

# A Christian Philosophy of Logic

## I. Introduction

By a “philosophy of logic,” we are referring to the wise principles necessary in the use of logic. Philosophy is simply the striving after wisdom and we strive for it as a goal that we attain by a process. The process aspect of philosophy focuses on principles by which we obtain wisdom, the principles by which we reach the goal of wisdom in a multitude of areas from how to drive a car to how to live the Christian life. These principles of the process are in summary the principles of logic. Logical reasoning is how we strive for wisdom, but we need to apply wise principles in the process of striving for wisdom; it would be silly to think that we can arrive at true wisdom on the basis of unwise principles. We have a circle: we seek wisdom and to do so, we need logic, but logic must operate wisely or it is out of whack. Thus, to say Christians need a philosophy of logic is to say that even the pursuit of wisdom must have a godly foundation. We need wisdom to strive for wisdom. Bottom line: a philosophy of logic means that true knowledge begins with the fear of God and knowledge of His will.

Five components show how the fear of God and knowledge of His will give us the foundation for wisdom in a philosophy of logic: logical skill, contextual sensitivity, open-minded humility, presuppositional awareness, and the acceptance of paradox (picture a pie with five slices that represent the basic elements in a Christian philosophy of logic. If any of these components are lacking in our reasoning then to that degree we are unwise, which means we are to that degree ungodly. To be a critical thinker is a matter of godliness.

## II. Logical skill

This is the ability to argue intelligently (knowing what you are doing; knowing what logic is at its core) with contextual sensitivity, presuppositional awareness, and a submissive acceptance of paradox.

Christians are duty bound to develop reasoning skills through the study of argument. This may take place in a more or less informal context, but it is needful that we grow in *knowledge of what logic is* at its core. However, the more difficult and more important challenge is to *develop and improve in logical skill* through the study of argument recognition and analysis.

## III. Contextual sensitivity

Of course, to be context sensitive means that we must read Scripture in its context (of the grammar, paragraphs, book, history of redemption), but it also means that we must include how various thinkers use terms and concepts in systematic theology, philosophy, and historical theology. For example, the terminology of “free will” is difficult to define, and in argument, it is difficult for people to preserve fairness and civility regarding the definition of this concept. This subject often spills over from arguing to quarrelling.

At its core (in the history of philosophy and theology), free will refers to the ability to choose between good and evil. Thus, according to this standard definition, a personal being (a responsible person) is only free if they have this ability. Without this ability, the claim is that one not only loses his freedom, but he ceases to be a person, a responsible person.

However, this idea of freedom (*free will*) is unbiblical; it is false and it is wrong. Biblically, freedom refers to the ability to choose what is good. Freedom is incomplete where someone has the ability to choose evil. Thus, the fact that Christians (saints, holy ones) can still sin is not a mark of their freedom; instead, it shows that they are not fully free and their freedom is incomplete. Clearly then, their ability to sin has nothing to do with their freedom. This is the case because 1) freedom for believers is eschatological (Rom. 8.21). 2) The ability to sin showed Adam and Eve’s incompleteness; it revealed the fact that God was testing them. It did not show them to have free will but that they did not yet have complete freedom. 3) The ability to sin shows the remnants of bondage in the Christians life. 4) God is perfectly free and He does not have the ability to choose to sin.

There is more to discuss here, but this point is clear: for the reader to understand this writer’s claim that free will is unbiblical, he must grab hold of the definition the writer is using. Otherwise, understanding will fall short and reactions, critiques, and counter argument will miss the mark of accuracy as well. In other words, the reader will interact with this subject in some unwise way, which means that he will fail in that degree to be a critical thinker. Note that understanding and properly critiquing in a godly way says nothing about truth or error *per se*; that comes through the process of striving after wisdom on the basis of wise principles of a Christian philosophy of logic.

#### IV. Open-minded humility

In order to tackle this subject (a philosophy logic) and all theological subjects with the right attitude (in reverence to the Lord Jesus Christ), the Christian needs a very helpful cluster of graces summarized in the principle of open-minded humility.

Acts 17:10-11 is a backdrop for explaining open-minded humility. The Jewish Bereans confronted teachings on the Bible that were extremely different from their views to date. Luke describes them to be of "noble character" because they eagerly examined Paul's message. The Berean spirit equates with a mindset in dealing with differences, the time when emotions run high. When something affects us deeply, that is the time when we need clear-headedness the most. In this context, the attitude of the Bereans is a model for Christians to emulate. With other related passages in mind (such as "test all things...hold the good, 1 Thess. 5.21), it leads to the open-minded humility model.

Open-minded humility subdivides into two important areas: openness and humility. Each area has a number of ingredients, which together make up a deliciously baked open-minded humility pie. As we go through them, note how a person could have some of these ingredients and still not have true openness.

## 1. *Open-Minded Humility*

First, we can sketch the ingredients of openness. There are at least four and they are all needed or closed-mindedness results. As we go through them note how you could have some ingredients and still not have openness. Also note the quip that calls us to broad-mindedness: "Some people are so narrow that if they turn sideways, they disappear!" Face to face they may look broad shouldered but when they turn, look out! They can be razor sharp and cut deeply.

1) The first ingredient is comparison.

