

Scripture and the Paradox

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I. What Is a Paradox?

A recent newspaper article discussed the “paradox of plenty.” In the long run, resources in oil, gas, diamonds etc. lead to poverty in developing countries. Economists talk about the “Dutch disease.” Exports of resources strengthen the currency but weaken the national industry and agriculture and lead to dependence on the natural resources. In these countries the risks of war and corruption are higher than in countries poor in natural resources. There is a curse of the oil.

The statement “Now I am lying” is a paradox, for if it is true, it is wrong. If it is wrong, it is true. Normally a paradox is something that is apparently contradictory and yet makes sense and is “profoundly true.”¹ It is a statement which is opposed to widespread expectations. It conveys meaning and sense in apparent nonsense and contains an element of surprise.

K. S. Kantzer suggests that a paradox as found in Scripture consists of “(1) an assertion which is self-contradictory, or (2) two or more assertions which are mutually contradictory, or (3) an assertion which contradicts some very commonly held position on the matter in question.”² He also distinguishes between rhetorical paradoxes and logical paradoxes. A rhetorical paradox is, for instance, a statement such as the following: “Allow the dead to bury their own dead . . .” (Luke 9:60b). It is a figure of speech. A logical paradox “arises from the attempt by the human mind to unify or to coordinate the multiple facets of experience.”³

II. Paradoxes in Scripture

Both types of paradoxes are found in Scripture. Jesus spoke in paradoxes. Actually, his speeches were filled with paradoxes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt 5:3-5). “But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also” (Matt 5:39). “So the last shall be first, and the first last” (Matt 20:16). “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mark 8:35). “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:14b). “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35b).

Paradoxes are also used in the Old Testament—“One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty” (Prov 11:24). Paul in his writings has his share of paradoxes: “For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord’s freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ’s slave” (1 Cor 7:22). “As unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things” (2 Cor 6:9-10). “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10b). “But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ” (Phil 3:7).

All these statements do not make much sense humanly speaking. Jesus’ commandment to love one’s enemies is called “an ultimately unnatural demand, contrary to empirical human nature.”⁴ Whereas Greek ethics “culminates in the fulfillment of human nature,” Christian ethics “teaches that human nature is to be transcended.”⁵ That may be one reason why some of these statements are paradoxes in our opinions. Another reason may be that reality is more complex than we are able to perceive and understand.

But there are broader theological concepts expressed in Scripture that also sound like paradoxes to our ears. We have already been saved, and yet we are not completely saved. We are still waiting for the final

consummation and yet possess already eternal life here and now. We are saved by faith through grace, but will be judged by our works. Although works do not contribute to our salvation, they are not unimportant. Or “how is it possible for humans to be simultaneously sinful and saved?”⁶ Our salvation is paradoxical.

God is portrayed in Scripture as one, and yet Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are called God. Jesus is eternal. He is Yahweh. He is worshiped. To Him we pray. Christians have expressed the biblical concept of one God and three persons within the Godhead by the doctrine of the Trinity. Three equals one does not make much sense mathematically; it is a paradox, and yet it is true. What about Christ’s nature who was completely human and completely divine while living among us?

Giving tithes borders on the paradoxical. When we give money to support God’s cause, we have more than when we withhold it.

The ultimate paradox is the cross of Christ. “In Christian theology, and in Pauline thought particularly, the crucifixion of the Christ is the foundational paradox (1 Cor. 1:22-25).”⁷ God dies for us so that we might be saved. No wonder that the cross is a stumbling block and foolishness for many. No wonder that the cross is reinterpreted even in our days and that a bloodless religion is created replacing the substitutionary atonement of Christ with a sentimental love of God the Father toward humankind.

III. How to Deal with Paradoxes?

Since Scripture is full of paradoxes, the question arises: How to deal with them? Some of these paradoxes come as a surprise but are to some extent self-explanatory. But what about those that consist of apparent contradictory biblical statements not found in one verse or passage only? Oftentimes they reveal important theological concepts and have tremendous implications. They shape the relationship of humans to God and affect the everyday life of Christians.

In these cases we have to learn to live with statements which in human perspective may seem to be illogical and nevertheless are true. To choose one set of assertions and disregard the seemingly contradictory set leads to heresy. To opt for the oneness of God and thereby exclude the divinity of Christ is as wrong as to accept the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but make them three Gods. To limit salvation to the present or the future only does not do justice to the biblical account. Kantzer correctly states: “In such cases man may be nearer the truth when he espouses both sides of a paradoxical issue than when he gives up one side in favor of the other.”⁸ As Christians we have to learn to live with tensions, because sometimes truth can be expressed in paradoxical terms only.

¹Richard N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, second edition (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 140.

²K. S. Kantzer, “Paradox,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 826.

³Ibid.

⁴Wolfgang Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990), 77.

⁵Ibid.

⁶R. V. Schnucker, “Neo-orthodoxy,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 755.

⁷Soulen, 140.

⁸Kantzer, 826.