

## The Laws of Logic and Reformed Philosophy

[Jamin Hübner](#)

Founder, RealApologetics.org

Student, Reformed Theological Seminary

Author, *The Saving Grace of God*, *Light Up the Darkness*, *The Portable Presuppositionalist*

Contact

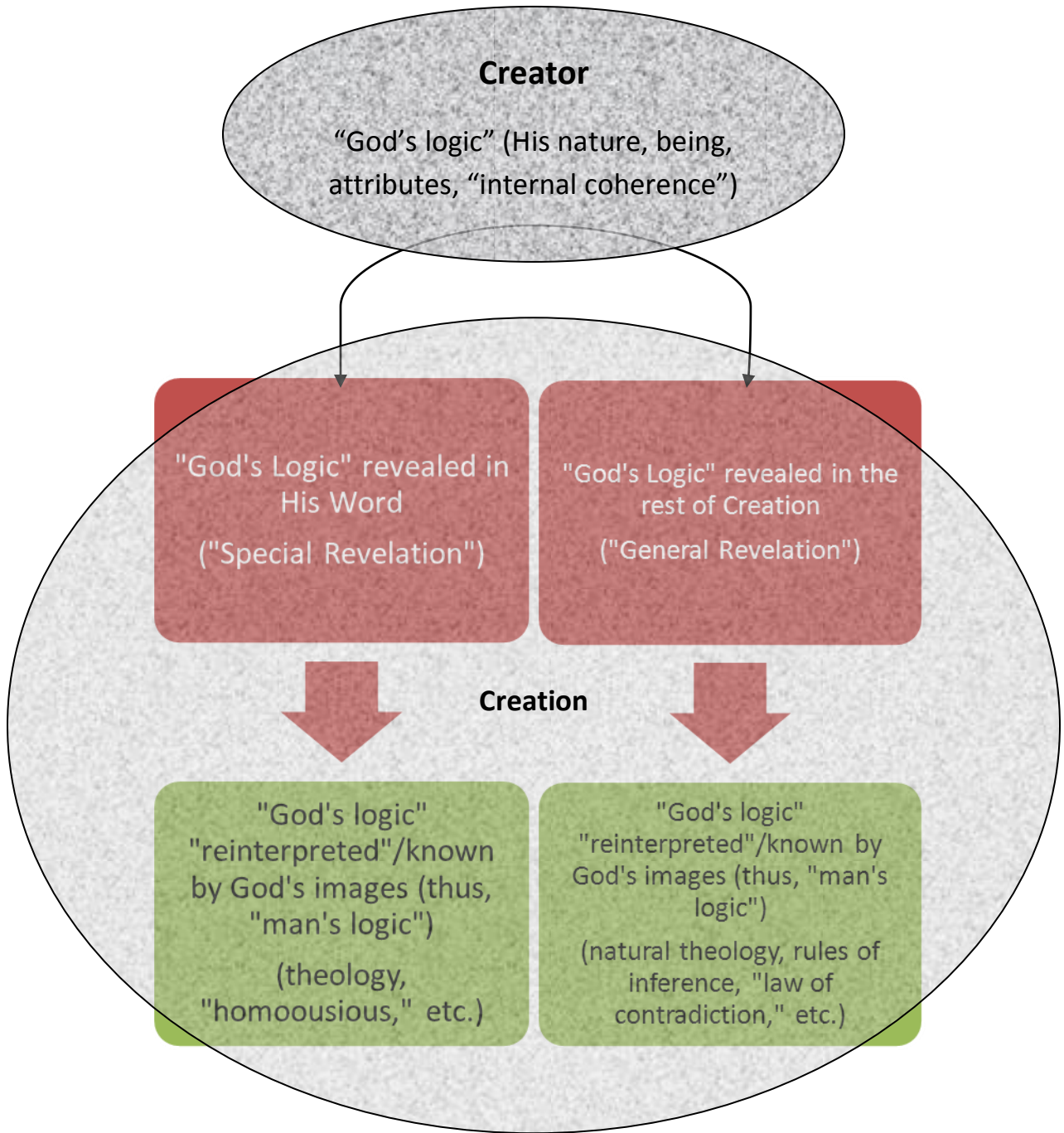
realapologetics@gmail.com

### Introduction

The laws of logic have played a consistent role in Reformed apologetics in the past century. Figures such as Van Til and Bahnsen have often appealed to the nature of logical laws to form a transcendental argument for the existence of God. But there are still critical questions about the nature of these laws that remain unclear. Are logical laws created? Or are they a kind of “halfway point,” “intersection,” or “mediator” between God’s mind and the world?

