Does God Observe the Law of Contradiction? . . . Should We?

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An issue that often arises in theological education is the role of the law of (non) contradiction in theological studies. In evangelical circles students encounter a wide range of viewpoints. Some theologians appear to argue that the law of contradiction is the final arbiter of truth; others seem to deny the law any normative role in the theological enterprise. An assortment of outlooks appears at many points between these extremes. In this paper, I will briefly present my own perspectives on the function of the law of contradiction in theology. Put simply, I will focus on the questions: *Does God observe the law of contradiction? Should we?*

My response to these questions focuses on three issues: 1) realities described by the law; 2) linguistic expressions and understandings of the law; and 3) theological applications of the law. These three concerns correspond roughly to the metaphysical, linguistic, and prescriptive perspectives know from the history of the debates on the subject.

A. Reality Described by the Law (Factual Considerations)

When I speak of factual considerations related to the law of contradiction, I have in mind the actual physical and metaphysical objects described by the law. That is to say, I am not speaking so much of contra-*diction*, for *dicta* (linguistic expressions) are not my concern here. Instead, I am interested in the objective realities described by the law of contradiction. In this vein, I usually speak not of contradiction but of reality as *non contra se* (not contrary to itself).

Competent human beings by and large intuit that reality is actually *non contra se*. We expect that facts cannot be something other than themselves. I have never heard of a widely respected thinker who actually disagreed with this outlook. Even the well-known paradoxes of Zen Buddhism (often accused of denying the law of contradiction) openly affirm that reality is *non contra se*. These paradoxes simply explore the implications of statements and ideas that seem contradictory in order to expose simplistic (and contradictory) assessments of reality.

What is the meta-epistemic and ontological basis for believing that facts are not contrary to themselves? In the final analysis, a Christian response to this question is that the *non contra se* condition derives from the nature of him who made all things. The Scriptures affirm that God is light without darkness; they teach that God cannot be other than himself and cannot act against himself. In effect, the consistency of the self-

contained God of Scripture lies behind the physical and metaphysical *non contra se* condition described by the law of contradiction.

This connection with the nature of God helps us see why so many logicians have rightly argued for the transcendental character of the law of contradiction (along with other laws of thought). Belief in the condition of facts to which the law refers is so fundamental to human thought that it is impossible to give direct argumentation in favor of or against the principle with implicitly assuming it. All arguments that reality is *non contra se* will implicitly employ that condition as a premise. For this reason, we may rightfully speak of belief in the factual situation described by the law of contradiction as a transcendental necessity for all (proper and improper) thought.

I should also mention at this point how our commitment to the inerrancy and consistency of Scripture is closely associated with this belief. As the revelation of God, the Scriptures are without error; they do not misrepresent the facts they describe. If this is so, the Scriptures neither contradict themselves nor other aspects of reality because reality is *non contra se*.

The views I have expressed so far can be summarized this way:

1) Can any aspect of reality actually be something other than itself? No.
2) Can any aspect of divine revelation in Scripture actually be contrary to itself or other realities? No.
3) Is the factual condition described by the law of contradiction rooted in the nature of God? Yes.
4) Is implicit or explicit acceptance of the *non contra se* factual condition necessary for all argumentation? Yes.

B. Understanding and Expressing the Law (Cognitive and Linguistic Considerations)

Unfortunately, a theoretical affirmation that reality is *non contra* se provides little practical help for theological work. To make much use of this knowledge in the theological enterprise we must move beyond factual considerations to cognition and linguistic expression. We must consider contra-*diction*, *dicta* as expressive of understanding. As soon as we move in this direction, however, significant differences arise between our *dicta* and the reality toward which they point.

An analogy may help explain what I mean. We affirm, for instance, the metaphysical reality of God's love. Following Scripture, we rightly say, "God is love." But the objective fact described by these words extends far beyond human understanding and expression. We can apprehend it truly to some degree; we can even describe it correctly in some measure. Yet, in the final analysis God's infinite love is incomprehensible to us

and we cannot fully express it. In much the same way, reality is *non contra se*, but the human mind never grasps completely and human language never fully describes this feature of reality.

A strong evidence in favor of this distinction is that the law of contradiction has been expressed in so many different ways. It is beyond the scope of this paper to list many of these important historical formulations. It will suffice simply to note a few examples that illustrate how expressions and understandings of the law are historically conditioned.

