

The influence of various movements within our culture such as New Age, Eastern religion, and irrational philosophy have led to a crisis of understanding. A new form of mysticism has arisen that exalts the absurd as a hallmark of religious truth. We think of the Zen-Buddhist maxim that “God is one hand clapping” as an illustration of this pattern.

To say that God is one hand clapping sounds profound. It puzzles the conscious mind because it strikes against normal patterns of thought. It sounds “deep” and intriguing until we analyze it carefully and discover that at root it is simply a nonsense statement.

Irrationality is a type of mental chaos. It rests upon a confusion that is at odds with the Author of all truth who is not an author of confusion.

Biblical Christianity is vulnerable to such strands of exalted irrationality because of its candid admission that there is much paradox and mystery in the Bible. Because there are thin but crucial lines that divide paradox, mystery, and contradiction, it is important that we learn to distinguish among them.

We are quickly confounded when we seek to plumb the depths of God. No mortal can exhaustively comprehend God. The Bible reveals things about God that we know are true in spite of our inability to understand them fully. We have no human reference point, for example, to understand a being who is three in person and one in essence (Trinity), or a being who is one person with two distinct natures, human and divine (the person of Christ). These truths, as certain as they may be, are too “high” for us to penetrate.

We face similar problems in the natural world. We understand that gravity exists, but we do not understand it, nor do we seek to define it in irrational or contradictory terms. Most everyone agrees that motion is an

integral part of reality, yet the essence of motion itself has perplexed philosophers and scientists for millennia. There is much that is mysterious about reality and much that we do not understand. But that does not warrant a leap into absurdity. Irrationality is fatal both to religion and science. Indeed, it is deadly to any truth.

The late Christian philosopher Gordon H. Clark once defined a paradox as a “charley horse between the ears.” His witty remark was designed to point out that what is sometimes called a *paradox* is often nothing more than sloppy thinking. Clark, however, clearly recognized the legitimate role and function of paradox. The word *paradox* comes from the Greek root that means “to seem or to appear.” Paradoxes are difficult for us because at first glance they “seem” to be contradictions, but under closer scrutiny resolutions can often be found. For example, Jesus said, “He who loses his life for My sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39). On the surface this sounds akin to a statement like “God is one hand clapping.” It sounds like a self-contradiction. What Jesus meant, however, is that if someone loses his life *in one sense*, he will find it *in another sense*. Because the losing and saving are in two different senses, there is no contradiction. I am a father and a son at the same time, but obviously not in the same relationship.

Because the term *paradox* has been misunderstood so often as a synonym for contradiction, it now appears in some English dictionaries as a secondary meaning of the term *contradiction*. A contradiction is a statement that violates the classical law of noncontradiction. The law of noncontradiction declares that *A* cannot be *A* and *non-A* at the same time and in the same respect. That is, something cannot be what it is and not be what it is at the same time and in the same respect. This is the most fundamental of all the laws of logic.

No one can understand a contradiction because a contradiction is *inherently unintelligible*. Not even God can understand contradictions. But He can certainly recognize them for what they are—falsehoods. The

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word *contradiction* comes from the Latin “to speak against.” It is sometimes called an *antinomy*, which means “against law.” For God to speak in contradictions would be for Him to be intellectually lawless, to speak with a forked tongue. It is a great insult and unconscionable blasphemy to even suggest that the Author of truth would ever speak in contradictions. Contradiction is the tool of the one who lies—the father of lies who despises the truth.

There is a relationship between mystery and contradiction that easily reduces us to [confusing](#) the two. We do not understand mysteries. We cannot understand contradictions. The point of contact between the two concepts is their unintelligible character. Mysteries may not be clear to us now simply because we lack the information or the perspective to understand them. The Bible promises further light in heaven on mysteries we are unable to understand now. Further light may resolve present mysteries. However, there is not enough light in heaven and earth to ever resolve a clear-cut contradiction.

## Summary

1. Paradox is an *apparent* contradiction that under closer scrutiny yields resolution.
2. Mystery is something unknown to us now, but which may be resolved.
3. Contradiction is a violation of the law of noncontradiction. It is impossible to resolve, either by mortals or God, either in this world or the next.

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