When one talks about a “contradiction,” that person can mean a variety of different things depending on the context (e.g. an inconsistency in the character of God, a disagreement of propositions, a conflict with revelation and human reason, etc.). The same goes for “logic,” and “laws of logic.” In short, the average Christian or seminary student is faced with questions and confusion on this subject and there is a need for clarification.

It is my contention that the laws of logic should be viewed in the following way (Figure 1):



The most basic features of this illustration are self-explanatory. The Creator and creation distinction is obvious, as is God's immanence through revelation and the

analogical relationship of human knowledge.<sup>1</sup> But three other important features should be briefly summarized before going any further.

First, the darker texture covering “God” is the attributes, character, and being of God (assuming the doctrine of divine simplicity that God is coterminous with his personality and attributes).<sup>2</sup> Thus, we may rightly speak of “God’s logic”<sup>3</sup> in contrast to (second) “human logic,”<sup>4</sup> which is the lighter shaded texture in the “Creation” circle. These are “the laws of creation,” which include everything from the laws of logic, to laws of math, chemistry and pressure, the uniformity of nature, objective morality, time, space, etc. Such laws are immaterial, “universal and unchanging”<sup>5</sup> laws that permeate all of God’s creation for the purpose of maintaining order as servants of the Most High God. They are attributes of creation that reflect the various attributes of the Creator, from His logical consistency, to His genius, perfection, holiness, etc., albeit analogously.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, these laws are inescapable for creatures<sup>7</sup> and cannot be violated unless God Himself chooses to suspend or eliminate them for whatever purpose. God is sovereign over His creation. Third and finally, is the right green box which is “the laws of logic” as “a human reflection of the mind of God and of God’s thinking regarding the conceptual and/or evidential proof relations between truths (or sets of truths). Logical laws [of this category] are elaborations upon the fact that God does not contradict Himself...and that it is impossible for him to lie.”<sup>8</sup> These are such formulations as “A cannot be A and non-A at the same time and in the same sense.” As such, this “logic”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See Cornelius Van Til. *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2007), 32-34.

<sup>2</sup> “The laws of logic are an aspect of [God’s] own character. Being logical is his nature and his pleasure.” John Frame. *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002), 518.

<sup>3</sup> John Frame uses this terminology (as he did with me in a Reformed Theological Seminary Virtual Campus forum post for *History of Philosophy and Christian Thought*. August 27, 2011) while K. Scott Oliphint is somewhat hesitant in his essay, “Cornelius Van Til and the Reformation of Christian Apologetics” in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton, eds. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2007), 285 fn. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Cornelius Van Til. *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 202.

<sup>5</sup> Greg Bahnsen. *Always Ready* (Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 1996), 158.

<sup>6</sup> Edgar Andrews essentially distinguished L2 from L3 in the following way: “The laws of nature *constitute* unchanging reality whereas the laws of science are our frequently imperfect attempts to *describe* reality.” Edgar Andrews. *Who Made God? Searching for a Theory of Everything* (Carlisle: EP Books, 2009), 141.