Very often discussions of the law of contradiction focus on Aristotle. His work (for instance, *Metaphysics* IV-VII) is foundational to much western philosophical analysis of the issue. Yet, Aristotle's views were deeply influenced by his historical circumstances. His discussion of the law of identity was heavily conditioned by his opposition to Heraclitus' principle of non-identity. His insistence on the law of excluded middle must be evaluated against the backdrop of Plato's τα γενομενα. His definition of contradiction rested squarely on his ontological distinction between accidence and substance.

Of course, Aristotle's distinction between accidence and substance has been disputed throughout the history of western philosophy and science. Such prominent thinkers as Frege, Ayers, Russell, Einstein, Whitehead, Heisenberg, Lukasiewicz, Zadeh, and Kosko – to name just a few – have directly and indirectly challenged this aspect of Aristotle's formulations with must success. Today it is widely recognized that Aristotle's understanding of the law of contradiction was deeply conditioned by his historical circumstances; his formulation was hardly the final word.

Other viewpoints on contradiction have contributed significantly to contemporary understanding. A. J. Ayer discussed the law in terms of propositional linguistic conventions. He expressed the principle in the formula: "not (p and not-p)" *(Language, Truth, and Logic).* Elementary bivalent discussions usually symbolize the law $\sim(p \cdot \sim p)$ (I. Copi, *Introduction to Logic*). More sophisticated bivalent formulations tend to express the law (more adequately in my opinion) along the lines of $\sim(p \cdot \sim p)$, $\forall_x \sim(P_x \cdot \sim P_x)$. Beyond this, Lukasiewicz, Zadeh, and Kosko have also refined definitions of the law by recasting it in terms of multivalent dynamics. While we should all agree that these and many other expressions point toward the genuine character of all reality, their variety reflects the difficulty of specifying one definition as indisputable.

This difficulty should not surprise us. As Christians we should expect all human definitions to suffer to one degree or another from the limitations of human thought and language, especially as they suffer the corruption of sin. Our best *dicta* concerning the *non contra se* condition will always have limitations. Only God's understanding of any aspect of creation is perfect. God has always understood himself fully and therefore has always fully understood the law of contradiction. No static obscures his concept of the

law. But interference from sin and finitude always crowds our perspectives. As the Reformed tradition insists that all theological formulations remain subject to further reform, we should also assume that all formulations of the law of contradiction can be improved.

In one sense, I am attracted to symbolic, mathematical definitions. They have the advantage of less ambiguity because they are theoretical expressions of the law in abstraction. In abstraction all kinds of logical principles can be developed without the encumbrances of actual facts.

For instance, Euclidian geometry has produced a number of very helpful theorems, axioms, corollaries, etc. to which we have grown accustomed from elementary geometry. We accept them as true, but we must remember that these principles function in an imaginary world that does not exist. Euclidian geometry defines points, lines, squares, circles, etc. in ways that they *never* actually occur. There is no physical straight line, no actual dimensionless point, and no perfect square or circle. Instead, these items and the rules that regulate them are hypothetical, imaginary conditions. By creating this artificial world, geometry avoids the ambiguities of physical points, lines, squares and circles, as well as the difficulties of applying geometric rules to the real world.

I cannot help but refer to Einstein's warning: "So far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain. And so far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality" *(Geometry and Experience).* For example, it seems plain enough to most people that two parallel lines cannot intersect. "That's the definition of parallel lines," we urge. But this rule only applies in the imaginary world of Euclidian geometry. Real things that we often treat as parallel –such as two sections of rail on a train track- are never perfectly parallel. If we extend any paired sections of train tracks far enough in both directions, they will eventually touch each other. Einstein's point is plain enough: reality does not fit neatly into the categories of geometry. To be sure, the abstract definition of parallel lines tells rail surveyors to set tracks as close to perfectly parallel as possible, but they must always remember that they can never reach their ideal in the physical world.

In much the same way, abstract symbolic formulations of the law of contradiction do not precisely match the way things actually are. As a result, they cannot provide a completely reliable guide for theological studies. Theologians deal with concrete things like biblical texts and theological propositions. These objects of study are linguistic expressions that do not bear the qualities of the imaginary world of abstractions.

In this regard, I am reminded of Polzin's clever summation of the book of Job: $F_x(a) : F_y(b) = F_x(b) : F_{a-1}(y)$ *(Biblical Structuralism).* Given the conventional meanings of these symbols, this formulation is relatively unambiguous because it is abstract. But how much does it help students who are trying to understand the text of Job? I believe most people sense that it is not very helpful. To begin with, theological students usually do not

understand the sigla of this expression. Moreover, one has to wonder how well Polzin's bivalent quantitative formulation can communicate the content of a book whose dominant genre is poetry.

