As evangelicals all of us, I suppose, bristle indignantly if we are charged with adherence to a fideistic irrationalism. A fideistic irrationalism indeed! Our Gospel, we vehemently assert, is the embodiment of reason—belief-fu reason, to be sure, sanctified reason, if one prefers so to characterize it, but reason nevertheless. Intolerant of contradiction and wary of anything akin to a Kantian antinomy, we delight to quote John McTaggart’s dictum: “None ever went about to break logic, but in the end logic broke him.” Proclaiming a God Who cannot contradict Himself and Whose very nature therefore supplies the laws of thought, we argue—most of us, at any rate—that our faith ought to be accepted precisely because of its intellectual cogency. Wholeheartedly we endorse what one of my own professors, Edwin Lewis, wrote: Christianity

is capable of being construed into a Weltanschaung—a total view of things—to which there is nowhere any comparison. The Christian view, even when not accepted as “revelation,” but regarded as solely the result of human reflection may still be shown to be infinitely more “reasonable” than anything given us by naturalism, vastly more satisfying, and profoundly congruous with man’s own deepest nature. 

Yet as an evangelical I find myself wondering whether we self-confessed Bibli­cists are unintentionally disloyal to the logic of Biblicism. I wonder whether we are so en­snared by alien principles that we refuse to take seriously the postulate of paradox, a postulate without which evangelicalism ceases to have an evangel. I wonder again and again whether we are prepared to follow—shall I say logically?—the consequences of Paul’s avowal:

The preaching of the cross is to them that perish, foolishness; but unto us which are saved, it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness: But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God (I Corinthians 1:18-24).

Yes, I seriously wonder whether we had better not reconstruct our apologetic and, instead of keeping paradox hidden from sight like a deformed imbecile of whom we are ashamed, welcome it proudly into the very throne-room of theology—a kind of Cinderella at long last discovered and exalted to her rightful place. So, begging the indulgence of my system-minded brethren, let me do some thinking out loud.

All of us recognize that every theologian by virtue of belonging to the human race suffers some measure of ideological contamination; his perspective is inevitably slanted by the relativities of his locus in history and culture. As evangelicals we also recognize that every theologian is a sinner, noetically distorted his sin. We recognize too that every theologian is a creature and consequently has a sadly circumscribed knowledge of his Creator. We not only recognize this: we insist upon it. We contend that whenever any mere man—finite, blinded by sin, imprisoned at
one point in the space-time continuum—attempts to understand God, he encounters the impenetrable, the inscrutable, the incomprehensible. In a word, he encounters mystery. Here it is, that we reverently repeat a passage from Isaiah: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8). And here it is that we may profitably employ a distinction made by Gabriel Marcel, the distinction between problem and mystery: A problem is something which I meet, which I find complete before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. But a mystery is something in which I myself am involved, and it can therefore only be thought of as “a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and its initial validity.”2 A genuine problem is subject to an appropriate technique by the exercise of which it is defined; whereas a mystery, by definition, transcends every conceivable technique. It is, no doubt, always possible (logically and psychologically) to degrade a mystery so as to turn it into a problem. But this is a fundamentally vicious proceeding, whose springs might perhaps be discovered in a kind of corruption of the intelligence.3

But while adopting Marcel’s distinction, we must not reduce the mysteries of our faith to celestial detective stories. By no means! Dorothy Sayers, who is a peerless writer of murder thrillers as well as a perceptive theologian, points out in The Mind of the Maker that mysteries of the Perry Mason genre differ in four respects from Biblical mysteries. First, “the detective problem is always soluble.” Second, it is “completely soluble” with no loose ends left dangling. Third, it is “solved in the same terms in which it is set.” Fourth, it is “final;” when it has been solved, that winds up the matter.4

Biblical mysteries, however, unlike detective yarns, are never completely solved: as a matter of fact, they are humanly insoluble and remain insoluble to us despite the miracle of revelation. Must we, accordingly, classify Biblical mysteries in the category of unintelligible surds? Quite the reverse! Let E. L. Mascall explain their function. Although the contemplation of a mystery may raise questions which we desire to answer, a mystery is not in itself a question demanding an answer, but an object inviting contemplation. It shares with a problem the character of being something of which we are to a greater or less degree ignorant and with which we wish to become better acquainted; but the activity to which it invites us is not that of standing back and viewing it in detachment as something subject to our condescending investigation, but that of penetrating beneath its surface in an attitude of humble and wondering contemplation. There are in fact three features which belong to a mystery, as I am now using the term. In the first place, on being confronted with a mystery we are conscious that the small central area of which we have a relatively clear vision shades off into a vast background which is obscure and as yet unpenetrated. Secondly, we find, as we attempt to penetrate this background in what I have described as an attitude of humble and wondering contemplation, that the range and clarity of our vision progressively increase but that at the same time the background which is obscure and unpenetrated is seen to be far greater than we had recognised before. It is in fact rather as if we were walking into a fog with the aid of a lamp which was steadily getting brighter; the area which we could see with some distinctness would get larger and larger but so also would the opaque and undifferentiated background in which no detail was yet visible. Thus, in the contemplation of a mystery there go together in a remarkable way an increase both of knowledge and also of what we might call conscious ignorance. The third feature of a mystery to which I want to draw attention is the fact that a mystery, while it remains obscure in itself, has a remarkable capacity of illuminating other things.5