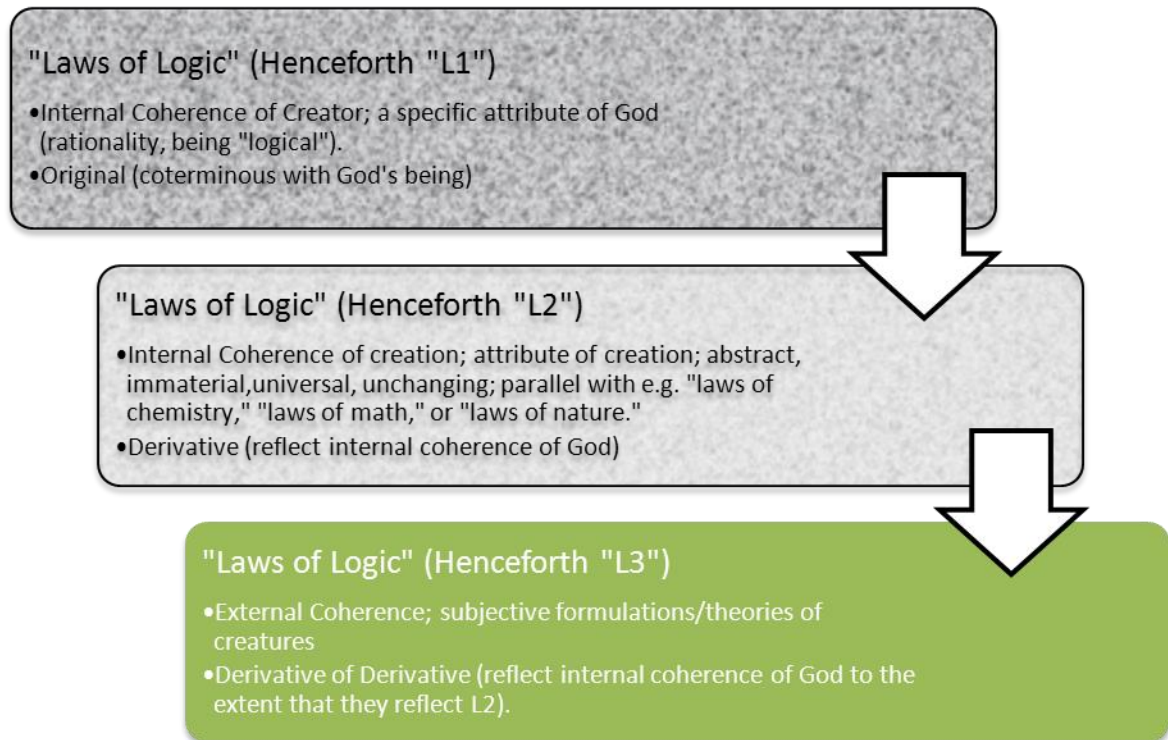
<sup>7</sup> As Van Til put it, “no one can say anything intelligible about God’s revelation through Christ in Scripture without the use of the process of syllogistic reasoning.” Van Til cited in *Revelation and Reason*, 286.

<sup>8</sup> Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, 149.

<sup>9</sup> In summarizing Van Til’s teaching, Frame often speaks of the difference between how unbelievers and Christians “use logic.” Obviously, “logic” in this context is referring to human formulations of logical laws in creation and not the laws in creation themselves

can be “used” in different ways. As John Frame puts it, “Logic is not neutral. It can be used to glorify God or to resist him.”<sup>10</sup> Logic in this sense, then are “laws of thought.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, we have three main categories or “types” of logical laws (Figure 2):



These distinctions are perhaps the most consistently confused categories in discussions about the laws of logic (L1-3) in the work of recent Reformed Christian philosophers such as John Frame, Greg Bahnsen, Cornelius Van Til, and K. Scott Oliphint, even though they generally agree with most (though not all) of the above illustration (e.g. Creator-creature distinction). Let us then synthesize an accurate picture in light of the above proposed model.

### The Heart of the Debate: The Creator-Creature Distinction

The distinction between the Creator and the creature is critical. Van Til said “If we allow that an intelligent word can be spoken about *being* or *knowing* or *acting* as such, without

---

(since such laws are inescapably “used”; no creature can choose that  $2+2=4$  or equals anything else, but one *can* choose how to express and formulate such mathematical/logical truth).

<sup>10</sup> John Frame in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Stephen Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 197.

<sup>11</sup> John Frame. *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 25; Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, 158; *Pushing the Antithesis* (Powder Springs: American Vision, 2007), 202.

first introducing the Creator-creature distinction, we are sunk.”<sup>12</sup> He strongly asserted that instead of thinking of all things being on the same level of existence, God should be recognized as existing on His own level of being. This applies to epistemology as much as it does ontology:

Christians believe in two levels of existence, the level of God’s existence as self-contained and the level of man’s existence as derived from the level of God’s existence. For this reason, Christians must also believe in two levels of knowledge, the level of God’s knowledge, which is absolutely comprehensive and self-contained, and the level of man’s knowledge, which is not comprehensive but is derivative and reinterpetive. Hence, we say that as Christians we believe that man’s knowledge is analogical of God’s knowledge.”<sup>13</sup>

This line of reasoning is followed closely by Bahnsen<sup>14</sup>, Frame<sup>15</sup>, and Oliphint.<sup>16</sup>

Everything that is not God is created.<sup>17</sup> Hence, it is a serious error to think God and man submit to the same system of logic:

Every non-Christian theory of method takes for granted, that time and eternity are aspects of one another, and that God and man must be thought of as correlative to one another. God and man work under a system of logic that is higher than both, and exists in independence of both. The law of contradiction is thought of as existing somehow in independence of God and man, or at least as operating in both God and man on the same level.

In contrast to this, Christianity holds that God existed alone before any time existence was brought forth. He existed as the self-conscious and

---

<sup>12</sup> Cornelius Van Til in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, E.R. Geehan, ed. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1971), 91.

<sup>13</sup> Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 33.

