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The Paradox in Perspective

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PARADOX" is an ancient word and an honorable one. The Greeks applied it to anything that seemed contrary to public opinion or strange and marvelous. In this latter sense the term occurs in the New Testament. It was heard on the lips of the multitude that saw the healing of the palsied man. "We have seen παράδοξα today," they said in astonishment and awe (Luke 5:26). In Latin authors "paradox" came to mean an apparent contradiction. This is today its most common meaning in ordinary speech, although we must hasten to add that the Christian continues to feel in it the connotation of a depth which defies the consistencies of logic. We find the word defined in two ways, therefore, "as a statement or proposition which on the face of it is (a) apparently self-contradictory, or (b) apparently incredible or absurd, or at least marvelous, because it is contrary to common sense in some wider or narrower sense. . . ." [1]

As a more technical term in theology, however, the word "paradox" hardly antedates the work of Kierkegaard. In fact, its current use and popularity goes back no farther than the beginning of this century, when both philosophers and theologians suddenly became aware of the profound insights of that tragic Dane. So recent, in fact, is this development that even bulky encyclopedias of religion, until very lately, passed from "Paradise" to "Paraguay" without further ado — which even in a jet age is a leap of considerable proportions! Since the discovery of the method of paradox in the thought of Kierkegaard, the word itself has at times been overworked to the extent that with little exaggeration certain theologians could be described as devotees of "the cult of the paradoxical." [2] Its use, like the wearing of the latest Dior creation, for a time became a fad. Happily the fashion seems to be receding; yet we are left with the term and its consequences for theological formulation.

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[1] *The Encyclopedia of Ethics and Religion,* 9, 632; cf. also John Hutchison, *Faith, Reason and Existence* (1956), p. 18.

[2] Albert Knudson, *Principles of Christian Ethics* (1943), p. 155.

Partly in reaction to what in many instances amounted to no more than a fleeting fashion, but chiefly from a concern for rational expression and communication, some secular philosophers and even certain exponents of a philosophy of religion have decried the use of paradox as a totally irrational procedure, unworthy of the precision achieved by a scientific century. Bertrand Russell, for example, once went so far as to say that "paradoxes arise from the attribution of significance to sentences that are in fact nonsensical." [3] From the standpoint of religion Henry Nelson Wieman has viewed the appeal to paradox as a repudiation of reason.[4] If we allow these men their basic assumption that reason is an adequate instrument for theological understanding and expression, they are partially justified, particularly in view of the fact that certain followers of Karl Barth seemed to manifest symptoms that bordered on the pathological as they reveled in the irrational and absurd. The abuse of a term and the method for which it stands do not, however, justify its abandonment. The paradox, in point of fact, is not only a legitimate but also an essential tool for the expression of certain insights in Christian theology; for the dimension of God's revelation often cannot be expressed or described in anything except paradoxical formulations.

This observation is intended to go beyond the assertion that Jesus at times resorted to such paradoxical statements as: "Let the dead bury their dead" (Luke 9:60), or again: "Whoever would save his life shall lose it; and whoever would lose his life on My account shall find it" (Matt. 16:25). Nor are we limiting ourselves to the rather obvious fact that His great apostle employed a paradox when he wrote to the Philippians: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12, 13). Instead we shall venture out to the point of an insistence that much of revealed truth cannot be contained in single consistent statements. Truth often comes as twins, separate from, yet complementing, each other. This we propose to demonstrate by a hurried examination of a few facets in the Biblical view of man

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[3] *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (1940), p. 215.
[4] *The Growth of Religion* (1938), p. 256.

and God. We shall soon discover that the paradox is a necessary instrument of phenomenological description and of theological formulation.

