

How My Mind Has Changed No. 3 “The Dialectical Nature of Biblical Revelation”

August 13, 2017

The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

We have so far considered in this short series of subject sermons the question of whether the Bible actually *commands* a particular form of church government, or to put the question in the terms of the historic debate, whether there is a *jus divinum*, a divine law of church government. Should every Christian be a Presbyterian? Many Presbyterians have thought so through the ages. Episcopalian scholars, for example, admit that some of the outlines of Presbyterian church government can be detected in the practice of the apostolic church, though they would quibble at some points, but they do not believe that the church is ordered to be Presbyterian. I'm now inclined to agree with them. I don't think it is ordered to be Episcopalian either. There is simply too much ambiguity in the little bit of material we have to fashion from it an ecclesiastical polity that is definitely one system or another. Add in the material from the OT and the situation gets murkier still.

Then we considered the question of covenant children at communion, a question almost never seriously addressed in the days of my upbringing and seminary training, and so far as I can tell, hardly addressed for several hundreds of years before that. To make our children wait until adolescence was our standard policy, but we never thought about it and certainly never mounted a serious defense of that practice. But when challenged, as it began to be in the 1970s, the weakness of the biblical argument for our longstanding practice became immediately obvious. With a number of other men I came to believe that covenant children, by right of their baptism, their membership in the body of Christ, and the Bible's summons to nurture them in a faith that was assumed to be already theirs, ought to be at the Lord's Supper. With the frequency of the observance of the Lord's Supper increasing rapidly until many of our churches were observing the sacrament every Sunday – something that Presbyterians had never done in all of their history – the pressure for change on this point increased, as it continues to do.

Now, to a third matter. When I was a young minister, raised as I had been in the believing Presbyterian Church and trained as I had been in a Presbyterian seminary, there was a tendency to assume that since truth is a unity, each fact consistent with every other, we ought to be able to harmonize those facts into a coherent whole. We were, among Christians, a particularly cerebral community and we tended to have confidence in our intellectual prowess. Problems were meant to be solved, even theological ones.

I remember, for example, hearing many times some teacher or minister in one of our churches say that God was one in essence and three in person, so there was no contradiction. We were worried that people might think the Christian doctrine of the Trinity was unreasonable because it involved a logical contradiction, and so we were careful to point out that it did not. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity was entirely reasonable. If God were one and three in the same respect, that would represent a logical contradiction, but he is one in one way and three in another way and there is no contradiction in that. That was typical of our viewpoint; in many ways it still is. We didn't see a problem, or we minimized it to the point of insignificance. Or in regard to divine sovereignty and human freedom and responsibility we might say that God rules over all, but he

uses means and the means he employs are the decisions that human beings make, all of them, of course, unbeknownst to them, made according to his will. Again, no contradiction. The main thing was that God ordered all things; what humans thought and did was simply *the way* he ordered all things. Again, no problem. Probably no one would have said this, or even thought it in precisely these terms, but we tended to take the mystery out of Christian theology and biblical teaching. Herman Bavinck begins his magisterial systematic theology, *Reformed Dogmatics*, with the statement “Mystery is the life-blood of dogmatics.” I had never heard any of my Presbyterian teachers say any such thing.

I cannot remember precisely when I began to grow uncomfortable with this viewpoint, this attitude, but I began to realize that not only were there deep and impenetrable mysteries in our Christian faith, fundamental realities that were impossible to explain, but eventually I came to believe that there were, and, in fact, many more such mysteries than I first thought. Further I noticed that the Bible is written in such a way, its truth is revealed in such a way as to leave many questions both unanswered – even unaddressed – and unanswerable.

Let’s go back to the example of the Holy Trinity. The problem with that common explanation – God is one in one respect, he is three in another – is not that it is untrue. It is most certainly true. The problem is that it doesn’t at all remove the deep mystery of the nature of God himself. It is all very well to say that God is one in essence, three in person, but in saying that what have we said? First of all, we don’t really even know what the terms we use actually mean. What is the divine essence? What is a person in reference to God? Augustine said that he used the word “person” in order not to say nothing at all. The word “person,” however, is never used in the Bible in reference to God; nor, for that matter, is the word “essence.” The fact is, all of us, no matter how much we know about the Christian theology of God, struggle, or perhaps we don’t actually struggle as we should, to avoid the thought that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, being three persons, are, therefore, three Gods, or, if we know enough not to say or think *that*, we find ourselves thinking that they are each a third of God. But, of course, a third of God is not God and if we were actually to believe that about the three persons, that each was a third of God, not a one of them would be the living God. But that is not the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Rather we believe that each of the persons is the whole living and true God! What does that mean? How can that be? Now *that* is a mystery. We simply don’t know, we cannot say how the divine essence or being is related to the three persons and *vice versa*. Christian theologians long ago developed the doctrine of *perichoresis* or *circumincessio* as a way of stating the fact that each person is the whole God – that the nature of the divine life and of each person is in constant circulation in the Triune life, the nature of each is interpenetrated by the nature of the others – but that is far from an explanation. It is a confession, not an explanation.