<sup>14</sup> See section 4.5 of *Van Til’s Apologetic* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995); *Always Ready* (Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 1996), 24-25; Part I of *Presuppositional Apologetics* (Powder Springs: American Vision, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> See “Part I” of *DKG*.

<sup>16</sup> See “Cornelius Van Til and the Reformation of Christian Apologetics” in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton, eds. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2007); *Reasons for Faith: Philosophy in the Service of Theology* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> And with Van Til’s articulation, “Created things are not identical with God or with any act of God with respect to them. They have a being and an activity of their own. But this being and activity is what it is because of the more ultimate being and activity on the part of the will of God. Things are what they are ultimately because of the plan of God.” Cornelius Van Til. *Christian Apologetics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), 35.

self-consistent being. *The law of contradiction, therefore, as we know it, is but the expression on a created level of the internal coherence of God's nature.* Christians should therefore never appeal to the law of contradiction as something that, as such, determines what can or cannot be true...Christians should employ the law of contradiction, whether positively or negatively, as a means by which to systematize the facts of revelation...

Notice how Van Til carefully distinguishes L2 (using law of contradiction as an example) from L3 (right, lower green box in Figure 1) in the italicized sentence. If the laws of logic were *only* conventions or rules of thought, there would be nothing external to “know,” let alone “employ.” Thus, Van Til says that the laws of logic “as we know” them (L3) are what is “the expression on a created level of the internal coherence of God’s nature,” not the laws of logic *as they actually exist and give rise to the order we see in creation* (L2). Thus, it is fair for Frame to put the “law of contradiction” (L3) in the category of “our own rationality” which is “created” in summarizing this sentence by Van Til.<sup>18</sup>

However, it should be pointed out that L2 express God’s internal coherence of God’s nature as much as – or more than – L3. But the degree to which our summarizing of logical laws (L3) reflects those actual logical laws (L2) may vary, which in that case would determine how much of God’s character they reflect.<sup>19</sup>

Also, notice that Van Til asserts that God is no more bound to human logic than God is bound to time. God transcends “time existence” as much as the law of contradiction (L3).

## **The Model and the Reformed Philosophers**

As far as this particular “law of contradiction” is concerned, K. Scott Oliphint can be found essentially asserting the same thing as Van Til:

The law of contradiction, and the use of this law, can never finally determine whether or not a particular Christian doctrine is true. *That* determination is left to revelation. What reason can do is to help theology to organize, articulate, and expand its truths in such a way as to clarify

---

<sup>18</sup> John Frame. *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), 152.

<sup>19</sup> One might parallel this with the inerrancy debate and the relationship between today’s translations and the *autographa*: translations today are “inspired” and “inerrant” *to the extent that they reflect the original* (see “The Inerrancy of the Autographa” by Greg Bahnsen in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980)). In the same way, the “law of contradiction” as a human formulation (green quadrant), reflects the internal coherence of God to the extent that they reflect the laws of logic of creation (texture in creation circle).

their meaning.<sup>20</sup>

As it is clear, Oliphint equivocates “law of contradiction” with “reason.” Thus, when he says “law of contradiction” he means the same as Van Til: a human “system of logic” (L3).<sup>21</sup>

Bahnsen can be found referring to both L2 and L3 in the same context...

Logic is not a philosophically neutral and unproblematic tool [L3]. For instance, it makes unmistakable demands on one’s metaphysic. The laws of logic [L2] are abstract, nontemporal relations, and therefore seem to presuppose a non-sensory world – which will prove an uncomfortable assumption for the materialistic unbeliever.<sup>22</sup>

...and Pratt with L1, L2, and L3, though in a very short manner...

“Does God observe the law of contradiction? Yes. It is his very nature to do so [L1]. *Should we?* [L2?] Yes, so long as we do not place our imperfect understandings and applications of the law [L3] above the teaching of Scripture as the unquestionable arbiter of truth.”<sup>23</sup>

Bahnsen elsewhere describes L2 and L3, though with apparent inconsistency and unanswered questions. Here Bahnsen clearly describes L3:

The law of contradiction in itself is of trivial value; formal logic is a tool of scholarship and not a final truth. The science of logic, after all, is a second-order discipline which argues *about* argumentation; it does not give us the facts of the world, but guides our discovery thereof.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> K. Scott Oliphint. *Reasons for Faith: Philosophy in the Service of Theology* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), 23.

<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Oliphint is careful to distinguish “the law of contradiction” with “the use of this law.” This particular distinction is not completely illustrated in the above model. Nevertheless, this compounds the possibility of confusion: there are not only nonmaterial *laws* inherent to creation, and not only human *understanding* of those laws, but human *application* of those understandings *or* those laws – all four of which might be found under the terms “laws of logic.”