Paradox is a basic descriptive tool in setting forth the nature of man as he meets us in our Sacred Scriptures. In the vast drama of creation and redemption recorded for us in the Bible we not only observe, but become involved in, the full range of man's situation in existence, surrounded as he is and infiltrated by the invisible "powers of darkness," a being "with the damp and drizzly November in his soul," suffering from the haunting fear that, when all is said and done, life may after all be quite meaningless, and often demonic in his own attitudes and behavior. The fearful dimensions of this mystery of evil have been a recent rediscovery of theology. "We have reached a better understanding of the Bible's view of man," writes Professor Wilder. "This man is seen in his psychosomatic unity. . . . Again, man is seen in his social involvement. . . . Finally, man is seen as a historical being in the sense that he necessarily participates in an ongoing process through action, choice, etc. Here all ideas of salvation through escape into a static inaction of contemplation are put in question, whether Platonic or spiritualist." [5]

We meet man as a finite creature. This limitation, to be sure, can also be demonstrated from the two-dimensional processes of the scientific method, as witness the fact that, when Heisenberg had established the impossibility of determining both the speed and the position of an atom, he resorted to the quite illogical principle of indeterminacy, by which the product of two uncertainties is equal to a definable constant.[6] Or, again, we might point to the physicist's willingness to use two contradictory theories of light, the corpuscular view of Newton and the wave theory of Huygens, to deal with certain phenomena of light. The Scriptural view of man, however, runs much deeper than all this: he is unequal to the proud boast of Nebuchadnezzar and under divine judgment for any thoughts of self-sufficiency like those of the rich fool.

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[5] *Otherworldliness and the New Testament*, pp. 53—54.

[6] I owe this illustration and the following one to Edward Ramsdell, *The Christian's Perspective* (1950), p. 52.

More significantly, we find man to be a creature of God and yet in rebellion against his Creator, to such an extent, in fact, that at the Crucifixion he was caught with the very weapons of defiance in his hands. Yet despite this impious act and even by its means he is forgiven; for God "justifies the ungodly" (Rom. 4:5). This description of man, justified by God and sanctified in his life, is the source of Luther's famous paradox "Simul iustus ac peccator sum." As the Reformer discovered from his serious study of the Bible and from the anguish of his soul, this situation is sketched neither in terms of legal fiction nor of a pious hope — either of which would help solve the contradiction — but as a present and dependable fact. He found that as a person, in relationship to God, the ultimate dimension of life, he had to think of God's utter rejection of him and of His gracious acceptance of him as an indissoluble unity of existence. Now, such a state of affairs defies all the rules of logic. In truth it requires a "leap" [7] beyond reason to reconcile these two poles of life. In other words, here is a truth that can be stated only in the form of a paradox; and surely this instance demonstrates that a "rationally irresolvable contradiction may point to a truth which logic cannot contain." [8]

From the preceding is derived the equally important ethical paradox of Christian living: that justification is the impulse to action. This has quite properly been called the paradox of *Gabe und Aufgabe*.[9] God gives salvation freely; and yet we are expected to do good works. By God's grace reborn man is liberated from the curse of the Law, but by that very fact he is moved to do what the Law directs. "Just as three plus seven are not obliged to be ten," said Luther, "and no law or rule need be sought for their being ten . . . so the justified man is not obliged to live rightly, but he lives rightly; and he needs no law to teach him to do so." [10]

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[7] This word was made famous by Kierkegaard, who borrowed it from Lessing but had to redefine it for his purposes. (Cf. James Brown, *Subject and Object in Modern Theology*, 1955, p. 64). — In passing, it might be noted that the use of this term in the dialectics of Marx serves as a good illustration of how this concept can be reduced to the two-dimensional language of science; for there it is used only of natural and social phenomena.

[8] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, I 262.

[9] For instance in Whale's *The Protestant Tradition* (1955), p. 92.

[10] W 2, 596.

True, the Scriptures themselves at times use the analogy of the tree and its fruits; yet a tree is not a person, equipped with the whole apparatus of will and emotions. For that reason a similitude is hardly adequate to contain this truth; it can be said only in terms of an apparent contradiction.