The same kind of criticism applies to abstract formulations of the law of contradiction. They do not help much with the practical tasks of theological studies because Christian theology focuses not on an imaginary world, but on the concrete phenomena of Scripture and human discourse about Scripture.

The limitations of abstract expressions of the law of contradiction lead many theologians to work with definitions that rely more on ordinary language. These formulations of the law are much more useful. We easily make sense of them and employ them in many practical ways. Nevertheless, ordinary language formulations suffer from severe limitations when applied to academic pursuits.

I will illustrate my point by interacting with an ordinary language expression of the law of contradiction that often comes up at RTS-Orlando: "A cannot be A and non-A at the same time and in the same relationship."

I should affirm as forcefully as possible that I agree with the principle this formulation expresses. Reality is *non contra se* (see my comments in *Every Thought Captive* 22-26, 112-113; *He Gave Us Stories* 39, 114, 312; and "Popular Misconceptions of Van Til's Epistemology" 12).

Beyond this, I should also make it clear that I have no serious problem with using this or many other ordinary language expressions as working definitions of the law of contradiction. It has a commonsensical ring to it and we can employ it successfully in most day to day affairs. Police officers would be correct to insist that a stop sign cannot be a stop sign and not a stop sign at the same time and in the same relationship. Doctors have good reasons for urging that food cannot be healthy and not healthy at the same time and in the same relationship. Who could possibly think otherwise?

Even so. Theological students should realize that problems arise when we probe into this formulation. Permit me to suggest a few ambiguities that limit the usefulness of this expression of the law in theological studies.

1) What is "A" and "non-A"?

I know of nothing in the created universe, including human propositions and thoughts, that has sufficiently discrete boundaries to permit scholars to leave this question unexplored. Simply consider what we know about the nature of physical objects. Contemporary science has demonstrated that physical things are not utterly distinct from each other. Created reality is not binary but analog; it does not exist in sharply defined

segments but in continuum. Every physical object is constantly in tumultuous movement and variation. Electrons shift in quantum motion; molecules move, attach and detach. No discrete boundary marks the edge of any item. In a variety of scholarly pursuits this fact makes it difficult to identify what an "A" or "non-A" is.

For example, it seems straightforward that "an apple cannot be a non-apple." We have no problem so long as we are not particularly concerned with reality. But what precisely is the difference between a real "apple" and a real "non-apple"? What percentage of molecules may be missing from an apple before we consider it a non-apple? How many electron field disintegrations must have occurred? To what degree must the disintegrations have taken place? In at least one sense, every apple is to one degree or another an "apple" and "non-apple" at every moment.

In much the same way, the meanings of human expressions are not absolutely discrete items. The semantic boundaries of actual expressions are never precisely fixed. Take the sentence, "It's cold in here." At first glance, the meaning of this statement may seem to be a simple matter. Upon reflection, however, we realize it can mean many things, depending on the circumstances and the incredibly slippery intentions of the speaker. It can mean, "The temperature is too low." "This is an unfriendly group." It can even mean, "It's hot in here." This sentence, like all others, is somewhat elastic. We cannot totalize or fully grasp its meaning, and thereby precisely isolate its semantic boundaries.

A similar situation holds for human thoughts and ideas. Are they absolutely discrete items? Our understanding of cognition is extremely limited. Yet, the experience of thinking as well as scientific studies on the physiology of cognition suggest that ideas are soft, pliant, organically integrated, and constantly changing. Scrutiny reveals that ideas are not discrete entities. When examined closely enough, these created realities always reveal vague boundaries.

These facts raise important questions related to using ordinary language expressions of the law of contradiction in academic theology. A real "A" can be defined only to varying degrees of exactitude. Our understanding of the meaning of every biblical passage and theological proposition inevitably reaches areas of vagueness. Only God knows unambiguously and comprehensively what these items mean and how to distinguish them from each other. This human condition should press us to use ordinary language definitions of contradiction with caution.

2) What is "at the same time"?

Throughout history the concept of time has been disputed. Definitions continue to fall short of universal, even widespread adherence. How then can we expect the meaning of "at the same time" to be entirely clear?

We live in a world where our understanding of time is hardly settled. In a day when we speak of light years, nanoseconds, and "real time," our concept of time is particularly difficult to pin down. For instance, we have only begun to understand how space and time, physical movement and temporality, are inextricably tied to each other. Current experiments with quantum motion still defy all attempts to settle on an adequate understanding of time in relation to sub-atomic reality. Noted physicists such as Stephen Hawking suggest that similar difficulties apply to macro-space.

