Paradox in Christian Theology: An Analysis of Its Presence, Character, and Epistemic Status

by James Anderson

Reviewed by W. Gary Crampton

Paradox in Christian Theology,[1] by Dr. James Anderson, is one of some 30 Paternoster Theological Monographs. According to the "Series Preface," the "aim of the series is theology written in the twofold conviction that the church needs theology and theology needs the church—which in reality means theology done for the glory of God." Surely this "aim" is admirable, as we believe with the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Q. 1) that "man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever."[2] This review will attempt to see if Dr. Anderson's work fulfills this "aim."

After chapter 1 (Introduction: The Problem of Paradox), wherein the author introduces his subject matter, the book is divided into two major sections. Part I: The Presence of Paradox, is dealt with in chapters 2 (The Paradox of the Trinity), 3 (The Paradox of the Incarnation), and 4 (Responding to Paradox). Part II: The Propriety of Paradox is studied in chapters 5 (Warranted Christian Doctrines), 6 (A Model for the Rational Affirmation of Paradoxical Theology), and 7 (The Model Defended). Chapter 8 (Conclusion: The Prospects of Paradox) brings the author's study to a close. It is worthy of mention that Dr. Anderson (who is obviously a very learned individual) writes with an irenic style that is noticeable (and appreciated) throughout the book.

As we study the issue of "paradox in Christian theology" in this review it is important for us to understand, as Kenneth Kantzer correctly stated, that there are two kinds of paradoxes: rhetorical and logical. The former is a "figure used to shed light on a topic by challenging the reason of another and thus startling him." The Bible clearly contains rhetorical paradoxes (see *Matthew* 10:39; *John* 11:25-26; *2 Corinthians* 6:9-10). Logical paradoxes, however, are altogether different. Here we have a situation where an assertion (or two or three assertions) is self-contradictory, or at least seems to be so. One way or the other, the assertion cannot be reconciled before the bar of human reason.[3] Whereas no one can rationally deny the use of rhetorical paradoxes in the Bible, there are some who also assert that the Bible contains logical paradoxes as well. Dr. Anderson is one of these. When this reviewer interacts with the author of this book on the subject of paradox, it will be based on his acceptance of logical paradox.

Dr. Anderson defines "paradox" as "a set of claims which taken in conjunction appear to be logically inconsistent." For the author "paradox" is "synonymous with *apparent contradiction*" (5-6). A paradox, then, is only apparently a contradiction. Yet, it is one that cannot seemingly be reconciled before the bar of human reason. In chapter 1 the author asks two questions—the answers give us the "Outline of the Book." The first question is: "Are any essential Christian doctrines genuinely paradoxical?" Part I of the book (9-152) responds in the affirmative (6-7). The second question is: "Can a person rationally believe a paradoxical doctrine?" Part II of the book (107-306) also gives an affirmative reply (6-7).

As for Part I, Dr. Anderson contends in chapter 2 that "The Paradox of the Trinity" (11-59) and in chapter 3 "The Paradox of the Incarnation" (61-106) are forms of logical paradox.[4] They are only apparently contradictory because "the Bible nowhere makes any formally contradictory statements about God's triune nature or the hypostatic union." Generally speaking "the perceived contradiction will be merely implicit—but no less awkward for that" (225). Regarding "the paradox of the Trinity," the author studies "Early Trinitarianism" (13-31) and "Recent Trinitarianism" (31-58). His "early Trinitarian" studies include the Nicene and Post-Nicene fathers. Here the author covers the Monarchian teachings of the third century, the works of Origen, Tertullian, Arius, Athanasius, and Augustine (as well as others). In his "recent Trinitarian" studies Dr. Anderson studies the writings of Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., Richard Swinburne, David Brown, A. P. Martinich, and others. Having completed his overview of these teachings, the author reaches his conclusion:

> As the debate stands today, no writer from the first century to the twenty-first century has offered an explanation of the doctrine of the

---

1 James Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology: An Analysis of Its Presence, Character, and Epistemic Status* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007). The pagination found within the body of this review is from Dr. Anderson's book.
2 All references to the Westminster Standards, comprised of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, and the *Larger* and *Shorter Catechisms*, are from the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994). The English has been modernized.
3 Kenneth S. Kantzer, "Paradox," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 826-827.

---

4 The author believes that the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are only two examples of paradox in Christian theology. He contends that "a case can be made of the paradoxicality of several doctrines distinctive to the Reformed tradition" (7n).