It contrasts with the following: "Don't talk to me about religion or politics." "Don't confuse me with the facts." Comparison is up front in openness, even with views we perceive to be wrong! Consider how we view the same facts in different ways in the well-known duck-rabbit illustration in which the viewer sees either a duck or a rabbit, and can adjust his perspective from seeing one to seeing the other. How do we know if we should see a duck or a rabbit (or both)? We must get the point of view of the author of the facts. Developing open-minded humility includes engaging the mind from different perspectives to rule out one and rule in another where necessary. It may be a process with some fluidity at times (of being unsure, or of wavering on the same idea). Still, there is value and privilege in receiving exposure to other views. We get a rich vein of perspective from church history (past and present), an inside view not just that of an outsider, and a varied diet. This is good because variety is a spice to life.

A quote from Silas Mariner illustrates the blind-sidedness we experience when we refuse to disturb ourselves by comparison. "The Squire had been used to parish homage all his life, used to the presupposition that his

family, his tankards, and everything that was his, were the oldest and best; and as he never associated with any gentry higher than himself, his opinion was not disturbed by comparison."<sup>1</sup> If we avoid association with other views, perhaps higher than our own, then we may avoid being disquieted in our walk, but this will only last until we stumble and fall due to our willful blindness.

However, comparison is not enough to ensure true openness. Here is why. You could be willing to compare in order to tear the opposing view to shreds! While sitting outside and pondering this principle, I noticed a spider in a large web in the sun. When I walked over to the huge spider, it slipped behind a leaf. I thought, "What an ugly surprise hides behind that leaf! Open-minded humility will not spin webs to trap others. True openness does not operate with an ugly and feigned piety that tends to hurt and humiliate by showing others wrong and ourselves right. This kind of "piety" hides an ugly meanness by which we devour people with our words. This ought not to be so (James 3.10).

2) We need more than comparison.

We also need empathy to be truly open. This accentuates comparing that looks for the good; at least some good, however little might be expected. This involves a training of the mind that includes testing all to hold to the good and having your senses exercised to discern between good and evil (1 Thess 5.21, note the larger context of pastoral care beginning at v. 12; cf. Heb. 5.14). This is a thought-provoking question to ask in this regard, "Can you meaningfully understand something without empathy?" But this is not enough to make one broad-minded because you could say, "Okay, I will compare and do so empathically, but only one time, you get one crack at it and that's it." The additional quality of dialogue is required for true openness.

3) Third, we need "counter question and question."

What does beginning with "counter question" imply? A process of dialogue is already going on: there is a claim, a question, and a counter question already on the table. Now to the table comes a question regarding the counter question. This is the "Pete and Re-Pete" principle in dialogue over time. They did not build Rome in a day, nor do we edify the people of God in a day. Learning takes time under the teaching of the Holy Spirit through pastors as frail human instruments. Nevertheless, they must work hard to handle the work accurately and to refute that which contradicts the truth (2 Tim 2.14-15, "remind...rightly handling the word of truth"; Titus 1.9, "give instruction in sound doctrine...rebuke those who contradict it"). Most of all, they must do their work with humility,

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<sup>1</sup> George Eliot, *Silas Marner*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1899), 87.

patience, and gentleness without being quarrelsome (2 Tim 2.24-25). In a word, they must argue vigorously without quarrelling!

But all these do not make for open-mindedness if we stiff-arm and polarize the situation by a subjective posture. This closes down discussion. The subjective posture manifests itself in statements like the following: "I know I am right" and "I know you're wrong." In addition, it can be subtle (it can be conveyed in tone, gesture, or in overall approach). For example, some students never ask questions for clarification, information, and learning, instead, they only offer objections and alternatives. "There is a time to be a student" is a lesson sometimes difficult to apply. Some students are not content to listen for even a class period, let alone for a time long enough to hear a full presentation of the view they oppose. They must disagree; they must express their disagreement immediately, they must relay the other side even before the whole picture they oppose is given (they interrupt flow of thought and thus divide and conquer by fragmentation).

4) Therefore, fourth, we need an objective posture.

This refers to how we carry ourselves in discussion. Objective means we try to steer away from saying, "I believe," "My view is" and we try to concentrate attention on the issues at hand (depersonalizing where possible). We will pursue clear definition, historical perspective, be context sensitive (get speaker's or writer's perspective, definitions of terms, etc., to receive what he presents, fairly and fully). It is "reasons oriented" rather than "conclusions oriented" (emphasize process versus conclusion). We will say, "I may be wrong, but here is why one might hold x" (even here, we try not to say why "I" hold x). "Let's talk about the whys and wherefores." "Correct me if I'm wrong." "Please, correct me where I am wrong." These comments depolarize, invite further discussion, and welcome counter-question. This objective approach opens up discussion rather than closing it down.