One factor with which we must all deal today is the destruction of the concept of instantaneity. In ordinary speech we speak of "a split second" or "a point in time," but these phrases disclose a concept of time that does not correspond to reality. It is common for people to think of time as a series of indivisible instances. Yet, advances in technology have demonstrated that every slice of time is actually a period of temporal duration. Every minute is sixty seconds long. Every second extends for 1000 milliseconds. Every millisecond may be divided into nanoseconds. Every nanosecond is itself an indefinitely divisible period of time. This characteristic of time reveals a significant limitation on "at the same time" formulas. Every aspect of created reality changes somewhat even during the smallest time unit we can measure. Items only appear to be stable because our instruments of measurement are limited. In a world where the concept of instananeity has been discredited, what does it mean to say that A cannot be A and non-A "at the same time."

Of course, on a day to day basis most people ignore these ambiguities quite happily. Questions about the nature of time do not come up when we glance at our imprecise wrist watches on the way to the store. In this sense, nothing is wrong with an ordinary language definition of contradiction that relies on "at the same time." But let the shopkeeper lock the door a little before our watches say it's time and we squarely face the vagueness of defining a moment in time. More importantly, some tasks – nuclear medicine, space exploration, astrophysics, and particle physics, to name just a few – require constant attention to the explosion of instantaneity.

Do these difficulties have any bearing on theology? The most obvious theological difficulty in this regard is our concept of divine eternality. How should we conceive of time in relation to God? Is eternality timelessness, endless time, temporal freedom, or a host of other options? What does it mean to say that something cannot be both true of God and not true of God "at the same time" when God is eternal? In my opinion these questions go beyond what is revealed in Scripture. As such, they raise serious doubts that a "same time" formulation will be entirely adequate for those who pursue scholarly study of theology.

3) What is "the same relationship"?

This aspect of the definition is the most problematic. At times, the word "sense" is substituted for "relationship," but the substitute term is not very clear either. *Sensus* has certainly had many different meanings throughout history. And as every hermeneutician will tell you, even the meaning of "meaning" is not altogether clear. It is not difficult to imagine that this ambiguity also has tremendous effects on the use of this ordinary language formulation of the law of contradiction.

4) What is the meaning of the terms "be" and "non"?

Competent logicians of many philosophical orientations have debated the meanings of these terms in ordinary language formulations for centuries. What makes a thing *be* something? What makes it *non*-something? So many assumptions regarding metaphysical and physical reality are implied by these terms that widespread agreement is unlikely. A case in point is how Aristotle's attempt to define these matters in terms of accidence and substance provides little help for contemporary investigation.

In theology these issues have come to the foreground in recent decades. In our own circles, the debate over the Dooyweerdian distinction between God as being and creation as existing brings the point home. We have a grasp of what these terms mean in ordinary affairs, but academic discussions require much more subtlety. In many ways, the recent controversy over Murray Harris' views on the resurrection of Christ also highlight the potential significance of this issue. We confess the bodily resurrection of Jesus, but what was the relation between Christ's pre-resurrection body and his resurrected body on a molecular and atomic level? Here we become lost in countless conundrums.

What is my purpose in raising these problems? Why press the idea that we cannot form an absolutely precise ordinary language expression of the law of contradiction?

On the one hand, it should be evident from my discussion above that I do not want to deny the importance of the law of contradiction. As I have pointed out, neither God nor his creation can truly be *contra se*. Likewise, actually contradictory ideas or propositions cannot both be true. Therefore the Scriptures can never contain actual contradictions and Christian theology should never affirm actually contradictory ideas.

On the other hand, I have a major set of pedagogical concerns that require me to stress just as strongly that all formulations of the law of contradiction fail to be entirely adequate for the understandings of this law of thought. Why? Simply put, our faulty human understandings of contradiction must not serve as the final arbiter of truth.

Very often theological students employ vague notions of contradiction with little care. Filled with false confidence that a contradiction consists simply in the selection of terms or the turn of a phrase, they reject aspects of biblical teaching as contradictory. They treat divine sovereignty and human significance as incompatible. Immutable decrees and providential immanence become mutually exclusive ideas. The full divinity and humanity of Christ are treated as contradictions. The list is very long.