Trinity that is both clearly orthodox and free from apparent contradiction. It seems that the careful theologian inevitably faces a dilemma: that of embracing either paradox or heterodoxy. (59)

This is an astonishing statement—the first of several such statements which will be analyzed below.

In his study of "the paradox of the Incarnation," Dr. Anderson overviews "Early Christianity" (63-80) and "Recent Christianity" (80-105). His "early Christianity" deals, for the most part, with Chalcedonian Christology. The teachings of numerous writers are examined: Apollinarius, Athanasius, the Alexandrian school, the Cappadocian fathers, the Antiochene school, Nestorianism, Augustine, the Monophysite groups, and others. "Recent Christology" studies the Kenosis theory, Dual-Psychology interpretations, Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, and others. The conclusion reached by the author is:

As with the Trinity, so with the Incarnation. There appears to be no option for the Christian theologian but to grasp one or other horn of the dilemma: to abandon orthodoxy or to embrace paradox and thereby face the charge or irrationality. (106)

Here too is another astonishing statement.

In chapter 4, Dr. Anderson responds to the matter of Biblical paradox. He outlines several approaches to help clear up the problem of paradox, and concludes by saying, "In this chapter I have considered a range of possible responses to the problem of doctrinal paradox, and have argued that each is unsatisfactory on either philosophical or theological grounds" (152). In other words, there is no real solution to the alleged difficulty of paradox in the Bible. This is the third astonishing statement that the author has made in the first part of the book.

Gordon Clark did not have this problem. In *The Trinity*[5] and *The Incarnation*,[6] he propounded a rational, Biblical view of both doctrines. Robert Reymond also set forth rational explanations of the Trinity and Christology in *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*.[7] Then there is the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which teaches that there is a perfect harmony in all Scripture, *i.e.*, a "consent of all the parts" (1:5), and wherein we find a rational, orthodox teaching on the doctrine "Of God, and of the Holy Trinity" (2:1-3) and "Of Christ the Mediator" (8:1-8). In the words of Gordon Clark, the Westminster theologians and the Reformers before them "believed that God's revelation can be formulated accurately. They were not enamored of ambiguity [as is found in logical paradox]; they did not identify piety with a confused mind [which is the result of logical paradox]. They wanted to proclaim the truth with the greatest possible clarity. And so ought we."[8]

Indeed, there is mystery involved in these doctrines, but not paradox. The Bible distinguishes between mystery and logical paradox. If the author were talking merely about the mystery involved here, there would be no problem.[9] A mystery in the Bible

is that which was once hidden, but now has been revealed (see *Ephesians* 3:4-6 and *Colossians* 1:27). This is true with regard to Old Testament teachings which are made clear under the New Testament era, and it is also true of those doctrines which need additional study to give them clarity. That is, with additional revelation, a mystery becomes clear. As stated in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1:7):

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place in Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

This is taught (implicitly) in *Mark* 8:22-26, where Jesus Christ performs the miracle of giving sight to a blind man. When Christ first laid hands on the individual his eyes were opened to the point where he saw "men like trees, walking." But with the second laying on of Christ's hands, the man "saw everyone clearly."[10] This is the way it is with the study of the Bible. The more careful study and meditation that is practiced, the more clear the teachings of Scripture become. This is what the *Confession* means when it speaks of the "due use of the ordinary means." It is a matter of reading and studying the Scriptures by applying the proper rules of logic and grammar. There is nothing mystical about reading the Bible.

Jonathan Edwards acknowledged that there is a mysterious element to divine, special revelation. He wrote that "it may well be expected that a revelation of truth concerning an infinite Being should be attended with mystery…" [Yet] "men are capable of understanding as much as is revealed [by God]," even though they are not able to "understand everything that belongs to the things that are revealed." The Biblical accounts are "of such a nature, containing such depths and hidden treasures of knowledge, that there should be room for improvement of understanding, and to find out more and more, to all the wisest and best of men, to the end of the world." It is true that some portions of Scripture are more difficult than others, but the more one studies Scripture, the more God opens up His Word.[11] "Men are reasonable," said Edwards, and "the Bible does not ask [them] to believe things against reason."[12] Curt Daniel correctly stated that whereas some Calvinists "admitted paradox and mystery" in the Bible, Edwards sought "reasonable explanations for things revealed in Scripture."[13]

According to the *Westminster Confession*, and Reformed Christianity as a whole, not only has God revealed Himself in the

seems to equate mystery with paradox. At least the two terms appear to be used somewhat synonymously. He writes: "A mystery is a metaphysical state of affairs the revelation of which appears implicitly contradictory to us on account of present limitations in our cognitive apparatus and thus resists systematic description in a perspicuously consistent manner" (245).