C. S. Lewis made a statement that has the effect of defining open-minded humility: "I like my Christianity as I like my whisky, straight." This defines Christian broad-mindedness as an attitude that says, "Give me the whole picture, both the easy and the hard stuff, undiluted."<sup>2</sup> For example, the doctrines of grace have some difficult aspects

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<sup>2</sup> Here are some questions for personal reflection that summarize a humble openness that should govern Christian learning. Do you listen looking for the good? Do you immediately go into a counteraction mode (recall how difficult it may be to catch ourselves eating impulsively)? Do you only counteract? Do you listen with empathy looking for the whole picture and for the greatest clarity? Do you simply challenge or do you inquire for clarification? Do you read good representatives of the view you oppose? Can you outline the best case for the view you do not hold? Cf. what Vanhoozer calls interpretive virtues or dispositions of the mind that arise from the motivation for understanding: honesty, openness, attention, and obedience, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 376-77. From the outset we must recognize that we have a hermeneutical circle here in that the open-minded humility virtues are on one hand part of the means through which we receive the blessing of the Spirit and on the other hand they are themselves blessings given by the Spirit. At the least, we can untangle this paradox by depending prayerfully on the Spirit to create new hearts within

that are hard to understand (2 Pet 3.16) and hard to hear without complaint (Rom 9.18-21). However, we must not complain against God but submit ourselves to Him, to His sovereignty with adoring wonder. Therefore, in the first place, a philosophy of logic, that is, principles regarding the right use of logic, includes an openness of heart to the Lord to receive all He has said whatever the difficulty.

Closed-mindedness puts logic into a straight jacket of “invincible ignorance.” Also, note the quip that calls us to broad-mindedness: “Some people are so narrow that if they turn sideways, they disappear!” Face to face, they may look broad shouldered but when they turn on you, eek! They can be razor sharp and cut deeply. Open-mindedness is critical to good conversation in which godly people seek to build up one another.

## 2. Open-Minded *Humility*

In our context, humility involves the right use of the *mind*. This is an aspect of loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind. One does not have open-minded humility if he does not engage the mind and engage it critically (one ought not to be so open-minded that his or her brains fall out: one should have answers, 1 Pet. 3:15).

Looked at this way, as mindedness, the open-minded humility pie includes presuppositional self-awareness. Presuppositions enter this discussion in the use of logic or critical thinking in a self-critical way. The ultimate expression of humble-mindedness or humility in our use of reason and logic is the submission of ourselves, of our reasoning selves to Christ speaking in Scripture. This necessitates the acceptance of paradox. Another way of speaking about a Christian use of logic is to substitute thinking, reasoning, or meditating for the word logic.

Four basic ingredients make up humility. These virtues are of supreme importance for the right use of logic at a basic level. As we consider these ingredients, remember, there is a right kind of humble pie to eat without getting sick.

1) First, there must be awareness.

That is, awareness and acknowledgement of the “hidden man” problem (the mask-wearing problem, hiding from ourselves, hiding from our sinful selves; as Augustine said, we put ourselves behind our backs so that we will not see how foul we are). The point here is the personal recognition that sin is *my* problem. We must each face this squarely before the Lord or we are not humble.

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us and by cultivating these virtues through diligent effort. For Vanhoozer this means attentive listening to the Author of the text with a willingness to be changed by reading which “develops the interpretive virtues” and these virtues “help us become better readers,” 377.

2) Second, there is risk.

We must be willing to take the risk of being wrong. Pride keeps us from candidness lest someone shows others and us where we are wrong. We must be willing to admit it when we are "wrong"! The word just does not want to come out. However, it is good to put our reasons for what we believe on the table in public view. This helps us see them better, to see strengths and weaknesses in our thinking better; it helps us see what others offer in critique and as alternatives. Of course, such a process of exchange gives clearer and clearer perspective that runs the risk of showing our thinking to be wrong. Knowing that may happen, we still engage with others "out of reverence for Christ" (Eph 5.21).

3) Third, an element of distrust is part of the idea of humility.

This refers to a basic distrust of one's self. The intent here is not an ostrich extreme; instead, it is a focus on the self in which we use language that indicates a seasoned inward view. We will use language like this: "Maybe, I don't have it all together. I need more perspective. I must suspend judgment on this or that until I get a better handle on it, especially regarding something new and different." Or we may say, "Although I have been through all the important arguments for x, I can always do so again, besides, I may have missed something along the way." Circumstances and consideration of the needs of others may call us to revisit stopping points of arguments that we passed long ago, but we honor the call in honor to Christ, to the gospel, and to our neighbors in need.

4) Fourth, a preventative love is part of being humble.

Humility is having qualities of love that are opposite to pride. Love prevents a) scorn, making others feel small or worthless around you. Some people exude a radius about themselves that says, "You are not worthy to come into my presence" (a nose in the air attitude: "don't trouble the bubble"). Love prevents b) an arrogance that says, "I have all the answers, no one else's opinion is worth consideration." We should have answers (1 Pet 3.15), and we should engage in earnest refutation (Titus 1.9), but we must always give due consideration to other views (to other people and their views). If they do not give us due consideration, then we must strive after patience and gentleness without quarrelling (2 Tim 2.24-25). In addition, love prevents c) a leveling spirit or destructive criticism. What happens when you tear other people down? You lift self up! If logical criticism is necessary, and often it is, it will emerge from self-criticism (doing something about the telephone pole in one's own eye) and will be gentle (with a speck of dust in the other person's eye; the analogy here concerns the eye with all its sensitivity, Mat 7.3-5).

## V. Self-Critical use of Logic: Presuppositional Self-Awareness

Presuppositions enter this discussion because we are to use logic in a humble way (it is open-minded-humility oriented). For it to be humble, it must be self-critical (thus, we have self-critical thinking and not just critical thinking; we are usually better at the latter than at the former). Moreover, note that a necessary and deep-rooted ingredient in self-critical thinking is being critically aware of that with which you think, which brings us to our use of presuppositions. Without presuppositional self-awareness, we will not have humble mindedness or be self-critical in our thinking.