All this touches on another problem of man's experience, namely, that of his freedom. We find the ancestors of our race asserting themselves against the specific instructions of their Maker, in the prospect of rising above them, but experiencing to their sorrow that they were now "bent back upon themselves," to use a phrase Luther delighted in. Israel of old set out to achieve its independence from divine direction. God's people demanded a king such as other nations had, but this path led to oppression and servitude. Judas took occasion to give full expression to his inmost drives and ended a suicide. The two great apostles Peter and Paul took up this matter and pointed to the paradox that to be free the Christian must serve. Writing to the Christians in Asia Minor, Peter distinguishes between license and liberty, describing his readers as free because they were servants of God (1 Peter 2:16). "For the man that has been called as a servant of Christ is the Lord's freedman," wrote St. Paul, adding, "Similarly the man that is called to be free is the servant of Christ" (1 Cor. 7:22). When Luther, therefore, set about describing the liberty of the Christian man, he put the essence of the matter in these two apparently contradictory statements: "The Christian man is the most free lord of all and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all and subject to everyone." [11] On the purely rational level that can sound only nonsensical; and yet the tension is resolved in the life of each Christian. For that reason he even prays to his Lord as One "whom to serve is perfect freedom." [12]

By virtue of this relationship to his Lord man becomes a person, as his Creator intended him to be. His need for response is met not only adequately but fully; for he has related himself to the Eternal. This is a piece of theological psychology, or psychological theology, as the case may be, which is at times overlooked. But

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[11] WA 7, p. 21 in Wace-Buchheim, *The First Principles of the Reformation* (London, 1883), p. 104.

[12] The Latin of this is more eloquent: "Cui servire est regnare."

as life becomes ever more meaningless in our hurried secular
society, this side of experience deserves a growing emphasis; for
the tensions of a life led in the dimensions of length and breadth
alone can be most effectively resolved by the paradox of freedom
through service. It is this that keeps man from being or becoming
only an "it," or worse yet, "the quotient of one billion divided by
one billion," to borrow Arthur Koestler's biting phrase for the
totalitarian technique of reducing man to the level of a digit. This
new quality of life is at the bottom of the suggestion made in the
lines of Edwin Muir:

> They could not tell me who should be my lord,
>   But I could read from every word they said
>   The common thought: Perhaps that lord was dead,
> And only a story now and a wandering word.
> How could I follow a word or serve a fable,
>   They asked me. "Here are lords a-plenty. Take
>   Service with one, if only for your sake;
> Yet better be your own master if you're able."
>
> I would rather scour the roads, a masterless dog,
>   Than take such service, be a public fool,
> Obstreperous or tongue-tied, a good rogue,
>   Than be with those, the clever and the dull,
> Who say the Lord is dead; when I can hear
> Daily His dying whisper in my ear.[13]

Paradox, moreover, is a basic instrument for any attempt at
a systematic presentation of the mighty acts of God, as these are
recorded for us in the Scriptures. It is a theological truism by now
to say that God chose not only to communicate with His creatures
on their way through history but especially to confront them with
Himself. The hidden God, to that end, unveiled Himself in his-
torically experienced and demonstrable events. We can join
Vaughan, therefore, in saying: "There is in God, some say, a deep
but dazzling darkness." [14]

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13 Quoted in the New York *Times,* Book Review Section (August 5, 1956),
p. 20.

14 Quoted in the article on "Paradox" in the *Twentieth-Century Encyclopedia
of Religious Knowledge,* p. 841.

He manifested Himself at the Red Sea and at Sinai. In estab-
lishing His solemn covenant with Israel, by unilateral action, God
made it abundantly clear to His people that He, whom the heavens
of heavens cannot contain, elected to dwell in the midst of His
chosen race. For that reason the tabernacle was in fact known as
"the tent of meeting." Moreover, God Himself designated the
ark of the Covenant, the altar of burnt offering, and the altar of
incense as places where He would meet with His people "to speak
there unto thee" (Ex. 25:19; 29:42; 30:6). In subsequent periods
God identified Himself with the tenuous but firm thread of Israel's
history, particularly during and after the Exile. The absolute
paradox — to use Kierkegaard's expression — is, of course, the In-
carnation. This was and is "foolishness to the Greeks" precisely
because it defies all processes of logic and reason. "This is the
paradox of the Word made flesh, that the absolute Meaning which
is the ground and end of the world — the Alpha and Omega —
should be manifested in the world." [15] Man himself cannot pene-
trate this mystery; the Holy Spirit must provide the "leap" which
reconciles the statement that "the Very God . . . was made man."