To correct this practice, I try to alert students to the inadequacies of human conceptions of contradiction. Genuine contradictions do no occur in the Bible. They are also unacceptable in the Christian theological system. Yet, true theological propositions often appear to be contradictory. Only students aware of the difficulties of precisely defining a contradiction will take time to explore subtle distinctions that may reveal how apparently incompatible propositions are actually quite compatible.

Once again, I will summarize my viewpoints in a series of questions and answers.

1) Does God fully understand of the law of contradiction? Yes.
2) Do humans fully understand of the law of contradiction? No.
3) Does any human description of the law of contradiction state the principle precisely as it is (i.e. as God knows it)?No.
4) Is it important for students to exercise caution because of the inadequacies of every human understanding of the law of contradiction? Yes.

C. Application of the Law (Prescriptive Considerations)

A third way in which we may speak of the law of contradiction is its application or practical use in theological studies. How should we employ our understanding of the law of contradiction as we interpret Scripture and ecclesiastical doctrines?

My chief concern at this point is that the object of theology is incomprehensible to the subject of theology. I agree with the traditional way of putting the matter. We may truly apprehend God because he has condescended in revelation, but we may never comprehend him. Because we apprehend but do not comprehend, we should expect the revelation of God in Scripture to exhibit at least two qualities.

On the one hand, the logical consistency of many biblical teachings should be easily discerned. After all, Scripture reveals God whose very nature is absolute logical consistency. In this sense, the remarkable "consent of all the parts" (*WCF* 1.5) of Scripture is evidence of its divine inspiration. Similarly, the central Protestant hermeneutic of Scripture as the only infallible interpreter of Scripture (*WCF* 1.9) seems fruitless without the assumption of logical coherence in the Bible. Beyond this, we are instructed to look for "good and necessary consequence" as we work with the Word of God (*WCF* 1.6). All of these important beliefs reflect the conviction that Scripture will

exhibit remarkable logical consistency. The completely consistent God reveals himself in Scripture. Consequently, the Bible's compliance with the law of contradiction appears plainly in many places.

On the other hand, Scripture is an accommodated, partial revelation of the infinite God to creatures with finite capacities. In this sense, we may safely say that the Bible does not reveal infinitely more about God than it does reveal. Countless "secrets belong to the Lord our God" (Deut. 29:29). For this reason, we should also expect mysteries in the Bible.

To be sure, we must clearly distinguish mystery from contradiction. Mystery is the mere appearance of contradiction due to our incredibly enormous ignorance. The omniscient God faces no mysteries; he senses no apparent contradictions in Scripture. Yet, we are not omniscient. Even if we could fully understand everything in the Bible (and we can't come close to that), our ignorance of God would still be infinitely greater than our knowledge of him. Consequently, we are unable to explain how all the teachings of Scripture are in perfect conformity with the law of contradiction. We know that the Scriptures are from God who never contradicts himself. Yet, we are not always able to demonstrate this quality of Scripture because of our finitude and sinfulness.

Put simply, the logical consistency of biblical teachings is discernible to varying degrees. Much as our confessional heritage speaks of various levels of perspicuity (*WCF* 1.9), the conformity of biblical teaching to the law of contradiction appears more clearly in some places than in others. Some logical relationships are crystal clear. Other connections require careful analyses before their compatibility becomes evident. Some logical connections may be discerned in the future. Still, the conformity of other biblical teachings to the law of contradiction may never be discerned by finite minds.

This twofold character of Scriptural revelation has important implications for our use of the law of contradiction in theological studies. So long as we are dealing with Biblical teachings whose logical connections are easily discerned, we have little trouble using the law of contradiction in the theological enterprise. Difficulties arise, however, when we face those teachings that have not been or cannot be fully reconciled by our finite minds. How are theologians to use the law of contradiction when faced with a mystery? We are called upon to believe the teachings of Scripture despite their mysterious nature.

Once a student asked me, "Do you believe in the law of contradiction?" Naturally, I did not want to give a response until I knew what he meant. I went through a litany of options: "My answer depends on what you mean by 'believe in the law,'" I said to him.

1) "If you mean that we should not contradict ourselves in theology, then yes, I believe in it."

2) "If you mean that the Bible never actually contradicts itself, then yes, I believe in it."
3) "If you mean that I should reject a biblical teaching because I cannot explain how it conforms to the law of contradiction, then no, I don't believe in it."
4) "If you mean that I should forsake Christ if I come upon teachings in Scripture that the best theologians have not been able to reconcile with the law of contradiction as they understand it, then no, I don't believe in it."

