kuhn, "Systematic, metasystematic, and cross paradigmatic reasoning: A case for stages of reasoning beyond Piaget's stage of formal operations." *Childhood Development* 53 (1982): 1058-68; Francis A. Richards and Michael L. Commons, "Postformal cognitive-developmental theory and research: A review of its current status," *Higher Stages of Human Development: Perspectives on Adult Growth*, ed. C.N. Alexander and E.J. Langer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 139-161; Michael Basseches, *Dialectical Thinking*, (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1984); Patricia M. King & Katherine S. Kitchener, *Developing reflective judgment: Understanding and promoting intellectual growth and critical thinking in adolescents and adults*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994); Dierdre A. Kramer, "Development of an Awareness of Contradiction Across the Life Span and the Question of Postformal Operations," Michael L. Commons, Jan D. Sinnott, Francis A. Richards, & Cheryl Armon (Eds.), *Adult Development: Vol. 1, Comparisons and Applications of Developmental Models*, (New York: Praeger, 1989), 133-160.

88. John M. Rybash, Paul A. Roodin, and William J. Hoyer, *Adult Development and Aging* (3rd ed.). (Madison, WI: Brown & Benchmark, 1995), 172. Metasystemic reasoning does not repudiate the laws of formal logic. They still operate within systems and continue to be used to evaluate evidence, relate specific propositions, and adjudicate truth. Metasystemic reasoning does nothing more than assume and build on formal logic, taking it into a higher "orbit."

89. There is debate about whether postformal thought consists of a genuine, qualitative change in human thought (and so constituting a new stage) or simply an advanced application of formal operational abilities, cf. Dierdre A. Kramer, "Post-formal Operations: A Need for Further Conceptualization." *Human Development* 26 (1983): 91-105; Rybash, Roodin, and Hoyer, *Adult Cognition and Aging*; Charles N. Alexander and Ellen J. Langer, eds. *Higher Stages of Human Development*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), throughout the whole book. Ronald R. Irwin and Ronald L. Sheese, "Problems in the Proposal for a 'Stage' of Dialectical Thinking," *Adult Development, Vol. 1.*, M.L. Commons, J.D. Sinnott, F.A. Richards, and C. Armon, ed. (New York: Praeger, 1989), 113-132. I personally think that metasystemic thought does constitute a higher organization of thinking, qualitatively different enough from systemic thought to warrant the label of another stage (cf. Eric L. Johnson, "Growing in Wisdom in Christian Community: Toward Measures of Christian Postformal Development," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 26, 366). However, it is plausible to argue that metasystemic thought is simply formal logic applied to more complex objects of thought (systems).

90. Metacognitive skills include mental skills that permit people to monitor their thinking and problem-solving, assess its success or failure, and apply strategies to assist their thinking and problem-solving. See Michael Ferrari and Robert J. Sternberg, "The Development of Mental Abilities and Styles" in *Handbook of Child Psychology*, vol. 2: *Cognition, Perception, and Language* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 909-910.

91. Pascal recognized this kind of complexity: "The last proceeding of reason is to recognize that there is an infinity

of things which are beyond it. It is but feeble if it does not see so far as to know this. But if natural things are beyond it, what will be said of supernatural?" Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, (New York: Random House, 1941), #267, "Wisdom sends us to childhood." #271, and "There is nothing so conformable to reason as this disavowal of reason." #272. The distinction between systemic and metasystemic reasoning, I think, helps us to make better sense of Pascal's insights.

92. Morris R. Cohen and Ernest Nagel, *An Introduction to Logic* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1934), 75.

93. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 1*, E. Hickman, ed. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 680-689.

94. p. 681.