Presuppositions are beliefs of a particular kind in a hierarchy of beliefs. Not all beliefs are the same. Some have a unique supportive role in holding other beliefs in place. They are like foundations to buildings, if you take away the foundation the superstructure will not remain in place. They subdivide into two types: weak and strong. Weak presuppositions hold up some beliefs but other beliefs hold them in place being more foundational. Think of a superstructure on a foundation that rests on bedrock. The foundation is a weak presupposition. Strong presuppositions are beliefs over which nothing else takes precedence.<sup>3</sup> They are like the bedrock in the building illustration. Presuppositions are comparable with sunglasses. They color all that you see (thus they govern how you see everything), perhaps without noticing it; hence, the need for self-awareness. It is like someone wearing blue tinted glasses and someone else wearing gray tinted glasses. One person says, "I want to prove that that cat is gray. Here is my evidence: this piece of paper is gray and it is the same color as the cat, so the cat is gray." The problem is that all the evidence is already tinted gray by the glasses. To find a solution, we must look *at*, (not just *through*) each pair. This is often very difficult. Each contrary presupposition must be tested and examined to determine if it gives a true representation of reality (or supportive of the very intelligibility of the world that we presuppose when we make claims about it, cf. the proof of proof in the justification of logic).

We need to be able to look at that with which we look, (as a person can do when he tilts his head and sees the line in his bifocals; he can see that with which he sees and which governs what he see).<sup>4</sup> For example, returning to the earlier discussion of free will, we can ask, "Does belief in free will have presuppositional status in a

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<sup>3</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1987), pp. 125-125.

<sup>4</sup> In the famous duck-rabbit drawing the image perceived could be either a duck or a rabbit depending on your perspective at the moment. So we must ask, "how do we know which image is the true one?" We must back up and get more perspective from a wider angle; we must get the perspective of the author of the facts. All biblical interpretation must seek the perspective of the author of the whole, the Holy Spirit. For Vanhoozer this means being open to be changed by personal encounter with the Author of the text of Scripture because in all reading "we encounter an other that calls us to respond," and in the process of reading the true reader becomes a "disciple of the text" who "lays himself or herself open to divine communicative action" and thus to "personal encounter" with God in order to be transformed, *Ibid.*, *Meaning*, 368, 372, 406.



Christian's belief system? How does this look or work out in a practical way? Does this presupposition stand the test of Scripture? Finally, what is the ultimate presupposition of the Christian worldview?

The ultimate presupposition of the Christian worldview is belief in God speaking through Christ by the Spirit in the Bible (for short: it is belief in Christ speaking in Scripture). The ultimate presupposition for the non-Christian is belief in the autonomy and self-sufficiency of human experience and reason (cf. Col 2.8, man-centered and creature-centered versus being God-centered and depending on Christ). Therefore, the ultimate presupposition for the non-Christian is belief in human autonomy, which refers to claiming independence from God in some way or another. What results is the contrast of theonomy (God's law) versus autonomy (self-law), and this ethical posture asserts that logic is the ultimate standard for truth. Notably, this assertion is moral and theoretical at the same time: ethics and epistemology are inseparable in such a way that true knowledge is only attainable by submission to Christ.

Consider the example of an atheist and a Christian who agree against abortion but disagree on capital punishment. The Christian holds to the latter based on Genesis 9.6. Both have the same presupposition of the sanctity of life. Thus, the atheist argues for the preservation of life from "the womb to the tomb" opposing abortion and euthanasia as well as capital punishment. Why does the Christian favor capital punishment despite his belief in the sanctity of life, and how do we account for this difference with the atheist? The answer is not in the "common" presupposition regarding the sanctity of life. These views diverge because belief in the sanctity of life is a weak presupposition that depends for its existence and its shape on the diverging strong presuppositions that hold it in place. For the non-Christian, the strong presupposition is belief in the autonomy and self-sufficiency of human reason and experience. Because of this strong presupposition, to be consistent, the non-Christian must respect human life across the board. For the Christian, the strong presupposition is belief in God speaking in Scripture. Since God is the life-giver par excellence as creator and sustainer of everything, His word regarding capital punishment is final in the matter. Therefore, because God designed and governs the sanctity of life, the unlawful taking of a human life demands "life for life" regarding men and women, His image bearers (Gen 1.26; 9.6).

Therefore, it bears repeating that a self-critical use of logic is necessary to a humble use of logic, and a central ingredient in self-critical reasoning is presuppositional self-awareness. We discussed two aspects of a philosophy of logic and one more remains, the relationship of paradox to a believing use of logic. In this relationship, logic, that is, logic's user is humbled to the utmost and the bearing of this on spiritual renewal should be evident: The Spirit mends and renews the broken heart of true humility by His sovereign grace.