My point to the student was that despite our theoretical affirmation of the law of contradiction, practical application of the principle is highly complex. It is insufficient simply to say, "I believe we should always accept the results of applying our understanding of the law of contradiction." At times, pursuing this line of thought will actually lead us into error.

On a practical level, theologians often have to choose between the thorough application of their understanding of the law and their belief in Scripture. We often have to ask ourselves, "Will I allow the tensions of mysteries in Scripture to remain in my theological formulations? Or will I construe biblical teachings without sufficient exegetical warrant so that they no longer seem contradictory?" In my opinion, the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* insists that Scripture, not our understanding of the law of contradiction, is our ultimate authority. Believers should submit to the teaching of the Bible, even if this means affirming beliefs that seem to be (but are not actually) in violation of the law of contradiction.

A profound example of this theological principle appears in John 6:25-70. In this passage Jesus forcefully challenged those around him to place their loyalty to him above their ability to apply their understanding of the law of contradiction.

Jesus began by saying, "I am the bread of life . . . I have come down from heaven" (John 6:35,38). The Jews objected to Jesus' statement because they believed it contradicted a fact they already knew to be true. "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven'" (John 6:42). From their perspective it was clear that Jesus was from earth (non-"from heaven"). Therefore, he could not also be "from heaven." That would be a contradiction.

Of course, as believers we know that Jesus was not from heaven in the same sense as he was from earth. He had come down from heaven in the miracle of the incarnation. But it is instructive that Jesus did not offer this explanation to his listeners. Instead of resolving the tension of his apparent contradiction, he simply stated, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). He left his audience without a logical resolution to his statements.

To intensify matters, Jesus challenged loyalties again, "If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (John 6:51). The Jews became even more perturbed. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" they asked (John 6:52). They believed that Jesus' word contradicted something else they were sure was true. The Messiah would never suggest an act of cannibalism, but Jesus claimed to be Messiah and urged them to eat his flesh.

Naturally, as Christians we reason from the rest of Scripture that Jesus was not contradicting himself. He did not actually expect anyone to eat his flesh. But Jesus did not explain the metaphorical nature of his words. He left his audience feeling the tension of another apparent contradiction.

In fact, he intensified the matter once again by adding, "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:53). Jesus, the self-proclaimed Messiah demanded something absolutely unthinkable. He even urged them to drink his blood. Their reaction was not surprising: "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" (John 6:60).

Once again, Jesus refused to explain what he meant in a way that would have resolved their logical tensions. Instead, he raised the stakes a final time. "Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before!" he urged (John 6:61). In effect, Jesus said, "You think what I have said so far contradicts your prized beliefs? Try this one. I'm going back to heaven where I was before." This statement was an intolerable contradiction for those listening to Jesus. They knew clearly enough that he was just a man.

Without waiting for a response, Jesus explained why his opponents had such difficulty accepting his teaching. Receiving Jesus' claims as true was not primarily a matter of resolving the logical consistency of his claims; it was a matter of divine enablement. "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him" (John 6:65). This explanation was more than many of Jesus' disciples could bear. They simply could not remain loyal to him when his teachings appeared to be so contradictory of truth. As a result, "many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (John 6:66).

Jesus then turned to Peter and the Twelve. How would they react? "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked (John 6:67). Note well that Jesus did not explain his words to them. He also left the Twelve without logical resolution. How did they respond? Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:69). Peter did not claim to understand everything Jesus had said; he had not figured things out. He still faced apparent contradictions posed by Jesus' words. But he did so with his loyalties in proper order. He refused to give priority to his ability to apply the law of contradiction over his

loyalty to Jesus. He would follow Jesus no matter what Jesus said. Why? It had been given to him by the Father.

A similar situation holds for all believers when they come upon teachings in Scripture that seem to be contradictory. Even if we are never able to reconcile every biblical teaching with every other, we must remain loyal to Scripture as the Word of life.

Theological students not only face complexities when applying their understanding of the law of contradiction to the Bible. They encounter similar problems applying the law to ecclesiastical theology. Unlike Scripture, theologians make mistakes; they actually contradict themselves, the Bible, or the facts of creation. We must be ready to reject formulations that are genuine contradictions of truth. Yet, we must always remember that even theologians may seem to contradict truth without actually violating the law of contradiction.

Permit me to give an example of the care theological students must exercise when evaluating the logical consistency of other theologians. In his *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, Van Til made an unfortunate error in judgment by stating, "We do assert that God, that is, the whole Godhead, is one person" (*Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 229). Although he did not say it precisely in this manner, it is not entirely unfair to summarize his view as, "The whole Godhead is three persons and the whole Godhead is one person." I have absolutely no interest in defending this statement; it is not well formed and differs with traditional distinctions between "person" and "essence." My concern at the moment is the criticism I have heard that his statement is a contradiction.