10 John Owen, *Hebrews* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), VI:72; Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, n.d.), V:503.

11 Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Volume 23, *The "Miscellanies" 1153-1360*, edited by Douglas A. Sweeny (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004), *Miscellany* 1340.

12 Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, revised and corrected by Edward Hickman (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), I:113.

13 Curt Daniel, *The History of Theology and Calvinism* (Springfield, Illinois: Good Books, 2003), 99.

5 Gordon H. Clark, *The Trinity* (The Trinity Foundation, 1985).

6 Gordon H. Clark, *The Incarnation* (The Trinity Foundation, 1988).

7 Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998, second edition), 205-342, 545-702.

8 Gordon H. Clark, "The Reformed Faith and the *Westminster Confession*, Part 2," *The Trinity Review* (June 2009), 2-3; Gordon H. Clark, *God's Hammer: The Bible and Its Critics* (The Trinity Foundation, 1982), 199.

9 Dr. Anderson does deal with the subject of mystery in the book, but he

66 books of the Bible, He has done so in a manner that is comprehensible. God has spoken in His Word in order to be understood. In the words of Paul: "For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand" (*2 Corinthians* 1:13; *New International Version*). The *Confession* in no way denies that some teachings of Scripture are harder to understand than others. For instance, Peter writes: "as also in all his [Paul's] epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand" (*2 Peter* 3:16). But note that Peter does not say that "all things" or "many things" which Paul writes are "hard to understand," but only "some things." Further, the apostle does not teach us that these "some things" cannot be understood; he merely claims that "some things are hard to understand," clearly indicating that they can be understood with further study. Then too, Peter goes on to say, in the same verse, it is those who are "untaught" and "unstable" who "twist" these teachings "to their own destruction, as they do the rest of the Scriptures." Paul wrote that "even if our Gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing" (*2 Corinthians* 4:3).

The *Confession* (1:7) affirms what those adhering to the existence of logical paradox in the Bible deny, *i.e.*, that "those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them."[14] As the Psalmist writes: "The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes" (*Psalm* 19:8). And again: "Your [God's] Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (*Psalm* 119:105). Too, in *Deuteronomy* 6:4-9, when Moses tells the people of Israel that they are to teach the Scriptures "diligently" to their children, the obvious assumption is that the people of Israel and their children were expected to be able to understand the teaching of Scripture. The same is true of *John* 5:39, where Jesus enjoins us to "search the Scriptures." The supposition is that Scripture is clear enough to be searched and understood.

It is important to understand that when the *Confession* says that "those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for *salvation,* are clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other," it is not referring merely to conversion and justification. In a Reformed worldview, "salvation" relates to all of life, sanctification as well as conversion. The Bible teaches us about redemption, but its teachings are not exclusively redemptive. The *Confession* (1:6) states that "the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture."

Mystery, then, does exist in the Bible. But that logical paradox exists in Scripture is denied by a number of passages. According to *1 Corinthians* 14:33 "God is not the author of confusion." God's Word to us, says the apostle, is not both "Yes and No," but in Christ it is "Yes…to the glory of God" (*2 Corinthians* 1:18-20). There may be mystery involved in these doctrines, but not contradiction or even apparent contradiction that cannot be resolved by rational deduction. Gordon Clark correctly stated that a Biblical paradox is nothing more than "a charley-horse between the ears that can be eliminated by rational massage."[15]

Robert Reymond has pointed out that one of the difficulties with asserting that the Bible contains logical paradox is that it is totally subjective. What may be a paradox to one person, may not be to another.[16] For example, the issue of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility was no paradox to the theologians who met at the Westminster Assembly. In chapter 3 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, they taught that "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established." This doctrine, these theologians went on to say, may be a "high mystery" (*i.e.*, difficult to fully understand), but it is in no way paradoxical (*i.e.*, impossible to reconcile). In fact, they claimed, the doctrine is "to be handled with special prudence and care" by men as they seek "the will of God [as] revealed in His Word." This, of course, would not be possible with any doctrine that cannot be reconciled by the mind of man.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones said it this way: "The difference between Christianity and every false religion is the difference between mystery 'revealed' and mystery 'concealed'…Christianity is mystery revealed."[17] If Dr. Lloyd-Jones is correct (and he is), then any religion that is full of logical paradox is a "false religion." Jonathan Edwards agreed. It is the non-Christian theories that are composed of "a whole heap of inconsistencies."[18]