Mystery, in this sense, all of us allow and affirm—impenetrable wonder which baffles while it illuminates. But not all of us—few of my fellow-evangelicals, I suspect—are prepared both to allow and to affirm paradox at the heart of Biblical mystery. Yet I for one am driven to endorse Soren Kierkegaard’s contention: Paradox is a category; everything turns on this point, really. People have been accustomed to talk thus—to say that one cannot understand such and such a thing does not satisfy science which insists on understanding. But it is this point of view which is wrong. One should say, rather, just the opposite: if human knowledge will not admit that there is something which it cannot understand, or, to speak more precisely, something about which it clearly realises that understanding is out of the question, then all is confusion. The problem for human knowledge is to see that there is something else. Human knowledge is normally in a hurry to understand more and more, but if it will at last take the trouble to understand itself, then it must frankly confirm the fact of paradox. Paradox is not a concession but a category, an ontological description expressing the relationship between a personally existent spirit and eternal truth.6

Whatever may be the case in philosophy, in Christianity, as I see it, paradox is not a concession: it is an indispensable category, a sheer necessity—a logical necessity!—if our faith is to be unswervingly Biblical. Are we sure, though, before proceeding further, that we share the same concept of paradox? A Reformed theologian, R. B. Kuiper, has proposed this definition: A paradox is not, as Barth thinks, two truths which are actually contradictory. Truth is not irrational. Nor is a paradox two truths which are difficult to reconcile but can be reconciled before the bar of human reason. That is a seeming paradox. But when two truths, both taught unmistakably in the infallible Word of God, cannot possibly be reconciled before the bar of human reason, then you have a paradox.7 Or to quote Cornelius Van Til, another Reformed theologian: It will readily be inferred what as Christians we mean by antinomies. They are involved in the fact that human knowledge can never be completely comprehensive knowledge. Every knowledge transaction has in it somewhere a reference point to God. Now since God is not fully comprehensible to us we are bound to come into what seems to be contradiction in all our knowledge. Our knowledge is analogical and therefore must be paradoxical ... To the extent that the contradiction that is to be there can be in the nature of the case be no more than a seeming contradiction. If we said that there is real contradiction in our knowledge that we would once more be denying the basic concept of Christian-theism, i.e., the concept of the self-complete universal in God. We should then not merely be saying that there is no complete coherence in our thinking but we should also be saying that there is no coherence in God’s thinking. And this would be the same as saying that there is no coherence or truth in our thinking at all. If we say that the idea of paradox or antinomy is that of real contradiction, we have destroyed all human and all divine knowledge; if we say that the idea of
paradox or antimony is that of seeming contradiction we have saved God's knowledge and therewith also our own. So, to follow Van Til, a paradox is only a seeming contradiction. Agreed. Yet, to follow Kuiper, before the bar of logic Biblical paradox is no mere seeming; it is a contradiction which cannot be broken down by the resources of human logic, not even by the resources of Spirit-illuminated logic—at least in the world which now is. Faith anticipates a future resolution, but faith here and now has no adequate resolution to offer. Thus in his able discussion of divine foreordination and human responsibility, J. I. Packer declares:

The antimony which we face now is only one of a number that the Bible contains. We may be sure that they all find their reconciliation in the mind and counsel of God, and we may hope that in heaven we shall understand them ourselves. But meanwhile, our wisdom is to maintain with equal emphasis both the apparently conflicting truths in each case, to hold them together in the relation in which the Bible itself sets them, and to recognize that here is a mystery which we cannot expect to solve in this world.

But are there such antinomies in the Christian faith? To be Biblically loyal we must postulate propositions which contain logically incompatible statements, doctrines which from the standpoint of reason are contradictory? Undeniably there are such paradoxes; and undeniably, therefore, we must formulate such propositions. We must formulate them, I am convinced, if we are to be Biblically loyal. This, in my judgment, has been done by our forebears who hammered out the historic creeds; for at bottom what are those creeds except distilled paradoxes? Hence we must postulate paradox. Let me rather sketchily indicate why I think this is so.

II.

1.

I mention, first, the ontological paradox of Christianity. For Biblical faith teaches that the ground of all being is the triune God, an ultimate Unity Who is at the same time an ultimate Plurality. What a contradiction this is! And the antimony cannot be reduced to logical consistency unless the dogma is interpreted away symbolically. But Scripture refuses to sanction a symbolic interpretation of this doctrine. Scripture avers that somehow the realities of unity and plurality coexist in the self-contained Trinity.

The illogicality of this dogma has been the target of attack since it was first framed. Typical is F. W. Newman's comment on the creosal assertion that Father, Son, and Spirit are together one indivisible Godhead: "This is certainly as much a contradiction as to say that Peter, James, and John, having each of them every thing that is requisite to constitute a complete man, are yet all together, not three men, but only one man."

Listen now to Luther as he defies logic and holds stubbornly to this revealed truth.

I hear that Christ is of one essence with the Father and that there is, nevertheless, not more than one God. Where can I here set down my foot, find firm ground; how can I conceive or conclude it? It sounds too ridiculous in my ears and does not enter my reason. It is not to be grasped with your reason, you should rather say: When I hear the word sounding from above, then I believe it although I cannot grasp it nor understand it nor let it enter my head, as I can grasp with my reason that two and five are seven and let me tell no one otherwise. But if He should say from above, no, two and five are eight, then I should believe it against my reason and feeling. If I am resolved to judge then I cannot believe, but I am resolved to believe him who judges and decides. To this I cling in life and death, for I trust in him whom I consider wiser and who can count better than I; although I also know it I am going to believe him; what he says I will consider as truth even if the whole world should say otherwise. Thus you must do here: although reason cannot conceive that two persons are one God—it is as if I would say: two are not two, but one is, and reason and reason are here in conflict, nevertheless reason should not play the master nor be the judge and doctor, you rather take off your hat and say: two are one although I cannot see nor understand it, but I believe it. Why? For his sake who said so from above. There, starkly put, is the ontological paradox of the Gospel.