Our Lord Himself was tempted to remove the tension of this
paradoxical situation by becoming only a particular person, framing
Himself off, as it were, from His unique relationship to the Father.
He could have achieved a revolution by yielding to the suggestion
that He satisfy man's hunger or His curiosity, as other men have
done, or by becoming a political figure, as other kings have been.
But He resisted these temptations to the death that men might
have salvation, believing as they sing the words of the mighty
Lenten hymn:
> O grosse Not,
> Gott selbst ist tot.[16]

As if to underline the logical inconsistency of His mission, Jesus
chose for Himself the title "Son of Man." This became the
stumbling block of the Jews; and they found it necessary to destroy
the paradox inherent in Jesus' use of this term by charging Him
with blasphemy. Even the disciples found it to be a mysterious

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15 Allan Galloway, *The Cosmic Christ*, p. 248.

16 The tension in this statement has subsided in the English translation:
"O sorrow dread, God's Son is dead."

concept. It recalled to them the majesty of the prophecy in
Dan. 7:13 and to Psalm 110 and yet seemed to contain overtones
of the Servant Songs in Isaiah. For, on the one hand, their Lord
spoke of Himself as One who had authority to forgive sins; on the
other, however, He hinted darkly at the necessity of suffering and
death. For a long time the Twelve chose to overlook one arm
of this paradox to the degree that the "sons of thunder" dreamed of,
and asked for, a place on His right hand and on His left in the
Kingdom.

Jewish theology before them had attempted to resolve the Mes-
sianic riddle by suggesting the possibility of two Messiahs: one to
come in apocalyptic splendor, the other to suffer at least temporary
defeat at the hand of Israel's enemies.[17] Jesus, however, absorbed
these seemingly contradictory prophecies in Himself, subsuming
them under His use of the name "Son of Man." It required no
less than the miracle of Pentecost to bring this paradox into
perspective in the understanding of the disciples.

In the record of the church's experience men have many times
tried to dull the edge of God's greatest paradox, the Incarnation.
Already in the days of St. Paul the Colossians attempted to apply
some philosophy to this situation, suggesting that Christ might
possibly be one in a hierarchy of intermediate beings stretching
across the abyss between God's holiness and the obvious imper-
fections of this world. They had a word for this: "elemental
spirits."[18] For their benefit, the apostle formulated the paradox
of redemption in its boldest form; in Christ the total fullness of
the Godhead resides in bodily shape (Col. 2:9). He had to explain
to his readers that the distance between God and man is covered
by the fact that the Creator is also the Redeemer and that the
Redeemer is at the same time the Creator (Col. 1:17-20). This,
of course, is not a solution made possible by logical processes;
it is an item of revelation. The Colossians were sharply reminded
that they could abandon this paradox only at their peril.

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17 Cf. Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament,* I, 486 and IV,
872, for extensive treatments of this subject.

18 It is now quite generally believed that the expression τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ
κόσμου in Col. 2:7 means just this. For another interpretation see Arndt-
Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian
Literature.* University of Chicago Press, 1957.

Some centuries later Arius sought to unravel this mystery by a method quite similar to that of the Colossians. In fact, he took a phrase from the apostle's letter to support his view. He selected from all that St. Paul had written particularly his description of Christ as "the First-born of every creature" (Col. 1:15) to advocate a kind of subordinate position for the Savior. He went further, however, by reverting to the Greek conception of the gods as architects of the universe and applying this limited construct to the Father. Athanasius was quick to recognize the mortal danger to the faith in the acceptance of these propositions. He kept insisting on the Biblical term ποιητής for God and went on to uphold the Son's oneness in substance with the Father as the very essence of the relationship between the Redeemer and the Creator. There were those at the time, and there have been many since, who, with Carlyle, lamented the fact that the "Christian world should be torn in pieces over a diphthong"; [19] and yet the very fact of our redemption was at stake in a controversy in which one side aimed to reduce a paradox to greater logical consistency.