## VI. Most Humble Use of Logic: Accepting Paradox

### 1. Definition

As we enter the domain of paradoxical thinking, let me begin with a definition.<sup>5</sup> A paradox is an apparent contradiction. [fn(cf. a brief and helpful discussion of this theme by Hoekema in *Saved by Grace*, pp. 5-7. However, Hoekema's approval of citations of Dowey on Calvin mistakenly defines paradoxes as logical inconsistencies and incompatibilities, p. 6). It grows from the notion of a contradiction, for which there is almost universal recognition in the history of Western philosophy. Outside of the kind of thinking we have inherited in our culture, some people try to make sense of statements like "you are to meditate on one hand clapping." However, this example shows that one of the reasons that contradiction is wrong is that it is meaningless and blocks communication. You cannot make sense of "one hand clapping." Try to clap with only one hand; it becomes "one hand waving." It is ambiguous (you can "clap" one hand against something) but what is meant is "clap your hands together but only use one hand" (trying it I cannot even keep one hand still!). That is contradiction. It breaks down communication; very often, it breaks down honest communication.

However, no one is allowed contradiction. It is ethically wrong. We have argued this ethical dimension in the justification of logic. Simply put: we are to be like God as His image and likeness in the wholeness of what makes us tick as human beings, created in His image, male and female. God is logical because He is truth. If there were contradictions in God's knowledge, then some of His knowledge would be false, He would not be the truth, and He would not be God.

Therefore, to fulfill our role on earth receiving God's communication to us in nature and in Christ, we ought to be logical, consistent, and non-contradictory in our thinking. It is an "ought to"; it is an ethical ought. Being logical is being godly. It is God-like. It is good and proper. It is required of us not only academically or intellectually but also morally and spiritually. Granted, not everyone has the same mental taste buds for logic due to their inherited predisposition and to their training. Nevertheless, we all use it everyday. If we did not use it at all, then we would not make sense to ourselves or to others in anything we said or did (with great confusion "I'm going to the store" could mean, "You take a nap" or anything else!).

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. John Frame on Van Til's use of logic, "The Problem of Theological Paradox," in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective*, ed. Gary North, (Vallecito, CA.: Ross House Books, 1979), 320-329

Here is an important rub: we can all improve our reasoning skills. Moreover, we ought to improve our reasoning skills where it is possible. It is one thing to have poor logic; it is another to have a poor interest in improvement (as a teacher of a college course in logic I have discouraged students from going into law as a career not simply because they showed poor skill in logic, but because they showed poor interest in improving their logical skill).

To live by Scripture as God's image bearers, it is necessary that we improve our reasoning skills. One very important way is by strenuous study of the arguments in Scripture (cf. the arguments in, and the argument of, the book of Romans). How else are we going to obey the Lord when He says, "Come now let us reason together"? To place a healthy emphasis on logical and critical thinking is a hurdle all its own. However, once we jump this obstacle, we face other ones. This is not an end; it is a beginning.

This brings us back to apparent contradictions. Note the key word, *apparent*. We must not tolerate contradictions in our thinking, but we must come to terms with apparent contradictions, which are beliefs (or claims) that seem to be inconsistent with one another. Importantly, we know that there is no inconsistency between them because God has given them to us in the Bible. Because it is God's word, the Bible has no contradictions. As the word of God to man, it should not surprise us to find apparent contradiction or paradoxes. How then do we know that something is a paradox? One way to answer this question is by comparing paradoxicality with a pie and by directing our focus to its ingredients.

## 2. Ingredients of the Paradox Pie

How do we know something is a paradox? Here are some general ingredients (perhaps these may be likened to both ingredients and baking instructions).

- 1) There are two claims or beliefs. Let us call them threads.
- 2) Both are in Scripture; they are threads of biblical teaching, threads of truth.
- 3) They seem to contradict each other. This means we have difficulty seeing how these threads fit together in the whole fabric of Bible truth. It means that human reason has trouble accepting one of the teachings because of the corresponding paradoxical thread.
- 4) The imminent danger, in our analogy of a baking danger, is that we will tend in various ways to do damage to one ingredient or the other by our reasoning. Our logic may inform us that A contradicts B so both cannot

be true. Then we will try to eliminate one or the other. We may take a biblical truth and use it to deny another biblical truth! It is like reading directions that say, "Bake at 350 and do not bake at 350 degrees" presumably in the same conditions and at the same time. On this presumption, we intuitively eliminate one requirement or the other.

5) Failure in the handling of paradoxes shows up in the twisting of words and the forcing of passages beyond clear contextual warrant. Sometimes we will have to debate about what is clear. What may seem clear to me may not seem clear to you. Nonetheless, in a rough and ready way, we can say that one thing is critical to clarity in reading a passage. The flow of a given context is super-important. We must saturate ourselves with a passage by prayerful meditation and reflection in order to absorb the pattern of thought. We must work hard at grasping the writer's purpose in a verse within a paragraph, within a book in the New Testament, within the Bible, within the history of redemption, remembering that the ultimate author is the Holy Spirit. This is saying that context is king, especially the immediate flow of thought within the larger framework of biblical teaching as a whole. This is easier to say than to do: we need to practice the art of careful contextual thinking. We need to expend much effort to absorb the patterns present in the word of God (cf. the outline of sound words, 2 Tim 1.13).

We might illustrate this by reference to the gears in a mechanical clock. Taking a word or phrase out of context is like removing a gear from a clock. When this happens, things will not mesh properly and you will not be able to read the proper time. Both "taking away" and "adding in" mess up the mechanism. Switching analogies, we can say that we must be concerned with every relevant thread that intersects the piece of fabric at any given time; otherwise, our work of interpretation will come apart at the seams. Paradoxical truths are threads of truth that are clearly and tightly woven together in the fabric of Scripture even though *how* they can co-exist in the same fabric may be difficult or even impossible to grasp.