<sup>22</sup> Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics*, 104.

<sup>23</sup> Obviously, by asking the question “should we?” Pratt is talking about L3 in this context, for there is no choice in answering the aforementioned question if one is speaking of L2 since in that case such laws are inescapable; saying “our imperfect understandings and applications of the law” is the essentially the equivalent of L3. But, as it is clear, Pratt unfortunately seems to collapse the fundamental distinction between Creator and creature by framing the questions as he does (both God and man submit to the same laws in the same sense; this I believe is impossible), though perhaps Pratt would clarify if being pressed to be more precise. Richard Pratt Jr. “Does God Observe the Law of Non-Contradiction?” *Reformed Perspectives Magazine*.1:9 (1999): 17.

<sup>24</sup> Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics*, 182.

But notice in this more recent work of Bahnsen, he appears to deny L2 altogether, while seemingly trying to hold on to its reality. It is a brief paragraph that leaves us with many questions:

Although logic requires ontological grounding, it itself is not some metaphysical machinery of the universe. Strictly speaking, it is *not* the *world* that is logical, but *arguments* that are logical or illogical. Logic presupposes a world where arguments are possible and meaningful,<sup>25</sup> but the laws of logic govern the use of arguments and do not tell us about the world as a whole.<sup>26</sup> When logic is thus conceived as a tool<sup>27</sup>, it becomes clear that the issue is not the law of contradiction *per se*<sup>28</sup> but the *use* made of it.<sup>29</sup>

This suggests some degree of uncertainty, or at least variability, in Bahnsen's position regarding the laws of logic. More evidence suggests the same conclusion. For example, Bahnsen can be found asserting in 1991 that "the laws of logic are not laws of thought, but *presuppositions* of (coherent) thinking."<sup>30</sup> But in *Presuppositional Apologetics* (date of authorship unknown) he can be found saying the opposite – that the Christian "views logic as rules of thought implanted in man's mind by the Creator."<sup>31</sup> This concurs with his work in *Always Ready* where he says that logical laws are "immaterial laws of thought."<sup>32</sup> Are the laws of logic "laws of thought" or not?

Thus, it is unclear whether Bahnsen would have agreed with, for example, Chris Bolt (philosophy Ph.D student at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) when he calls the law of contradiction "universal, invariant, abstract entities"<sup>33</sup> or agreed with Andrews who said the laws of nature "constitute unchanging reality."<sup>34</sup> Perhaps this waffling would have been ironed out had Bahnsen lived longer and finished a completed version

---

<sup>25</sup> This leaves us asking, why then is not the world considered "logical"? And do arguments alone reflect God's internal coherency? See Frame, *Five Views*, 225-226.

<sup>26</sup> But, who exactly is suggesting that they were ever intended to?

<sup>27</sup> Is this assertion merely preferable for discussion/Clark controversy, or is actually necessary because logic *cannot* or *should not* be conceived as anything but a "tool"?

<sup>28</sup> Which is what, since the L2-L3 distinction has been collapsed?

<sup>29</sup> Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics*, 182.

<sup>30</sup> Bahnsen, *Pushing the Antithesis*, 202. Keep in mind that this book is Gary DeMar's own written synthesis of Bahnsen's public lectures and therefore may be responsible for this inconsistency. But, it is still difficult to believe that DeMar would have so clearly misrepresented Bahnsen's point.

<sup>31</sup> Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics*, 90.

<sup>32</sup> Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, 158.

<sup>33</sup> Chris Bolt. *Choosing Hats*. "Introduction to Covenantal Apologetics: Part 27 – Logic and the external world." February 11, 2011. <http://www.choosinghats.com/2011/02/an-informal-introduction-to-covenantal-apologetics-part-27-%E2%80%93-logic-and-the-external-world/>

<sup>34</sup> Andrews, *Who Made God?*, 141.

of his work *Presuppositional Apologetics*, consistently made the proper distinctions as illustrated in our model, or perhaps a combination of both.