Part II of *Paradox in Christian Theology*, as noted above, deals with the issue of "the propriety of paradox," and attempts to answer the question: "Can a person rationally believe a paradoxical doctrine?" Dr. Anderson believes that this is possible. The author is not asking if someone may believe in logically paradoxical doctrines, because this would certainly be true. We all believe things which are not true, but we believe them anyway because we are mistaken as to their rational consistency and truthfulness. At the time we do not see them as contradictory or even apparently contradictory. This is a different question than asking if a person may "rationally" believe in a paradoxical doctrine. This is not possible. Dr. Anderson is incorrect in his assertion.

In chapter 5 (155-216), titled "Warranted Christian Doctrines," the author closely follows Alvin Plantinga's theory of epistemic warrant (which is interesting because, in contradistinction to Anderson, Plantinga does believe that there are orthodox formulations of the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation which are not inconsistent [215]), and lays the groundwork of an epistemological foundation for the claim that paradoxical doctrines ("in general") can be rationally believed (153).

Chapter 6 (217-262) sets forth a model for us to follow in the understanding of theological paradox that "most" believers will accept as rational—provided, of course, that the revelation given us in the Bible is true (153). In this chapter the author studies "The Character of Paradox" (220-236), "The Origin of Paradox" (237-243), and "The Rationality of Paradox" (244-261). He brings the chapter to a close with the assertion that his RAPT (Rational Affirmation of Paradoxical Theology) model is the best model in that it "shows that a Christian can be epistemically warranted (and therefore rational) in believing a set of theological claims even when those claims give the appearance of inconsistency" (262).[19]

---

14 For more on this subject, see W. Gary Crampton. *By Scripture Alone* (The Trinity Foundation, 2002).

15 Gordon H. Clark, *The Atonement* (Trinity Foundation, 1987), 32.

16 Robert L. Reymond, *Preach the Word!* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1988), 30-31.

17 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1988, 2005), 11:173.

18 Edwards, *Works*, I:30.

19 According to Dr. Anderson: "At the heart of the RAPT model is the claim that the paradoxical doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are best

We will see below that this is an "unwarranted" belief.

It is noteworthy that at one point in this chapter the author even suggests that John Calvin (due to the Genevan Reformer's belief that God is "incomprehensible" [by which he meant nothing more than a creature like man can never penetrate the depths of God's essence {238}], and his teaching that God, in His infinite majesty, "lisps" to His creatures in His Word as a mother speaks baby talk to her children [241]) opted for a form of theological paradox. This is simply not true. Calvin was very opposed to the concept of logical paradox in Scripture. He wrote: "Certainly no one can be more averse to paradox then I am."[20] John Robbins has correctly stated that "the Reformation began with a rejection of contradiction and logical paradox, not an embrace of it. Those who today claim to be Reformed, and yet praise paradox, have abandoned this principle of the Reformation."[21] Chapter 7 (263-306) deals with various objections to Dr. Anderson's model which might be raised. In it he covers "Biblical Concerns" (267-275), "Theological Concerns" (275-285), and "Philosophical Concerns" (285-306). Again he asserts that the RAPT model he proposes is "viable and deserves serious consideration as a solution to the problem of doctrinal paradox" (306).

The fact is, however, that a logical paradox (even an apparent contradiction) cannot be "rationally" believed, because one would not know what to believe. If one statement even "apparently" contradicts another, how would one know which to believe? What could be more obvious than this? It is not "rationally" possible to believe such paradoxes. Robert Reymond posed three insuperable obstacles to the notion that the Bible contains logical paradox.

First, as noted above, the issue of what is and what is not a logical paradox is totally subjective. Therefore, to claim universally that such and such a teaching is a paradox would require omniscience. How could anyone know that this teaching had not been reconciled before the bar of someone's human reason?