2.

Consider, next, the cosmological paradox. For Biblical faith affirms that the Triune God created the world and that He created it out of nothing—a baffling dogma, this, the inconceivability of which has been emphasized by Donald Baliff in his stimulating work, God Was In Christ.

The Christian idea of creatio ex nihilo . . . sounds absurd. "God created all things out of nothing." Even when taken as answering a more ultimate question, it seems far less satisfactory, far more difficult to state, than the other answers which it is intended to exclude. On the one hand is the dualistic answer which conceives of God as a great artificer taking an already existing raw material and moulding His world out of it. That is quite easy to state. But it is quite a pagan view, and it gives us an unworthy conception of God, a false conception of matter as godless and inherently evil, and therefore ultimately even an inadequate ethic and an inadequate doctrine of immortality. On the other hand is the pantheistic answer, which conceives God as creating all things out of Himself, out of His own substance. This is not really creation, but emanation. Again it is easily stated, and as it lent itself to the great pantheistic systems, so it has lent itself easily to absolute idealism in the modern world. But it also is quite a pagan view, destroying the true attitude of man both to God and to the world. No, says Christian faith, God did not fashion the world out of a raw material which He found, nor did He generate the world out of His own substance. He created all things out of nothing. This is highly paradoxical. It does not seem to be the kind of position that could ever be reached by a process of inference from the phenomena, or that can even be stated without paradox.

Biblical faith does more than affirm the dogma of creatio ex nihilo. It also affirms that as Creator the Triune God is both transcendent and immanent, the impassible Sovereign and Source of the cosmos Who somehow also is not, and particularly as Saviour enters into relationships which must disturb His eternal serenity. Leonard Hodgson has grasped and stated this antimony with challenging insight.

The Christian doctrine of creation must be seen against the unsolved philosophical problem of the relation between time and eternity, between this spatio-temporal universe and the eternal reality which has to be postulated if anything in space and time is to be intelligible. In the Christian doctrine the eternal reality is thought of as personal, as God, and His relation to this universe as the personal activity of creation.
As the ultimate reality, the only self-existent Being, the source of whatever existence, in whatever mode of reality He gives to whatever He creates, God must be thought of as impassible. That technical term of theology is best understood from the grammatical use of the words “active” and “passive” for the two “voices” of verbs. A passive verb is used to state that the subject is acted upon by someone or something else. But as God-in-Himself, the eternal and ultimate reality and source of all existence, God cannot be acted upon by anything than Himself, for He is all that there is. He cannot, therefore, be thought or spoken of in the passive voice. He is impassible.

But when we think of God in relation to His created universe, to which He gives a mode of reality in which it has a relative independence over against itself, we cannot help thinking and speaking of Him in terms of passive verbs. He can be obeyed or disobeyed, worshipped or blasphemed, loved or hated.

Again, when we think of God as the eternally perfect Being, we have to recognize the truth of Plato’s insight in his statement that perfection entails changelessness. But having thought in this way of God-in-Himself, we have to go on to think of God-in-relationship-to-creation as One who can and does call, reject, punish and forgive.

It is this apparent contradiction in the Christian doctrine of God which leads to its rejection by many philosophers. But there is no more satisfactory alternative. The theories which avoid the difficulty do so by ignoring or explaining away either the truth of the Platonic principle, or the reality of the created universe. We do not get rid of the fundamental mystery of human existence by giving up our faith in God.

The apparent contradiction has to be accepted as a genuine antinomy, i.e. we cannot rightly deny either of two truths which we cannot reconcile. We can do no more than speak of God-in-Himself as impassible and of God-in-relationship-to-creation as possible.

We must honestly admit this. Having admitted it, however we may claim two things: (i) it is a doctrine of God which is relevant and adequate to this actual universe, seeing that it embraces the problem presented by the universe which all who think sufficiently deeply about it find insoluble; and (ii) the mystery is acknowledged at the point where, if anywhere, it ought to be, i.e. at the end of the enquiry, where all human thought is baffled.

The paradox to which Hodgson calls attention is italicized by the difficulties theology encounters in discussing the attributes of God. The love are magnified. Little wonder, then, that theology encounters in discussing the attributes of God. The paradox to which Hodgson calls attention is italicized by the difficulties theology encounters in discussing the attributes of God.

God is allowed to remain as the Supreme Cause of the universe and as its eternal upholder. But whatever else has been alleged which implies a relation of God to men—such as his self-revelation, his work of salvation through Christ, and his function as a prayer-hearing and sympathizing Father—has been held in spite of its absolute inconsistency with those other conceptions, viz. of God’s immutability and impassibility. If anything more astonishing than this combination of irreconcilable doctrines in our system, it would be the fact that those who have thus combined them have seemed to be serenely unconscious of the self-contradiction. God’s love they have held to be his most comprehensive attribute, while yet they have declared him to be incapable of having any feeling; though nothing is more obvious than that love is a feeling. He is declared to hate sin; but hatred is a feeling. He is declared to be supremely happy; but happiness is a feeling. He is declared to turn from indignation to forgiveness, when sinners repent; but this would be a change in one who is held to be absolutely unchangeable. He is declared to foreknow future events, and therefore to have determined them; but this makes him exist in time, whereas he has been affirmed to exist out of time.