Frame can be found referring to both L1 and L3 in the same context, though not necessarily acknowledging if L2 exists:

God acts and thinks in accordance with the laws of logic [L1]. This does not mean that he is bound by these laws as though they were something 'above' him that had authority over him. The laws of logic and rationality are simply the attributes of his own nature. As he is righteous, so he is logical. To be logical is his natural desire and pleasure. Nor does he create the laws of logic, as if they were something he could change at will [still L1]. Rather, they are necessary attributes, inalienable qualities of all his thinking and acting. To say this is not to say that God's revelation is necessarily in accord with some particular human system of logic [L3]. Systems of logic [L3] are developed by human beings in an effort to catalogue and describe the factors [L2?] that generate validity and invalidity, consistency and inconsistency [L2?].<sup>35</sup>

### Further Elaborations

By using the "law of contradiction" in the way summarized above, Van Til and Oliphint are able to maintain the Creator-creature distinction. So in this use of the terms, Van Til is able to put logical laws in the category of "creation"<sup>36</sup> while at the same time asserting that logic is part of God's being,<sup>37</sup> (and therefore, as Frame would conclude,<sup>38</sup> an attribute of God). God does not know *x* in the same way and on the same level that a human being knows *x*. God is not logical in the same way that creatures and creation is logical (just as God is not "good" or "wise" in the same way that a human being is good or wise).

---

<sup>35</sup> Frame, *DG*, 511.

<sup>36</sup> "The non-Christian does not believe in creation. Therefore, for him the law of contradiction is, like all other laws, something that does not find its ultimate source in the creative activity of God. Accordingly, the non-Christian will seek to do by means of the law of contradiction what the Christian has done for him by God. For the Christian, God legislates as to what is possible and what is impossible for man." Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Syllabus, 1961), 256, cited in Poythress, "A Biblical View of Mathematics." "A Biblical View of Mathematics" in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective*, ed. Gary North (Vallecito: Ross House Books, 1976).

<sup>37</sup> "To talk about what can or cannot exist according to logic is but to swing a sword in the sky unless it is first determined at what point logic meets reality. According to the Christian story, logic and reality meet first of all in the mind and being of God. God's being is exhaustively rational [that is, God is logical]. Then God creates and rules the universe according to his plan." Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 303.

<sup>38</sup> Frame, *DG*, 511, 512, 518.

A law of contradiction that is found to be operative in the created world in the sense that man's intellectual operations require its recognition, but that rests on God's nature, is something quite different from a law of contradiction that operates independently of God [as in the case of atheistic reasoning]. In the former case the facts of the universe, if they are to be rationally intelligible, are ultimately dependent not upon the law of contradiction as man knows it, but upon God's internal coherence that lies behind the law of contradiction. Thus the facts of the universe can retain their novelty for man while they have not lost their rationality for God, and therefore also for man. In the latter case the rationality of the world does not depend upon God, but upon the principle of contradiction as an abstraction.<sup>39</sup>

The law of contradiction cannot be thought of as operating anywhere except against the background of the nature of God. Since, therefore, God created this world, it would be impossible that this created world should ever furnish an element of reality on a par with him. The concept of creation as entertained by Christians makes the idealist notion of logic once for all impossible.<sup>40</sup>

Notice that in this case, Van Til is *not* speaking of the "law of contradiction" as L3 as he did before, but as L2, the thing itself that requires human "recognition" and "rests on God's nature," the same "universal and unchanging" laws that Bahnsen talked about in one portion of *Always Ready*.<sup>41</sup> Van Til also asserts that L2 is created ("an element of reality" furnished by "this created world"). Van Til seems to believe that both logical laws as they actually exist in creation (L2) *and* logical laws as they exist in the mind as formulations of creatures (L3) are all *created*.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 82.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 31-32. Van Til also critiques the idea that the law of contradiction stands above both God and man in *Christian Apologetic*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), 32-33 and *The Defense of the Faith*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008), 303.

<sup>41</sup> Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, 158.

<sup>42</sup> Chris Bolt also agrees – at least with respect to L3: "Logic does not serve as a sort of otherworldly, divine mediator between God and the world. Rather, human logic belongs to the created order. It may be helpful to think of logic as analogous to morality (which we will discuss later). Morality is revealed with respect to the creature. Similarly, logic is normative; it is binding with respect to creaturely human thought. We may be further helped through this analogy by considering logic as decreed in accordance with the nature of God as it is with moral law. God knows propositions truly such that consistency exists between them. Logic is created upon the whole of the sets of relationships of the aforementioned consistency. God exists apart from His creation, and there is no inconsistency within God. Hence it is a mistake to suggest as some have that God might exist and not exist at the same time and in the same respect if the

Oliphint agrees, using the word “logic” to refer to L2:

Logic, like all else save God himself, *is created*. All things created are absolutely, totally, and completely subsumed under their Creator and, by definition, never equal to him. Logic (like light, for example) may reflect the character of its Creator but cannot be said to be above him (in the sense of being in anyway superior to him); nor does it, in and of itself, constrain him.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, the implications of God as Creator require that God determines what is ultimately possible and impossible for both Himself and creation.