Does Van Til's statement involve a contradiction? It would seem that Van Til was saying "A ("The whole Godhead is one person") and non-A ("The whole Godhead is three persons") are true at the same time and in the same relationship." But this is not necessarily the case.

A more adequate interpretation of Van Til at this point will factor in the linguistic fact that people often use the same terms with very different meanings, even in the very same sentence. Consider these examples: "Give me a match before the match begins." "Put the trunk in the trunk, and put that trunk in the trunk." The word "match" and "trunk" have sufficiently broad semantic fields in English to permit such sentences. Native English speakers have little trouble grasping the implicit distinctions. In fact, it is quite common in every human language to use the very same terminology without qualification in a single context to mean very different things.

Similar situations occur in Scripture. Consider the use of אֶרֶץ in Genesis 1. In Genesis 1:2 the word means the whole earth covered by the deep. In Genesis 1:10 it means the dry land as opposed to those portions of the earth covered by water. The meanings of πιστενυω in John 2:23 and 3:16 require similar analysis. In John 3:16, "believing" is

used in the sense of saving faith that secures eternal life. In John 2:23 "believing" is not saving faith because Jesus did not entrust himself to these "believers."

To conclude that Van Til's statement is a contradiction, we must give evidence that he intended to mean precisely the very same thing both times he used the word "person." If he meant anything different ("at another time," "in some other relationship," etc.) then the statement is not contradictory. It may be confusing; Van Til was known for confusing people. One is even justified in saying that it sounds like a contradiction. Yet, declaring Van Til's view to *be* a contradiction without delving into his intentions is inadequate.

In fact, I would suggest that much evidence points in a different direction. Van Til's other writings and teachings, his enthusiastic acceptance by respected Reformed theologians (Machen, Murray, *et al*), and his good standing in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church should be evidence enough that he did not affirm a contradictory view of God. His formulation is not the best, but it is not likely a contradiction.

How do I advise students to approach an issue like this statement by Van Til? In the first place, I encourage them to read all people charitably, especially their brothers and sisters in the Reformed tradition. Scriptures require us to give the benefit of the doubt whenever possible. At the same time, however, I encourage students to be alert to apparently contradictory theological propositions. They should investigate them as much as possible. Moreover, students should not be completely satisfied with accepting apparently contradictory views until they are sufficiently clarified.

I cannot imagine any Reformed theologian objecting strongly to these observations on the application of the law of contradiction. We all believe the Scriptures do no contradict themselves, but we also believe they contain mysteries that surpass our logical capacities. Yet, there are at least two areas of discussion where significant differences may arise.

First, Reformed theologians disagree over the number of mysteries in Scripture. Just how many mysteries are there in the Bible? As I have wrestled with this question, I have notices that responses seem to divide along the lines of disciplines. Apart from those who have been deeply influenced by biblical theology, systematic theologians tend to find fewer mysteries in Scripture than biblical scholars. There are exceptions of course, but the pattern is true by and large.

Many factors cause this difference, but one major influence is the difference between the disciplines of biblical and theological studies. Biblical scholars immerse themselves in the specific data of Scripture. The particularities of texts stand out as these scholars involve themselves in the subtleties of detailed exegesis. In short, biblical scholars are concerned primarily with the "many," the particularities of Scripture. Systematic theologians, however, are more concerned with the "one," the underlying system of

Scripture. They deal with issues whose rough exegetical edges have already been smoothed off by centuries of ecclesiastical debate. As a result, their theological data fit together more easily than the details of biblical data facing the biblical scholar.

As someone trained in Old Testament studies, I am inclined to say that the Scriptures are teeming with mysteries – aspects of truth that cannot be completely reconciled with our understanding of the law of contradiction. Along with many Reformed biblical scholars, I find that Scriptural texts frequently press us to affirm viewpoints that to many seem logically incompatible. Sometimes initial recognitions of logical tensions simply push us toward further study. After careful analysis some difficulties can be resolved. Future generations may go further in clearing up other matters. Still, I often have to shrug my shoulders and admit, "I don't know how these things fit together." Yet, at every turn I am also quick to affirm that these seeming contradictions are not actual contradictions. They are the result of my misunderstanding or my finitude.

Systematic theologians, however, devote themselves to presenting the teachings of Scripture with as much logical consistency as possible. This motivation often causes them to push distinctions and qualifications of ideas so that the number of mysteries shrinks.