Nor is that all. These paradoxes are intensified by the Biblical doctrine of a satanic power who really evil who opposes God, a power so formidable that it could be conquered only by the death of incarnate Deity. But how can we reconcile this evil reality with monotheism and yet do justice to the Scriptural data concerning the power of this reality, a malignant will capable of defying God and necessitating the redemptive strategies of Gethsemane and Calvary? It was Karl Heim who made me face up to the cosmological mystery which the revealed doctrine of Satan introduces. Let me, therefore, lay before you the gist of Heim’s argument as he presents it in his book, Jesus: The World’s Perfecter:

It is a priori evident that for an understanding of Christ’s work of redemption there is only one or the other of two possibilities.

Either the satanic power which opposes God on the whole front is reality. Then we cannot understand the entire present situation of the world unless we take this reality into account. The sinister existence of this power is the key to the understanding of the whole situation of the world. Then the redemption of the world cannot be other than the great final war with the power that is hostile to God . . . . Or what Christ, and under His guidance the first Christians, said regarding Satan is deception and mythology. There is no such opponent of God. The idea of Satan is merely a symbolic expression for certain mass-effects which have come into being through adding together many individual decisions by many autonomous individuals. Then we should not allow the devil to appear in the drama of redemption even as a mere cipher. In this case only two parties encounter one another in the reconciliation of the world, between whom a settlement is reached: on the one hand the holy God, on the other side a number of individuals who have transgressed against God’s commandment . . . . That in a world in which God works all things there should be a will that wants to destroy God, is, as we saw, to our minds a Gordian knot which we cannot undo. We are restless thrown to and fro between the two statements which our reflection can never unite. One is: God is the sole agent, even in the devil. For without this certitude we cannot pray and trust in God. For without it God’s power would be limited by an opposing power whose victims we might become at any moment. But the other is: God must have no part in the diabolical rebellion. For if God Himself receives diabolical characteristics, then He can no longer call us to account when we have taken part in the demoniacal rebellion.

Neither of these statements must be soft-pedalled in favour of the other. Our reflection must bleed to death from the open wound of this contradiction . . . . if this ultimate cosmic contrast remains insurmountable to us then we can never entirely fathom its solution. Only if we knew how the knot is tied
would we also be able to understand how it can be undone. This is an
un-surmountable barrier to our understanding.39

3.

I know of very few theologians who have grappled as Heim has done with this for-
midable mystery, a mystery which deepens the cosmological paradox of Christianity.

Consider, in the third place, the epistemological paradox of the Gospel. For
Christianity insists that truth comes to us not by human discovery but solely by
divine disclosure. And in this context, obviously, I am alluding to the truth which
philosophy essays to ascertain, the truth concerning human life and destiny, the
truth concerning the ultimate nature and possible meaning of all existence. Such
truth, Christianity insists, comes to us solely by divine disclosure. Christianity in-
sists, moreover, that such truth comes to us exclusively along the narrow corridor
of Hebrew history. It insists, further, that such truth comes to us climatically in
the strange career of a young Jew gibbeted on a cross.

Belief in an historical revelation makes faith irrational and makes the faith-
ful intolerant. What kind of a God is he, who one day in the year 1 or 30 does
or gives what mankind should have had long ago for its salvation? This ar-
itrariness of historical revelation, which gives at a certain point in history a
divine light into the dark world, but leaves the world before that event and
the world outside of it in the dark, is unbearable to our sense of divine justice.
On the other hand, the assertion that Christians alone possess the full divine
truth must make them arrogant and intolerant towards the others, who are
not able to do anything about it: they simply not the privileged ones, and
their religion must be devaluated as superstition and mere paganism.40

Reason’s criticism of our epistemological claim becomes angry protest when a theo-
logian like Rudolf Bultmann flatly affirms that there is no evidence to substantiate
so arrogant a claim. Pretend that you are a non-Christian and that in Bultmann’s
Existence and Faith you read this passage:

If we ask for plain convincing reasons why God speaks actually here, in the
Bible, then we have not yet understood what God’s sovereignty means. For it
is due to his sovereign will, that he has spoken and speaks here. The Bible
does not approach us at all like other books, nor like other “religious voices of
the nations,” as catering for our interest. It claims from the outset to be God’s
word. We did not come across the Bible in the course of our cultural studies,
as we came across, for example, Plato or the Bhagavad-Gita. We came to know
it through the Christian church, which put it before us with its authoritative
claim. The church’s preaching, founded on the Scriptures, passes on the word
of the Scriptures. It says: God speaks to you here! In his majesty he has chosen
this place! We cannot question whether this place is the right one; we
must listen to the call that summons us.41

How would you as a non-Christian react to that claim in support of which no “plain
convincing reasons” can be given? I rather think you would react with bewildered
indignation. For there, starkly put, is the epistemological scandal of the Gospel.

Consider, still further, the anthropological paradox of our faith. From the per-
pective of any philosophy, to be sure, man is an enigma. But from the Biblical
standpoint, for more so than from the standpoint of its competitors, homo sapiens
is a congeries of contradictions. For one thing, as Biblicalists we assert that in some
sense man has lost the divine image although in another sense he continues to exist as
imago dei. Hence G. C. Berkouwer raises this crucial question: “Do we not, then,
in dealing with an image which is both kept and lost, have to do with a strange
paradox, or a dialectic, or a mysterious antinomy, which invites confusion?” Pressing
this crucial question, Berkouwer inquires:

Is there, using the concepts of the wider and narrower meaning of the image,
any way to escape from the danger of dualism, of antinomy, of letting the two
concepts stand unreconciled? Or is it the tacitness with which theologians
have time and again held to this duality in the image a clear indication of a
very real problem which arises in connection with man’s nature, his “human-
ness”? And Berkouwer cites Edmund Schlink’s insistence that anthropologically the Chris-
tians faces a “true antinomy” which involves “both this—that the image of God
can be wholly lost in man’s sin; and this—that the image of God can never be lost
even in the greatest sin.”22