...For the theist, possibility has its source in God, while for the anti-theist, God has his source in possibility. Hence, what one will deem most possible, the other will consider altogether impossible...In [Reformed theology] alone is it made clear that God’s nature and will are the foundation for what is possible in the universe.<sup>44</sup>

The Christian is not even to reason from his idea of God, taken from Scripture, in a deductive fashion. He must always ask what Scripture itself says about God’s relation to the world. When charged with holding to that which is contradictory, he must still cling to his principle, knowing that that which appears contradictory to man because of his finitude is not really contradictory in God.<sup>45</sup>

So, for example, Scripture teaches that God is 3 and 1, whereby both singularity and plurality are equally ultimate. As Edgar points out, “according to Aristotle’s absolute laws of logic, this would be impossible.”<sup>46</sup> But it *is* possible with God. Dead men coming to life *appears* contradictory (for L3 and L2), but since it is not impossible for L3 – which happens to be the *very ontological foundation* for L2 and L3 – dead men do rise from the dead by the power of God. Hence, Oliphint inquires:

Is *everything* that man proves contradictory *ipso facto* contradictory for God also? Because man is unable to resolve a contradiction does not mean that God has the same inability...Because God is consistent with himself, man must be consistent, not fundamentally with *man* or with *logic*, but with God. God is our final reference point, not logic. It is true that God cannot resolve a “bona fide contradiction” if by “bona fide contradiction” we mean any proposition or “fact” that is opposed to the nature and

---

law of non-contradiction is a part of the created order.” “Introduction to Covenantal Apologetics: Part 27 – Logic and the external world.”

<sup>43</sup> Oliphint, *Revelation and Reason*, 285.

<sup>44</sup> Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 82-83. Oliphint says the same thing in *Revelation and Reason*, 320.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 229. Or in Frame’s words, “we should simply try to hold on both sides of the paradox, as best as we can, and walk by faith.” *DG*, 512.

<sup>46</sup> William Edgar in Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 32 fn. 15.

character of God.<sup>47</sup>

What then is “God’s logic” like, and how could we ever know? Oliphint is a bit skeptical: “Though theologians and apologists are quick to speak of *God’s* logic, I have yet to hear an adequate explanation of what his logic would be.”<sup>48</sup> Of course, we hope Oliphint is making a rhetorical charge here. For by the very nature of the case, it is *impossible* for any creature to possess an “adequate explanation of what” God’s logic would be – unless we’re simply talking about what God Himself reveals in His Word (which I hope would be “adequate”!). In that case, we can easily describe God’s logic as Scripture reveals it: despite apparent contradictions, God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility do not conflict (e.g. Is. 10, Gen. 50:20, etc.), God is good despite the existence of evil in His creation, Jesus is both God and man in the same person, etc. God’s logic says “death = life” (Mt. 10:3), “blessed are the poor” (Mt. 5:3), and so on and so forth.

So, things like the Trinity do not *violate* L2 or L3 (assuming L3 is an accurate reflection of L2). But L2 and L3 do not have the *capacity* to resolve the realities of L1 since such realities (“elements” in Van Til’s words) are entities and truths that transcend creation, leaving us with a paradox.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, “we must always ask ourselves whether our attempts at logical deduction run afoul of the general paradoxes pertaining to the divine nature and the Creator-creature relationship.”<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

So when asked the question, “Does God obey the law of non-contradiction?” the answer is not simple since “law” could be referring to either L1, L2, or L3 – God’s law, the law of creation, or man’s law (his understanding of the law of creation).

With respect to L3, we might respond by saying “God doesn’t have to in principle, depending on which L3 we’re talking about.” Indeed, there are many “different logics.”<sup>51</sup> God is under no obligation to submit to any of those human systems of logic – especially since they compete and conflict. Given that L3 is a product of man’s thought (reflection on creation and its inevitable orderliness), to answer “yes, absolutely” would be the equivalent of saying “God submits to man” (or even, “God thinks man’s thoughts after him”; not a biblical or Reformed conclusion, indeed). However, since L3 is based on L2 *through revelation* (the red box we’ve barely discussed) which is *in creation*, God cannot *not* follow (for example) what we would call the law of non-contradiction (a) if such a law is a faithful representation of reality (L2) and (b) since to do so would be to

---

<sup>47</sup> Oliphint, *Revelation and Reason*, 285.

<sup>48</sup> Oliphint, *Revelation and Reason*, 285 fn. 18.

<sup>49</sup> See James Anderson’s doctoral dissertation, *Paradox in Christian Theology* (London: Paderminster, 2007) for a thorough treatment on the subject of paradox.