### 3. Implications

The fact of paradox implies a number of things for the Christian.

First, careful, diligent and seasoned interpretation is presupposed. A paradox does not exist unless the threads in tension with one another actually exist. Therefore, approved workmanship and prayerful meditation are essential in the discovery and interpretation of paradoxical truths (2 Tim 2.15); an awareness of paradoxicality itself is vital in the process of identifying truths that make up an actual paradox.

Second, facing the fact of paradoxicality demands that we exercise faith. The saint must take God at His word even when, and especially when, things spoken by the Holy Spirit are difficult to accept or seem to contradict

each other. Again, we should stress the need for humility; this is the most humble use of logic: to bow to God speaking through Christ by the Spirit in all of Scripture. Paradoxes are threads of truth that have a hidden quality about them that demand a humble seeking faith. Many twist the Scriptures to their own destruction. Therefore, wise (godly) critical (most humbly critical) thinking demands that we submit to all the threads of biblical truth.

Third, wrestling with paradoxes in Scripture is wrestling like Jacob with the Lord. In prayerful persistence, we wrestle with God for His blessing. Ultimately, we must be humble in the presence of the covenant-keeping God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We end up on our faces in worship. Logic bows to its Creator. We submit our reason, we submit our reasoning selves to God speaking truths that soar above our thoughts like the heavens above the earth. Truly, such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high and I cannot attain unto it (cf. Ps 139, especially v. 6). Still it reaches the ear, inflames the heart, and enlivens the believer's walk in the steps of the Spirit (Gal 2.14; 5.16).

For clarification, it will be helpful to list some of the major paradoxes of Scripture with some brief comments. With each, we tend to do injustice to one claim because of another. We have difficulty seeing how both are true. We cannot resolve much.

#### 4. A Paradox List

This list of biblical paradoxes is not exhaustive. It is representative of truths that are slices of the pie of Scriptural paradox. Each slice has all the ingredients mentioned earlier (another addition to the list is the foreordination of evil and God's holiness; He wills the existence of evil but is not the author of sin; cf. Calvin on this point as reported by Warfield, *Studies in Theology*, 189).

##### 1) The Bible: God's Word and man's word

We want to say, "If God's thoughts are not our thoughts, then if it is His word it is not man's word." Nevertheless, and this is central, He tells us that the Bible is His speech and He tells us that it is the word of Isaiah, Peter and Paul.

##### 2) Jesus: God and man

If He is God, how can He be a man? If a man, how can He be God? Scripture teaches both; they do not contradict each other, but contradiction does seem to be present.

##### 3) God's Decree and God's Desire

God tells us of His decree or plan to save particular sinners out of the fallen human family. He elects some for salvation and passes over others. To raise a question of justice here is different from discerning a paradox. There is no injustice with God since no one deserves salvation. Paradox enters the picture here when we find that the Bible

also tells us that God desires that all people come to repentance for salvation. Therefore, we tend to think, if there really is an unconditional election, then this desire cannot be true or if this desire is true, then unconditional election has to be false. However, both are true. They appear to be contradictory, but we must accept both and live by both because God gives us both in His holy word.

Similarly, God's desire to save all and the work of Christ on the cross to efficaciously save some deserve classification together as a paradox. The parallel comes to expression, for example, in the debates where people use the same argument against election that they use against efficacious redemption. Namely, they reason that since God desires the salvation of all, then there can be no election of some and since God desires the salvation of all, then there can be no efficacious redemption of some.

#### 4) Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility<sup>6</sup>

Sovereignty refers to the kingship and rule of God over all that He created and made. He is in control of all things. Nothing is outside of His control. He has foreordained whatsoever happens in time. Then we ask, "If this is so, how can man be responsible?" Does this not make man a puppet on a string? No, he is not a puppet on a string. True, God planned and controls all things, and God tells us that man is responsible. Both facts are true and we strain to grasp how it can be so.

### 5. Balancing principles

A subset of the paradox of divine sovereignty and human responsibility is the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit and human responsibility in spiritual renewal. In this connection, we need some balancing principles.

1) First, we need balance with regard to biblical teaching, as expressed by Calvin, between earnestly pursuing all that the Holy Spirit has given and closing the way to inquiry at the precise point where the Lord has closed his holy lips:

Scripture is the school of the Holy Spirit, in which, as nothing is omitted that is both necessary and useful to know, so nothing is taught but what is expedient to know. Therefore we must guard against depriving believers of anything disclosed . . . in Scripture, lest we seem either wickedly to defraud them of the blessing of their God or to accuse and scoff at the Holy Spirit for having published what it is in any way profitable to suppress. Let us, I say, permit the Christian man to open his mind and ears to every utterance of God directed to him, provided it be with such restraint that when the Lord closes his holy lips, he also shall at once close the way to inquiry<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Note that the paradox is not "Divine Sovereignty and Human Free Will." If we define free will as the opposite of total depravity, then it means that the natural man has the ability to believe the gospel logically prior to being born from above. The position adopted here is that there is no paradox between divine sovereignty and free will because a paradox involves two truths and the doctrine of free will is false.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Ibid*, 2.3.21.21, sec. 3: 924.