For a second thing, from the Christian perspective man is a paradox because
his actions are simultaneously free and foreordained. Of all embattled issues in
theology this, as we are well aware, is the one which perhaps more than any other
perennially elicits terrific heat and precious little light. For attempts to resolve it
—let me be rashly dogmatic—are futile. I endorse the verdict of J. I. Packer con-
cerning this theological Gordian knot:

God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility are taught us side by side in the
same Bible; sometimes, indeed, in the same text. Both are thus guaranteed to
us by the same divine authority; both, therefore, are true. It follows that they must be held together, and not played off against each other. Man is a
responsible moral agent, though he is also divinely controlled; man is divinely
controlled, though he is also a responsible moral agent. God’s sovereignty is
a reality, and man’s responsibility is a reality too. This is the revealed antinomy
in terms of which we have to do our thinking about evangelism.

To our finite minds, of course, the thing is inexplicable. It sounds like
a contradiction, and our first reaction is to complain that it is absurd.42

And contradictory it is in the eyes of the logician, but if we are to be un-
deviatingly loyal to Scripture the contradiction must stand, a contradiction which
permits, Berkouwer contends, only a faith-solution:

Do we stand, then, in the relation between Divine and human activity before
an enigmatic paradox, an antinomy, which sterilizes our thinking? This
would indeed be the case if the activity of God and man were viewed on the
same level as comparable magnitudes. Then His activity would limit and
annul ours, or our activity would limit His. But since the activity of God is
preached to us in its absolutely incomparable character and as His Divine
Providence, we are not justified in division of activity. Hence G. C. Berkouwer asks the
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even in the greatest sin.”22
working, in which God works according to His good pleasure. At the same
time we confess our guilt and our responsibility, knowing that there is no
unrighteousness, but only light, in God. Rational conclusions which statize
His activity, give way to a living faith in Him .... But now we still see
through a glass, in riddles, and our knowledge is made up in fragments.
Now we are menaced by unbelief, doubt, and disloyalty. Temptation levels
itself on the reality of our time, in which, however, the living God is at work.
We cannot fathom it. We can only listen to the voice of the Word—listen,
as it speaks warning and comfort.26

For a third thing from our πως σου man is a paradox because he comes into
the world guilty of a sin which he did not personally commit. Now Christianity
teaches that man, created sinless by the all-good, all-powerful God, became a
sinner despite God's absolute sovereignty and in defiance of that sovereignty. Augustus
Hopkins Strong, for one, frankly admits that the Biblical doctrine of sin
combines antithetical elements.

Sin is an existing fact. God cannot be its author, either by creating man's
nature so that sin was a necessary incident of its development, or by with­
drawing a supernatural grace which was necessary to keep man holy. Reason,
therefore, has no other recourse than to accept the Scripture doctrine that
sin originated in man's free act of revolt from God—the act of a will which,
though inclined toward God, was not yet confirmed in virtue and was still
capable of a contrary choice. The original possession of such power to the
contrary seems to be the necessary condition of probation and moral de­
velopment. Yet the exercise of this power in a sinful direction can never be
explained upon grounds of reason, since sin is essentially unreason.27

Faced with the mystery of sin, Berkouwer, as a true son of Calvin, does not
dodge the issue. Instead he flatly avers:

We shall never fathom the Divine over-ruling, certainly not in regard to the
sinful activity of man. This inscrutability need not shock us nor fill us with
panic which might haunt our entire lives. The problems resolved, though not
rationally, in confession of guilt and in faith. There is a solution, but it is
the solution of faith, which knows its own responsibility— as it knows the
unapproachable holiness of God. He who does not listen in faith to God's
voice is left with an insoluble dilemma. God's revelation does not crucify our
thinking; it only judges our proud and sinful thinking. To persist in uncon­
verted thinking is, in the end, to shove our own guilt and responsibility
aside.28

The permission of sin is in itself an impenetrable mystery, yet Augustine com­
ounds that mystery, when loyal to Scripture, he announces that all of us as Adam's
descendants are responsible for Adam's transgression.

Man's nature was indeed at first created faultless and without sin; but nature
as man now has it, into which every one who is born from Adam, wants the
Physician, being no longer in a healthy state. All good qualities which it
still possesses . . . it has from the most High God, its Creator and Maker. But
the law which darkens and weakens all these natural goods, it has not con­
tracted from its blameless Creator . . . but from that original sin which it
committed of its own free will.29

Solidly rooted in Scripture and adroitly espoused by some of the greatest
minds in the history of the church, the doctrine of original sin, Mead maintains,
is open to serious objection. It labors not only under the difficulty that no individual can sincerely believe
and feel himself to be guilty of a sin committed by another man thousands
of years ago, but also under the further difficulty that, if there is such an
intimate connection between the progenitor and the race as this theory sup­
poses, then it is unreasonable that in the treatment of the individual descend­
ants of Adam any distinction should be made in the divine government. But
the same Augustinian doctrine which asserts the absolute oneness of the race
in its sin teaches that each individual, being treated separately in the divine government,
some being chosen out from the mass to be regenerated and saved, while
others are left to be punished for their sins. Each man being treated as an
individual responsible for his own sins, it is little relief to be told that Adam
at least had a fair trial and full freedom, and might have stood the test to
which he was subjected. It, having no evil propensity, and able to stand the
test, he yet failed to do so, how, one may well ask, should that make me
satisfied to be subjected to a test which I cannot stand.30

But logical or not the doctrine is Biblical. You and I are guilty before God
by virtue of Adam's sin—a mind-teasing concept if ever one has been formulated.