But the divine life is also a mystery in the way it is presented in the Bible. Perhaps you have thought about this, wondered about this yourselves. The Bible doesn’t actually ever give us a straightforward presentation of the divine life as one in three. We might have expected that somewhere in the Gospels or in the Epistles of Paul we might read something like what we find in the early church creeds: There is but one God but he exists in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We might even expect to read that this is a great mystery, beyond the power of human reason to comprehend, but is the truth nevertheless. But, of course, we don’t find that anywhere in the Bible. What we find are statements asserting the unity of God: there is but one

living and true God. We find them in the OT and in the NT. Monotheism is the most fundamental of biblical doctrines. But we also find deity attributed separately to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. All three persons – so individually distinct that each can talk about the other, each can address the other, each can relate in personal ways to the other – are called God, are worshipped as God, and are said to do or to have done what only God can do. It is from this data that the church fashioned the doctrine of the Trinity. She couldn't do anything else because there is no other way to organize the data. The doctrine is for that reason entirely and faithfully biblical. It is what the Bible teaches us to believe. There is but one God. The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God; but the Father is not the Son or the Spirit, the Son is not the Father or the Spirit, the Spirit is not the Father or the Son.

But the Bible itself never harmonizes or organizes the data into any sort of systematic presentation. God left that for the church to do. Very clearly the church understood from the beginning that there was but one God, *and that* Jesus was God, so much God that he was the creator of heaven and earth. Christians accordingly worshipped him as God. But the church also knew that Jesus wasn't the Father or the Spirit, since he had been sent by the Father and had himself sent the Spirit. And so on. And so it is that the church has never sought *to explain* the Trinity; only to *confess* the one and only three-person God. The Bible leaves us with the mystery.

So the mystery lies not only in the impenetrable depths of the truth itself – that the one God is three persons, however we are to understand that – but in the fact that the Bible never once offers an explanation, never once even admits that this is a reality that needs explaining, that it is baffling, and head-scratching; that it transcends our mental capabilities. Remember, I'm not saying and the church has never suggested that the assertions of both the unity and the triple personality of God somehow amount to a logical contradiction. They obviously do not contradict one another because they are the truth. But this truth *is* beyond our capacity to grasp. There are many things that illustrate the limitations of our intellectual powers. For example, we can calculate the vast distances that separate us from other galaxies in the universe – an astonishing achievement – but, at the same time, none of us, including the astronomers themselves, can really comprehend the vastness of the space involved. Our minds are too small. Well so here still more profoundly.

Or take another example. In many ways a very similar example. We confess from our hearts as Christians that Jesus Christ is both God and man. Surely that is true. He is revealed to us in the Bible as a true man, with the limitations of humanity very much a feature of his life. He was born a human baby. He got tired, hungry, and sad. He wept. No doubt he got sick from time to time, had a stuffy nose or vomited, hard as it may be for us to imagine that. He didn't know things and had to learn them. And, of course, he bled and died. All such things are common to human life but cannot be said of God. On the other hand, his coming was announced as the coming of God himself, he was revealed to be God in his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, he himself claimed to be one with God, he was confessed as God by his disciples, a confession he did not deny, and, of course, he is repeatedly identified as God in the rest of the NT. We are told that Jesus is a man and that he is God and that in many different ways.

In my experience growing up we were barely conscious of how utterly mind-boggling this is. If truth be told we thought of Jesus as a kind of superman – a mixture of God and man. Of course

he could work miracles; he was God. We tended to minimize his true humanity. It scarcely occurred to us that the only way that the Jesus could work miracles was, as Moses or Elijah before him, by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Gospels said this very clearly, but we tended not to notice. We struggled, we still struggle to believe that Jesus was a human being as completely as we are human beings, and in his humanity is as limited by it as we are, except for sin.

But, once again, the Bible never undertakes to address the question *how* Jesus can be both God and man, how the same person could possibly be both God and man. It never raises that question, obvious as it is; inevitable as it is. It never reflects on what it meant for Jesus himself to be both God and man. It never penetrates the interior psychology of his person. It never asks how it could be possible for the same person not to know things and be omniscient; or to be omnipotent and powerless; or to be omnipresent and confined to one location. It simply tells us that Jesus is God and that the same Jesus is a real human being. The church fashioned its doctrine of the *hypostatic union*, that is, two natures in one person, in a brilliant, utterly convincing effort to be faithful to all that is said about Jesus in the Bible. Of course we can say that he is omnipotent and omniscient in his divine nature and sometimes weak and ignorant in his human nature, but what does that mean when we are talking about the same person at the same time? The Bible does not tell us. *The mystery here too is not only the facts of the matter – the hypostatic union – which, in the nature of the case we cannot explain, but the fact that the Bible leaves all the obvious questions unaddressed.* What was going on in Jesus' head when he was both God and man and how is it possible that he thought and acted as God and, at the same time, as man, and that his two natures did not alter one another, that his deity was not diminished by his humanity and *vice versa*?