Calvin then calls for equilibrium in our walk in the Spirit where we are to "follow God's lead always." We are "not investigate what the Lord has left hidden in secret, that we should not neglect what he has brought into the open, so that we may not be convicted of excessive curiosity on the one hand, or of excessive ingratitude on the other."<sup>8</sup>

2) Second, having this commitment regarding the things revealed and the secret things firmly in mind, we must balance this responsibility (itself balanced as stated above) with the teaching of Scripture that renewal by the Spirit is His sovereign work. This is concisely put by Calvin when he says that no one benefits of God's word unless the Father "either gives eyes or opens them"<sup>9</sup> by the illuminating work of the Spirit:

If we are not ashamed of the gospel we must confess what is there plainly declared. God, by His eternal goodwill, which has no cause outside itself, destined those whom he pleased to salvation, rejecting the rest; those whom He dignified by gratuitous adoption he illumined by His Spirit, so that they receive the life offered in Christ, while others voluntarily disbelieve, so that they remain in darkness destitute of the light of faith.<sup>10</sup>

All these paradoxes challenge us to a remarkable depth. They challenge the very place of reason in giving a reason for our hope (1 Pet. 3:15). The danger is that we give logic, and thus the reasoning self, an ultimate status as a standard of truth.

## 6. Deuteronomy 29.29

Based on Deuteronomy 29.29, at least two relevant biblical principles must govern our approach to Scripture in general and paradox in particular. a) First, some things belong to God and He reveals other things (Deut. 29:29a). His thoughts are far above ours and demand acceptance with submissive hearts and minds as creatures before our Creator. Otherwise, we run the risk of exalting the creature above the Creator. b) Second, all revealed truth is clear and beneficial. It is for us and for our children (Deut. 29:29b). All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for instruction (2 Tim. 3:16-17). In this light, the paradoxes are clear doctrines: God's sovereignty is a clear doctrine, and man's responsibility is a clear doctrine. God's desire for all is a clear teaching and so it the efficacy of the cross. Granted, some teachings in Scripture are difficult to understand (2 Pet. 3:16), and we face paradoxicality in how we bring them together.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, sec. 4: 925.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 1.2.21, sec. 21:281.

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 58, italics mine.

However, we should note that with the areas of difficulty there is the great promise of profitability.

Further attention to the example of Jesus will bring out some of the value of reflecting on the biblical paradoxes. In the end, this must lead us to adoring worship of the risen Lord of glory.

## 7. The Example of Jesus

How can Jesus be both fully God and fully man in one person, concerning whom we must neither divide the person nor confound the natures? In the history of Christian thought, many have denied that Jesus is a man on the basis that He is God and others have denied that He was God on the ground of His true humanity. How does a humble use of logic proceed? It follows the biblical text on the humiliation of Christ (birth, eating and sleeping, growing and learning; the Word became flesh) and affirms his humanity. It listens to the references that characterize Jesus as existing before his incarnation and His equality with the Father (the Word was God; I forgive you). Moreover, it accents the biblical teaching that that Jesus is a single person. The same one that existed before the creation of the world is bound to the limits of time, space, and suffering while at the same time He continues to uphold all things by the word of his power! No wonder Matthew reports of Him, "no one knows the Son except the Father" (Mat 11.27). Even the Christian, the one to whom the Father has revealed the Son (cf. Matt. 16:16 -17), cannot know Jesus exhaustively though He does know Him truly by the Father's gift of "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation" to enlighten the eyes of the believer's heart (Eph. 1.17-18). Meditation on the Scriptural presentation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ stretches our reasoning capacities to their limits. However, we know there is no contradiction because the Holy Spirit is the author of Scripture; we have God's speech in Scripture and He does not contradict Himself. In addition, this stretching of reason to its limits is not disheartening because the gracious renewing work of the Spirit enlightens the eyes of our hearts in order that we may "know him better" (Eph. 1.17).

## 8. Reflections on the fact of paradox

The fact of paradox reminds us that total consistency of aspects of Scripture is beyond our reach. There is mystery. Our knowledge will necessarily have loose ends but without contradiction. This is humbling. On the other hand, the rationalist must have all the loose ends tied together.

Why do we face paradox? Our knowledge of God's thoughts is true in that it actually conforms to what God is thinking. However, it is not exhaustive because 1) we are finite creatures and 2) because it is God's sovereign



decision to reveal what he chooses to reveal while keeping other things, some we could presumably grasp, to Himself. Paradox is simply a way of saying that our knowledge of God's thoughts is limited. He has given creation interconnectedness in his wise plan wherein everything dovetails together, but we do not know all the interconnections. We cannot see the entire dovetailing.<sup>11</sup>

Given these limits, do we have true knowledge? Due to God's gift of logic, to His placement of logic in a meaningful relation to the facts He first interprets, we can in fact think His thoughts after him. We do know truly, though we do not know exhaustively.<sup>12</sup> How do we know that there is no contradiction in Scripture? God cannot deny himself; He is truth, in Him is no inconsistency or contradiction; so, in His word there is no actual contradiction.