Second, even when one claims that the seeming contradiction is merely "apparent," he raises serious problems. "If actually non-contradictory truths can appear as contradictories, and if no amount of study or reflection can remove the contradiction, there is no available means to distinguish between this 'apparent' contradiction and a real contradiction." How then would man know whether he is embracing an actual contradiction, which if actually found in the Bible (an impossibility, according to *1 Corinthians* 14:33 and *2 Corinthians* 1:18-20), would reduce the Scriptures to the same level as the contradictory Koran of Islam or a seeming contradiction? If Reymond's analysis here is sound (and it is), then Anderson's RAPT "warrant" for holding to the concept of logical paradox is "unwarranted." The reason being that one cannot "rationally" believe "a set of theological claims even when those claims give the appearance of inconsistency" (262). The acronym RAPT (Rational Affirmation of Paradoxical Theology) itself is oxymoronic. There is no "rational affirmation" possible of a logical paradox.

And third, once one asserts (as with Neo-orthodoxy) that truth may come in the form of irreconcilable contradictions, "he has given up all possibility of ever detecting a real falsehood. Every time he rejects a proposition as false because it 'contradicts' the teaching of Scripture or because it is in some other way illogical, the proposition's sponsor only needs to contend that it only *appears* to contradict Scripture or to be illogical, and that his proposition is one of the terms...of one or more of those paradoxes which we have acknowledged have a legitimate place in our 'little systems.'" This being so, Christianity's uniqueness as the only true revealed religion, will die the death of a thousand qualifications.[22]

To insist on the existence of logical paradox in the Bible is to hold, at least implicitly, to a very low view of the infallible, inerrant Word of God. The reason being, as Dr. Clark said, that "dependence on... paradox...destroys both revelation and theology and leaves us in complete ignorance."[23] What we have here is a divorce between Christian truth (and faith) and reason. Logic, we are told, is not to be trusted. The truth of the matter is, however, that logic is an attribute of God Himself. He is the "LORD God of truth" (*Psalm* 31:5); and truth is necessarily rational (logical) (*1 Timothy* 6:20). The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth (*John* 14:17; *1 John* 5:6). And Jesus Christ is truth (logic, wisdom, reason) incarnate (*John* 14:6; *1 Corinthians* 1:24, 30). Moreover, as the divine *Logos* ("Word") of God (*John* 1:1), Jesus Christ gives us a rational revelation in the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. As the *Westminster Confession* (1:5) teaches, there is a "consent of all the parts" of Scripture. "God is not the author of confusion" (*1 Corinthians* 14:33), writes Paul. He cannot speak to us in illogical, paradoxical statements. As logic is one of God's attributes, the laws of logic are necessarily eternal principles. And because man is God's image (*Genesis* 1:26-27), these laws are a part of man.

Chapter 8 (307-312) is written as the conclusion to the book. Here the author summarizes his overall thesis: 1) There are essential Christian doctrines that are genuinely paradoxical; and 2) a person can be rational in believing in paradoxical doctrines. This reviewer has explained that Dr. Anderson's conclusions are in error. Neither claim is true.

We began this essay noting that the goal of Paternoster Theological Monographs is to publish those theological works that are "done for the glory of God." Dr. Anderson's *Paradox in Christian Theology* is an attempt to do just that. But if Gordon Clark is correct (and he is) that "dependence on... paradox...destroys both revelation and theology and leaves us in complete ignorance," then when the author would have us believe that the God of the Bible has given us a set of doctrines which are ultimately paradoxical, without in any way intending to do so, he has done disservice to the God of the Word and the Word of God. This does not glorify God.

What is our conclusion? Simply this: The Bible does not contain logical paradox. Dr. Clark is correct; any so-called logical paradoxes found in Holy Scripture are nothing more than charley-horses between the ears that can be removed by rational massage. They are the result of faulty exegesis, not God's Word. Any stumbling in this area will lead to (at least) a fall into Neo-orthodox nonsense.

---

treated as merely apparent contradictions resulting from unarticulated equivocation" (225).

20 John Calvin, *Selected Works*, edited and translated by Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1983), V:330.

21 John W. Robbins, "Forgotten Principles of the Reformation," *The Trinity Review* (October 2004), 3.

22 Reymond, *Preach the Word!*, 30-31. It is noteworthy that A. P. Martinich, who is cited by Dr. Anderson in this book, is in agreement with Professor Reymond that "a rational man can put no faith in contradiction," even a "seeming contradiction" (217).

23 Gordon H. Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy* (Trinity Foundation, 1993), 78; Gordon H. Clark, *Christian Philosophy*, *The Works of Gordon Haddon Clark*, Volume 4 (The Trinity Foundation, 2004), 313.