Leaping across the centuries, we might describe the Reformation, at least in part, as a reaction to the medieval notion that God was now, since His incarnation, a substance that could be dispensed and manipulated in the sacraments of the church. Organized Christianity had got itself on top of the paradox that God became man by reducing the qualitative difference between God in His holiness and man in his sinfulness through a method of describing sin in arithmetically measurable terms. Luther found it imperative to object to this system of logical traffic by taking refuge in the contradiction that the Word had indeed become flesh, but that He was still God; and he found rest in the shadow of this heavenly paradox. .

Some time later Lutheran theologians were hurled into a controversy that had already plagued the early church. Its subject was the *communicatio idiomatum.* Possibly, in the present comfortable circumstances of the church and our general indifference to theological content, the story of this protracted argument may appear

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[19] This was the debate over ὁμοούσιος vs. ὁμοιούσιος; cf. Charles N. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture,* especially pages 365 ff., for a statement on the fuller implications of this controversy.

to have been quite irrelevant to the demands of the Kingdom.
Yet, in point of fact, this solemn and often staid quarrel was
concerned with the very heart of the Gospel mystery. It was
a planned attack on the logical proposition *Finitum non est capax
infiniti.* Those who insisted on the communication of attributes in
the person of Christ saw very clearly that the logic of their oppo-
nents resolved a puzzling paradox, to be sure, but only at the cost
of losing the "good news."

Coming now to the story of our own church body here in
America, we must note that the theology of its founder, Carl F. W.
Walther, was formulated against the background of an age strongly
under the influence of Hegel's claims for the self-realization of
reason. In his university studies he saw that a purely rational
approach to the "mystery of the Kingdom" and an almost universal
contentment with this method of procedure reduced the Gospel
to the dimensions of length and breadth, obscuring its depth in the
eternal counsels of God. This, more than anything else, accounts
for the fact that the most influential book to come from the pen
of Dr. Walther bore the title *Law and Gospel.* The lectures that
constitute this volume comprise a thorough reconsideration of
a paradox made famous in this form by Luther but inherent
in the whole Biblical account of God's ways with men.

We owe much to Dr. Walther; and we are particularly indebted
to him for bringing God's own great paradox back into proper
perspective in an age determined to create God in its own image
of logical abstraction. His insight is an abiding reminder of the
fact that when man encounters God, he is challenged to respond
in his entirety, including his personal center, where the processes
of thought go on. But this situation cannot be contained in the
dimensions of length and breadth alone. For in the logical formu-
lations man normally constructs, he works with the law of non-
contradiction; but this principle of operation also comes under
divine judgment as being an activity of exclusion. Revelation
stands outside and above that law, even as God Himself "sitteth
upon the circle of the earth." Any language about God must,
therefore, break through the "sound barrier" of its self-imposed
limitations.

But how can the method of paradox be meaningful at a time in history when the scientific method has created for itself the construct it refers to as the natural order of things? In part it cannot. And yet the use of paradox can be helpful in suggesting a level of existence that lies beyond the reaches of controlling knowledge and its exclusive concern with subject-object language. This must not, of course, be done with "Barthian lightheartedness." Its serious use induces anguish of thought and confronts the individual with the task of delving more deeply into the mysteries of life under God.

For this reason the paradox becomes a major instrument of communication in an age of logical positivism, the legitimate daughter of the scientific method. However, any paradox will have meaning only insofar as the hearer is able to recognize in the structure of the symbol under discussion some correspondence to the pattern of symbols within himself. At this point the church of today confronts its most difficult assignment; for it must constantly remind itself that modern man has deliberately cut himself off from the area of meaning, having set himself the task of reducing the three levels of his existence to the "Mercator map" of subject-object language alone. Here the paradox can serve as a "schoolmaster" that leads to Christ, in whom alone the anguish of life finds its resolution.

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