In one sense, admitting paradox is simply another way of saying that God's thoughts are above ours as the heavens are above the earth and it should not surprise us when we face difficulty. What we must do in faithful quest of the truth is pull together biblical data and accept paradox "where it is warranted."<sup>13</sup> Logic is properly used when it is governed by the recognition of our creaturehood and hence by the recognition of the limits of creaturely reasoning. We must acknowledge the distinction between Creator and creature, and thinking this way must control the use of logic because the laws of logic are founded in the character of God (He is truth and thus there can be no contradiction in His knowledge or revelation). Properly used, the laws of logic will reveal no contradiction in the biblical system of truth because as God's revelation it has no real contradiction.

## 9. The question of application

From another angle, the whole problem of paradox turns out to be a question of application because all teaching is for living. Scripture gives clear guidance by the same teachings that seem contradictory, but which we cannot demonstrate by the canons of logic in all the fullness of their consistency. What we do know, we know in truth and in conformity to God's thinking. This guides our conduct even if we cannot reconcile all the interconnections.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> John Frame, *Ibid*, 321.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 40-41.

<sup>13</sup> John Frame, *Ibid*, 323-24. Bassinger, in criticism of theological paradox, states a similar position regarding the identification of truth as prior to determining whether or not biblical statements are contradictory, David Bassinger, "The Postulate of Paradox: Does Revelation Challenge Logic?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30, no. 2 (June 1978): 213. For Van Til and Frame, this simply underscores the point that faithfulness to the text is paramount.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 328.

The apparently contradictory truths are interdependent and applicable. Consider how we can apply the dual nature doctrine of the Lord Jesus. As man, He could and did die for sinners. However, this would be of no avail to save if He were not also God. As God, He was able to endure the eternal punishment of sinners in His own body on the tree! Being God, He was able to pay an infinite price on the cross. Hence, Scripture speaks of the blood of God! Because of both sides of this paradox, we worship Him, the Son of God who came from glory to claim a people given to Him by the Father and who as the Son of man is one with us. Still this Immanuel, this one with us, is God with us! Finally, we must fall on our knees and worship the Lord Jesus. This is the greatest use of logic. Here logic is at its best when the reasoning self bows in submission to the risen Savior and there finds renewal by the work of the Holy Spirit through the words of the Holy Spirit.

## 10. Calvin on Pastors and Paradoxes

Before we leave this area of paradoxicality, it will be good to recall the place of the work of pastors (and by analogy all Christians). One of the means God appointed for our work is the consistent (i.e., logical) preaching of the word by pastors. In this context, it will serve us well to consider some thoughts from Calvin on pastors and paradoxes. This will remind us that belief in the sovereignty of God cannot be divorced from responsible, consistent, and thus logical conduct in the life of the church in both the giving and receiving of ministry of the word. Nevertheless, remarkably, the summons here is to a most humble use of logic in submission to God with a teachable spirit.

Calvin stresses that it is God's will to teach us through human means as we "grow up into manhood solely under the education of the church."<sup>15</sup> Thus, preaching and public assemblies are not superfluous. Instead, God, by ordaining them, has shown them to be necessary and highly approved. Calvin writes:

On the one hand, he proves our obedience by a very good test when we hear his ministers speaking just as if he himself spoke. On the other, he also provides for our weakness in that he prefers to address us in human fashion through interpreters in order to draw us to himself, rather than to thunder at us and drive us away.<sup>16</sup>

He notes further that we do not want to exaggerate the dignity of ministers and give to them "what belongs to the Holy Spirit."<sup>17</sup> Thus, for balance Calvin puts the relevant passages into two categories. There are passages that express that God is the author of preaching, that God joins His Spirit with it, and that promises His benefits to it (i.e.

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<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.4.1, sec. 5: 1017.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 1018.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, sec. 6: 1020.

Jn 15.16; 1Cor 4.15; 2 Cor 3.6). Another category contains passages where God separates Himself from all outward helps and "claims for himself alone both the beginnings of faith and its entire course."<sup>18</sup> This balance comes out in the paradox of illumination:

Surely we ought to remember those statements in which God, ascribing to Himself illumination of mind and renewal of heart, warns that it is sacrilege for man to claim any part of either for himself. Meanwhile, anyone who presents himself in a teachable spirit to the ministers ordained by God shall know by the result that with good reason this way of teaching was pleasing to God, and also that with good reason this yoke of moderation was imposed on believers.<sup>19</sup>

It is a paradox of illumination because a) man cannot claim "any part" of either illumination or renewal for himself, and b) man's responsibility is to present himself in a teachable spirit in hope of good result. A bold balance of divine sovereignty and human responsibility comes to expression in this way of connecting them without doing injustice to either. The key is rigorous attention to Scripture alone as the steps of the Spirit to follow.

## Conclusion

Indeed, by definition, the Christian travels the road of life in firm commitment to Christ as his prophet, priest, and king in every step he takes (Mat 11.28-30; cf. 1 Thess 1.5; 2.13). Submission to the risen Lord, submission of the reasoning self to Him is central for the wisdom required in the pursuit of wisdom. To have wisdom as a Christian doing any science, to have wisdom in seeking wisdom, we need to be critical thinkers. Accordingly, we seek wisdom wisely (in a godly manner) when we cultivate and apply contextual sensitivity, presuppositional awareness, open-minded humility, logical skill, and acceptance of paradox. In seeking wisdom, we are seeking God; we are doing theology and we begin to answer the question Jesus asks of us, "Who do you *think* I am?"

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, i.e. 1 Cor. 3.7; 15.10.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 1021.

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