<sup>50</sup> Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 169. See also, James Tyne, “Putting Contexts in Their Place: God’s Transcendence in Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book One” in *The Standard Bearer: A Festschrift for Greg L. Bahnsen*, ed. Steven Schlissel (Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2002), 371.

<sup>51</sup> Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics*, 90.

disassociate God from His own Word. For God to be God, He must always speak truth (e.g. Heb. 6:13-18).

With respect to L2, the answer is the same: God may but He doesn't have to, just as He leaves the law of contradiction powerless (necessarily, since God is incomprehensible, and transcends even the most fundamental aspects of creation, like number) to resolve the doctrine of the Trinity, incarnation, etc. Thus,  $2+2=4$  might be obvious and absolute to us, but it is not absolute with respect to God in the same way it is binding to us, as Vern Poythress has somewhat tried to demonstrate.<sup>52</sup> And (if we had more space) we would also conclude that this means God does not draw inferences as creatures do (primarily due to his attribute of simplicity).<sup>53</sup>

Frame says, "Now the 'law of noncontradiction' is such a fundamental law that I cannot imagine that it would ever be in error, even when formulated by a human being. But of course people err all the time in their *applications* of this law to specific arguments."<sup>54</sup> It is true that people err in applications of logic. But if L2 and L3 are created (as Van Til, Oliphint, and Bolt assert), it's not being suggested that the law of contradiction (L2) is *in error* (unless we're talking about L3 exclusively), but simply that God is not subordinate to creation. God is under no obligation to reveal truth in creation that must be resolvable

---

<sup>52</sup> "It may surprise the reader to learn that not everyone agrees that ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ' is true. But, on second thought, it must be apparent that no radical monist can remain satisfied with ' $2 + 2 = 4$ .' If with Parmenides<sup>2</sup> one thinks that all is one, if with Vedantic Hinduism<sup>3</sup> he thinks that all plurality is illusion, ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ' is an illusory statement. On the most ultimate level of being,  $1 + 1 = 1$ .<sup>4</sup> What does this imply? Even the simplest arithmetical truths can be sustained only in a worldview which acknowledges an ultimate metaphysical plurality in the world—whether Trinitarian, polytheistic, or chance-produced plurality. At the same time, the simplest arithmetical truths also presuppose ultimate metaphysical *unity* for the world; at least sufficient unity to guard the continued existence of "sames." Two apples *remain* apples while I am counting them; the symbol '2' is in some sense the *same* symbol at different times, standing for the *same* number. So, at the very beginning of arithmetic, we are already plunged into the metaphysical problem of unity and plurality, of the one and the many. As Van Til and Rushdoony have pointed out, this problem finds its solution only in the doctrine of the ontological Trinity.<sup>5</sup> For the moment, we shall not dwell on the thorny metaphysical arguments, but note only that without some real unity and plurality, ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ' falls into limbo. The "agreement" over mathematical truth is achieved partly by the process, described elegantly by Thomas Kuhn and Michael Polanyi, of excluding from the scientific community people of differing convictions.<sup>6</sup> Radical monists, for example, are not invited to contribute to mathematical symposia." Vern Poythress. "A Biblical View of Mathematics" in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective*, ed. Gary North (Vallecito: Ross House Books, 1976), 161.

<sup>53</sup> For a good section on something similar, see "What God Cannot Do" in Frame, *DG*, 518.

<sup>54</sup> Frame, RTS forum post.

by the law of contradiction, whether L2 or L3.<sup>55</sup>

With respect to L1, the answer is the same as Oliphint: no, since in this case we would be suggesting a contradiction within the very nature of God. God is consistent with Himself. God “is logical,”<sup>56</sup> something Frame, Oliphint, Bolt, and Van Til readily and rightly agree to.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [RPM Forum](#).

### Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).

---

<sup>55</sup> As Pratt said, “Do I think that the logical consistency of all biblical teachings is discernible? No.” *RPM*, 17. Frame asserts the same, but with more practical application: “If there are some apparent contradictions that we cannot reconcile (now, or in the future, or ever), we should simply try to hold on both sides of the paradox, as best as we can, and walk by faith.” *DG*, 512. This is essentially what Bavinck believed as he applied it to theological methodology: “When because of its weakness or limitations [dogmatics] is faced with the choice of either simply letting the truths of faith stand alongside of one another or, in the interest of maintaining the systematic form, of failing to do justice to one of them, dogmatics must absolutely opt for the former and resist the desire for a well-integrated system.” *Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 44.

<sup>56</sup> Oliphint, *Revelation and Reason*, 286.