Consequently, Pascal is simply underscorin the fact of paradox when he
exclaims:

It is beyond doubt that there is nothing which more shocks our reason than to
say that the sin of the first man has rendered guilty those who, being so re­
moved from its source, seem incapable of participating in it . . . Certainly
nothing offends us more rudely than this doctrine, and yet without this
mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we are incomprehensible to our­
selves.31

There, starkly put, is the anthropological scandal of the Gospel.

5.

Consider, again, the Christological paradox, the Absolute paradox, as Kierke­
gaard calls it, a dogma which merges the incomparable qualities, the ice and fire,
of time and eternity, deity and humanity, suffering and sovereignty. In the name of
reason the logician applauds Kierkegaard's willingness to label this dogma an
absurdity.

What is absurd? The absurd is that the eternal truth has appeared in time;
that God has come into existence, been born, grown, etc.; that He was there
just like an individual man, not to be distinguished from another man . . .
Of the absolute Paradox one can understand only this, that one cannot under­
stand it.

In the name of reason Spinza also labels the incarnation an absurdity though
unlike Kierkegaard he is seeking to sabotage not defend the Gospel.

As to the additional view, given by some churches, that God assumed human
nature, I have expressly declared, that I know not what they say; nay, to
confess the truth, they seem o me to talk no less absurdly than if any one
should say that a circle has assumed the nature of a square.32

In the name of reason, moreover, Reinhold Niebuhr rejects the orthodox view
of the hypostatic union.

All definitions of Christ which affirm both His divinity and His humanity (in
the sense that they ascribe both finite and historically conditioned and eternal
and unconditioned qualities to His nature) must verge on logical nonsense. It
is possible for a character, even or fact of history to point symbolically be-
yond history and become a source of disclosure of an eternal meaning, purpose
and power which bears on history, but it is not possible for any person to be
historical and unconditioned at the same time . . . . since the essence of the
Divine consists in its unconditional character, and hence the essence of the
human lies in its conditioned and contingent nature, it is not logically possible
to assert both qualities of the same person.

Nevertheless, the Gospel does assert that a certain Man combined within Himself
the unconditioned and the conditioned, the necessary and the contingent, the
eternal and the historical, the uncreated and the created, the divine and the
human. It asserts that Jesus of Nazareth was the God-Man. And there, starkly put,
is the Christological scandal.

6.

Consider, sixthly, the soteriological paradox of Christianity. This is the heart
of the Gospel—forgiveness, justification, a right relationship with God, all obtained
by grace through faith in the vicarious death of our Lord Jesus. But is it reason-
able or is it even ethical? Luther puts the case bluntly. Justification is wider alle
*Vernunft*—against all reason. So with devastating logic Kant writes:

This original guilt . . . . cannot, so far as we see by the light of the law of
Reason within us, be abolished by any one else, for it is no transmissible
obligation, which, like a pecuniary debt (where it is indifferent to the creditor
whether the debtor pay it himself or another pay it for him), can be trans-
ferred to another, but the most personal of all personal ones—the guilt of
sin, which only the guilty can bear, not the innocent, be he ever so generous
as to be willing to undertake it.

Who will deny that divine forgiveness is certainly a paradox? I personally
will make no such denial—nor will, if I may at this juncture ally myself with him,
Emil Brunner:

Forgiveness of sin is the expression of the incomprehensible renewal of God’s
relation to us, known or knowable only through an incomprehensible act of
divine revelation.

From the point of view of philosophy such an assertion is completely
irrational, and forgiveness of sin complete nonsense. The philosopher—I am
speaking always of the philosopher who takes no account of divine revelation
in Christ—being obliged to give reasons for what he says, can only acknowl-
edge a reasonable God, that is, a God who acts logically. If God is the law-
giver, then he must cling to his law and by some means or other remove res-
istance to it; or if God desires unconditionally the life and the well-being of
his creatures, then he must ignore the evil. Each of these two attitudes can
be called rational or logical. But to assert at one and the same time the
holiness of God’s will, reacting against transgression, his wrath, and his
merciful forgiveness of guilt, is a paradox which rational philosophy can only
decline as absurdity. This is what the New Testament itself says, the message
of the cross is foolishness to the Greek.

Who will deny that divine forgiveness by a substitute atonement is ethically
bewildering? Not long ago, for instance, Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam registered an
emphatic protest.

We hear much of the subsidiary theory of the atonement. This theory is to
me immoral. *If* Jesus paid it all, or *if* He is the substitute for me, or *if* He is
the sacrifice for all the sin of the world, then why discuss forgiveness? The

books are closed. Another has paid the debt, borne the penalty. I own nothing.
I am absolved. I cannot see forgiveness as predicated upon the act of some-
one else. It is my sin. I must alone.

Luther, however, scorning the common protest that divine acceptance must be
strictly on a *quid pro quo* basis, cries out:

The human heart does not understand, nor does it believe, that so great a
 treasure as the Holy Spirit is given simply for the hearing of faith, but it
argues like this: ‘It is a weighty matter (magna res)—forgiveness of sins,
death from sin and death, the giving of the Holy Spirit, of righteous-
ness and eternal life; therefore you must offer something of weight, if you
would obtain those unutterable gifts. This opinion (opinionem) the Devil
approves and fosters in the heart. And so when reason hears: ‘You can do
nothing to obtain the remission of sins, but ought only to hear the Word of
God,’ it immediately cries out: ‘No! you make the forgiveness of sins too
mean and contemptible.’