Both strategies have strengths and dangers. Systematic theologians help us see the consistency of Scripture. Yet, they invariably run the risk of oversimplifying the details of biblical data for the sake of the larger logical system of theology. Biblical scholars help us see the particulars and distinctive contours of Scripture. Yet, they run the equally serious risk of de-emphasizing the logical consistency of Scriptural teaching as a whole. Neither approach is necessarily better than the other. It's a matter of the forest and the trees.

Seminaries have teachers with specializations in different fields precisely because theological students need to see both emphases in action. The creative tensions that rise should help us all do our jobs more effectively. Those prone to logical consistency will restrain those who focus on detail. Those prone to emphasize detail prod those primarily concerned with building a logical system. This wonderful interaction is one of the ways we may remain true to our theological tradition. The Reformed tradition calls its scholarly community in two directions. We must remain in continuity with the Reformed system of doctrine, but we must also keep reforming. Is one calling more important than the other? I don't think so.

Second, differences in strategy also appear because of different orientations in apologetics. On one side, some Reformed theologians are deeply concerned with the theological and cultural understandings of the importance of reason. As a result, they develop approaches to apologetics that emphasize the rational character of our faith.

Irrationalism is perceived as a great enemy of the gospel such that Christians must respond with a strong assertion of the importance of logical consistency.

On the other side, some Reformed theologians have an additional concern. For instance, as a student of Van Til, I heartily applaud attempts to offer a rational defense of the gospel. Van Til himself called Christianity "ultimate rationalism" (*Defense of the Faith* 57). Non-Christian irrationalism in its various forms (existentialism, relativism, nihilism, post-modernism, etc.) is our enemy. As unbelievers attack the gospel from this direction, we must be ready with an adequate rational defense.

Nevertheless, the genius of Van Til's approach to apologetics was his contention that we face two fronts in our conflict with the unbelieving world. One front is the attack of non-Christian irrationalism. This concern led Van Til to accuse Kant of being the miscreant of western philosophy; he saw Kant as introducing a detrimental element of skepticism and irrationality. The same rationale explains Van Til's unequivocal rejection of Barthianism in *Christianity and Barthianism*.

A second front, however, is just a important. Van Til also saw non-Christian rationalism as the enemy of Christ. The pretense of autonomy in the rationalism of Parmenides and Descartes challenge the principles of Christianity as much as the pretense of autonomy in the irrationalism of Heraclitus and Derrida. In a word, the enlightenment's critical rational mind is no more the friend of Christ than Nietzschean will to power. For this reason, Van Til sought to avoid creeping rationalism as much as creeping irrationalism in Christian theology. He insisted that both forms of rebellion against God must be rejected.

I follow Van Til in this twofold concern. I believe it is important to prepare our students for the threats of non-Christian irrationalism and of non-Christian rationalism. Both challenges are alive and well today. We face anti-intellectualism and fideism (irrationalism), but we also face intellectualism and scientism (rationalism). Theological students in the Reformed tradition must prepare for both of these challenges.

In this way a Reformed theologian's orientation in apologetics can lead to different priorities in theology. Those who emphasize the rejection of non-Christian irrationalism will tend to protect the law of contradiction from criticism and limitations. Those who are also concerned with rejecting non-Christian rationalism will tend to circumscribe the application of human understandings of the law of contradiction in theology.

Permit me to summarize my views a final time:

1) Is any biblical teaching actually contradictory to another? No.
2) Do I believe that the law of contradiction must be applied in biblical and theological studies? Yes.

3) Do I think that the logical consistency of all biblical teachings is discernible? No.
4) Should we believe what our exegesis of Scripture reveals even if our results are mysterious? Yes.

In principle, the law of contradiction is one of many indispensable tools for theology. It is just as important as many other instruments such as linguistics, history, science, philosophy, art, and the like. We simply cannot do theology without these tools. Nevertheless, on a practical level the teaching of Scripture must regulate how we employ these instruments. In the final analysis, all of them – even applying our understanding of the law of contradiction – have limitations.

In conclusion, I return to the questions that started this paper. *Does God observe the law of contradiction?* Yes. It is his very nature to do so. *Should we?* Yes, so long as we do not place our imperfect understandings and applications of the law above the teaching of Scripture as the unquestionable arbiter of truth. This discussion barely touches the surface of this subject; much more work needs to be done to develop a more thorough understanding of the law of contradiction in theology. I sincerely hope this discussion will help us move toward that goal.