Yes, redemption by a vicarious sacrifice is precisely what Albrecht Bengel
calls it, ‘the highest evangelical paradox;’ for to quote his comment on Romans
3:25-26: “In the law God is just and condemning, and in the Gospel just and the
justifier of the sinner who believes in the Christ provided by God Himself a pro-
pitiation in His blood.”

There, starkly put, is the soteriological paradox of the Gospel.

7.

Consider, finally, the eschatological paradox of Christianity.

I mention is passing the doctrine of a resurrected body, a spiritual organism
which will be characterized by both continuity and change: the resurrected body
will somehow be continuous with the body which once was buried, yet the res-
urrected body will undergo a remarkable change, a change equipping it to serve
as the organ of personal experience in the world to come. All of this strikes the
philosopher as impossible, a doctrine so weighted down by illogicalities as to be
sheer nonsense. In his monumental work, *The Doctrine of a Future Life*, Alger
rehearses this common objection:

The scientific absurdities connected with that doctrine have been marshalled
against it by Celeus, the Platonist philosopher, by Avicenna, the Arabian
physician, and by hundreds more, and have never been answered, and cannot
be answered. As long as man lives, his bodily substance is incessantly chang-
ing; the processes of secretion and absorption are rapidly going forward. Every
few years he is, as to material, a totally new man. Dying at the age of seventy,
he has had at least ten different bodies. He is one identical soul, but has lived
in ten separate houses. With which shall he be raised? with the first? or the
fifth or the last? or with all? But, further, the body after death decays,
enters into combination with water, air, earth, gas, vegetables, animals, other
human bodies. In this way the same matter comes to have belonged to a
thousand persons. In the resurrection, whose shall it be?

Now to the paradox of a resurrected body we must add that of eternal punish-
ment. Thus in his Christian Dogmatics Hans Martensen struggles to achieve a re-
conciliation between limitless love and eternal punishment, an infinite penalty
inflicted for finite transgressions. Does Martensen succeed in reconciling these two
elements of Biblical revelation? Yes—by appeal to paradox!
The more deeply Christian thought searches into this question, the more does it discover an ANTINOMY,—i.e., an apparent contradiction between two laws equally divine,—which, it seems, cannot find a perfectly conclusive and satisfactory solution, in the present stage, the earthly limits, of human knowledge. This antinomy meets us if we turn to Holy Scripture; and no definite solution is given of it there. There are texts which if they be taken in their full and literal import, must distinctly refer to eternal damnation ... — these texts, if they be taken without reservation or refinement, clearly express the idea of a condemnation in which there is no cessation, to which there is no end. But on the other hand, there are contorted expressions of Scripture, which have an equal claim to be taken in their full sense . . . . If we take these texts without limiting their full and obvious import, we shall not be far from the idea of a universal restoration; for the Apostle says expressly ALL, not some. This apparent contradiction in the language of Scripture shows that Scripture itself does not afford us a final dogmatic solution of the question . . . . We readily grant that the Word of God cannot contradict itself, and that the antinomy here presented must really be solved in the depth of God's Word. We only maintain that this solution is nowhere expressly given; and we ask, whether we may not recognize divine wisdom in the fact that a final solution is not given us, while we are still in the stream of time and in the course of development? 39

We must ask that same question, I am persuaded, not only about eschatology but also about many of Christianity's major doctrines. Like eschatology they confront us with paradoxes for which no satisfactory solution seems to be given. Apparently it is impossible to mitigate their logical tension without denying Biblical truth. Now if I am correct in so concluding, we need to postulate paradox with a Kierkegaardian forthrightness, holding that within the framework of our paradox:

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Many of us, I know resist and reject this conclusion. Congenital Aristotelians, we find it hard to live at ease in "the pseudo-Zion of paradox," to use W. G. Mac- lagan's biting term. Yet what other option do we have? Whether or not we like our noetic predicament, we are stuck with it; and in this state of intellectual tension we must carry on our business of study, teaching, apologetics, and evangelism. But perhaps several considerations will help to mitigate our discomfort. I proceed to suggest them very briefly.

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Revelation does not, as we might think and as we doubtless wish, eliminate paradox; it requires the postulation of paradox. Recall here Job's inability to fathom the mystery of evil. How justify a suffering which is irrationally excessive and unfair? A suffering which inexplicably overwhelms a good man in a world controlled by a God Who is all-wise, all-loving, and all-powerful? When logic breaks down and human wisdom has vainly spoken its last word, God—I presume our familiarity with this Old Testament classic—reveals Himself. But what a revelation He gives! The omnipotent Creator—I follow the exposition of H. L. Ellison—points Job

to the apparently irrational in His creation . . . . Job is asked to consider a
We gladly acknowledge, therefore, that God deserves the praise and glory—entirely so. We deserve no credit whatever. Yet paradoxically we gladly testify at the same time that we ourselves are to be blamed for all the evil that we do. God is totally exonerated from any complicity with our sin and failure. What does C. H. Dodd write concerning Romans 9:17-18?

The truly religious man knows that any good that is in him is there solely by grace of God, whatever he may make of this in his philosophy. But to attribute one's evil dispositions to God is a sophisticated One may feel driven to it by logic, but the conscience does not corroborate it.44

This comment, W. G. Maclagan charges, is a frank abandonment of logic. Well, logical or not, such is the Christian's spontaneous testimony. In himself he experiences daily the paradox of grace. And this personal experience of paradox enables him to accept more readily the truth of those other paradoxes which he encounters within the framework of his faith.

3.

Christianity, while it postulates paradox, is not a misology, an asylum ignorance. It does not demand that reason be nailed to a cross of irrationalism. It logically requires defiance of logic at crucial junctures in the theology which it constructs from Biblical data, but it believes absolutely in the ultimate rationality of God. Even Kierkegaard, I remind you, votes for ontological coherence: "The eternal essential truth itself is by no means a paradox, but becomes paradoxical through its relation to existence."45

4.

By its postulation of paradox Christianity marks out the boundaries of reason and stresses the necessity of faith in thought no less than in practice. Hence Reinhold Niebuhr asserts that doctrine of original sin remains absurd from the standpoint of a pure rationalism, for it expresses a relation between fate and freedom which cannot be fully rationalized, unless the paradox be accepted as a rational understanding of the limits of rationality and as an expression of faith that a rationally irresolvable contradiction may point to a truth which logic cannot contain.46

The acceptance of revelational paradox, in other words, provides us with a truth which logic cannot contain.46

5.

When the Biblical paradoxes are embraced in faith, they form a strangely dovetailed gestalt, a mosaic of meaning which amazingly illuminates and interprets the mystery of existence. Here, then, I agree with Ramsdell: The Incarnation and the Cross constitute the unifying ground of the Christian perspective. In them all other Christian doctrines find their integration. Through them the doctrines of creation, original sin, grace, the Kingdom of God, and immortality become an organic whole.47

Accept paradox, in short, and paradoxically, a pattern of rationality emerges from the otherwise patternless welter of brute events.

6.

Accept paradox, furthermore, no, postulate it, and you save reason. Deny it, however, and you destroy reason. Van Til succinctly and, to my mind, convincingly shows why this is so.

Our position is naturally charged with being self-contradictory. It might seem at first glance as though we were willing, with the dialectical theologians, to accept the really contradictory. Yet such is not the case. In face we hold that our position is the only position that saves one from the necessity of ultimately accepting the really contradictory. We argue that unless we may hold to the presupposition of the self-contained ontological trinity, human rationality itself is a mirage. But to hold to this position requires us to say that while we shun as poison the idea of the really contradictory we embrace with passion the idea of the apparently contradictory. It is through the latter alone that we reject the former. If it is the self-contained ontological trinity that we need for the rationality of our interpretation of life, it is this same ontological trinity that requires us to hold to the apparently contradictory.48

7.

The acceptance of paradox is no excuse for intellectual sloth. Indeed, no specific paradox ought to be accepted until sustained travail of mind forces us to its acceptance. Ronald W. Hepburn, who is scandalized by the paradoxical nature of Christianity, imagines a conversation between a theologian and a philosopher. The theologian speaks first:

"You hold", he says, "as a metaphysical dogma that there are no mysteries. You believe that given persistence, cleverness, and good luck, we shall be able to describe all that there is to describe without paradox: or (putting it the other way round) that there are no entities such that we human beings are compelled to talk about paradoxically or not at all." But the philosopher might reply, "No, I'm not advancing any dogma. If I find, as I do find, that certain long-standing puzzles have in fact yielded or begun to yield when approached with the suspicion that they might turn out to be confusions of language, then I think I am justified in going on to attack further paradoxes at least in the hope that they will yield in the same way." In that case," says the theologian, "you are admitting, aren't you, that some paradoxes may never yield, but remain quite opaque to our understanding—just as I claim the paradoxes in all our talk about God will remain, for the most part, opaque?"

"I don't see any way of ruling that possibility out in advance," comes the reply, "but it is only after trying one's hardest to dissolve them and by discovering why they resist dissolution that one could prove them to be opaque rather than just confused."

Whereupon Hepburn draws this conclusion:

So the core of the problem would now seem to lie in knowing in what circumstances we should regard some stubbornly paradoxical concept as a muddle, to be dissolved sometime in the future, and when to regard it as a mystery, to be lived with and perhaps held in reverence.49

I concur enthusiastically. For we may fancy that some doctrine is an insoluble paradox when it is nothing of the kind. Our task, consequently, the task of all Christian scholars working cooperatively, is to expose ruthlessly any mental muddles which are illogically mistaken for mysteries.

In conclusion, I urge that we unabashedly imitate the famous evangelical, Charles Simeon, whose Cambridge pulpit exerted so commanding an influence over 18th century England. In the preface to the 21 volumes of his Horae Homileticae he explains the principle which he follows in exposition:

As in the Scriptures themselves, so also in this Work, there will be found
sentiments, not really opposite, but apparently of an opposite tendency, according to the subject that is under discussion. In writing, for instance, on John 5:40, "Ye will not come to me, that ye might have life," he does not hesitate to lay the whole blame of men's condemnation on the obstinacy of their own depraved will: nor does he think it at all necessary to weaken the subject by nice distinctions, in order to support a system. On the contrary, when he places John 5:44, "No man can come unto me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him," he does not scruple to state in the fullest manner he is able, "That we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us that we may have a good will, and working with us when we have that good will;" nor does he judge it expedient on any account to soften and palliate, and fritter away truths in the plain and unsophisticated manner of the Scriptures, than to undertake to reconcile them, as a sufficient ground for denying either the one or the other truths. If then neither of these points are doubted, notwithstanding they cannot be reconciled by us, why should other points, equally obvious in some respects, yet equally difficult to be reconciled in others, be incompatible, merely because we, with our limited capacity, cannot perfectly determine their harmony and agreement? Let us do as Simeon does. Let us emphatically assert "apparently opposite truths," remembering as a sort of criterion that very likely we are being loyal to the Bible, to the subject that is under discussion. In writing, for instance, on John 5:40, "Ye will not come to me, that ye might have life," he does not hesitate to lay the whole blame of men's condemnation on the obstinacy of their own depraved will: nor does he think it at all necessary to weaken the subject by nice distinctions, in order to support a system. 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