Or take one more example. God is absolutely sovereign. His will determines what comes to pass in this world, down to the most seemingly insignificant details, the number of hairs on your head, for example. This is taught so frequently and so extensively in the Bible and with such emphasis that no one can deny it without departing from the plain speaking of Holy Scripture. But, at the same time, human beings are free agents who exercise their wills as they please and who are responsible for the decisions they make. How can it be true that everything in this world happens according to the divine will and yet one thing or another will happen differently if only a man or woman chooses to do something else? This too is a biblical commonplace. More than that it is the presupposition of huge tracts of the Bible. Why must God judge this people, why must he reject them and punish them? Because of what *they did*, because they refused to submit to Christ's rule, because they chose to go their own way, because they loved other things than God. Is this not what we read in the Bible for page after page and for hundreds of pages? Why did the exodus generation of Israelites fail to enter the Promised Land? Because they did not have faith and because they disobeyed the Lord in the wilderness. Why were the Jews punished so severely in A.D. 70? Because they refused to honor the Son of God when he came among them. God plead with them repeatedly but they spurned his offer of salvation. Christ hoped for their repentance, but was disappointed because they never turned. God wishes for all men to be saved, but only some are. You know very well the verses at both ends of this continuum of truth: the divine sovereignty end and the human freedom and accountability end.

In Romans 9 and 10 Paul places both teachings side by side – absolute divine sovereignty and human accountability – and asserts both in language too clear to misunderstand.

“What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy...’ *So then it depends not on human will or exertion*, but on God who has mercy. So then he has mercy on whomever he wills and he hardens whomever he wills. You will say to me then, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’” Rom. 9:14-19

But soon after that we have this.

“...everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent.... But of Israel [God] says, ‘All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.’” 10:13-15, 21.

How are we to reconcile these two distinct and emphatic assertions, that God controls everything, including the mental and spiritual life of human beings, on the one hand, *and* that man is fully responsible for the choices that he makes, they are his own choices, that his thoughts and actions are real causes, on the other? The likely confusion is so predictable that Paul addresses it himself, but in a way that hardly removes the difficulty. If it all depends on God you are going to think that God is unfair, treating one man so differently than he treats another. “Who are you, oh man, to answer back to God?” Not exactly an explanation. And if it all depends on God, including who believes and who does not, why does he find fault with anyone, since, after all, they are only doing what God has determined that they do? “Does not the potter have a right to make what he will of the clay?” These objections surface only because the Bible so clearly asserts God’s absolute control. But Paul goes on to write chapter 10 as if *everything* depended on a person choosing to believe in Jesus and God is left wishing they would, even though most do not.

And how are we to reconcile that absolute sovereignty in salvation with statements found in the Bible to the effect that God *wants* everyone to be saved, that he does not want the wicked to perish but to come to the knowledge of the truth? If human sin breaks his heart, if it is up to him, why then does he not simply save everyone? And, perhaps more to the point, why doesn’t the Bible somewhere explain how we are to understand these two facts that seem very difficult to reconcile with one another.

These questions are typically answered differently according to theological party. The Arminians search for a way round the strong assertion of divine sovereignty; the Calvinists work to mitigate statements that seem so clearly to leave the outcome in human hands. When I was growing up and even in my seminary training, I was taught to interpret the human responsibility passages in terms of the sovereignty passages. But as I lived with the Bible, and as I read the best of Christian theology, I came to doubt the wisdom of that approach. In my experience and in the books I read, even by devout theologians, it seemed rather obvious to me that each side was

preferring one set of texts to the other, each side was concentrating on one truth and doing its best either to ignore or minimize the other, no matter how emphatically taught in the Bible.

But it was at this point that I began to notice how many Reformed writers, and preachers especially, had been perfectly content to let the two statements lie side by side, as they do in the Bible, and make no effort to attempt to harmonize or reconcile them. They openly admitted that the effort to harmonize always resulted in the diminishment of one or the other of these emphatic teachings. They were content to say, as Charles Simeon memorably put it, “the truth does not lie in one extreme, it does not lie in the middle; it lies in both extremes.” They were in effect saying that this is reality too comprehensive, too profound for us to grasp and so it was necessary that we be given simply the two facts: God’s absolute rule and man’s absolute accountability. How they are both true at the same time we can no more explain than we can explain how Jesus is both God and man or how God is both one and three.

I was further encouraged to think this way and to read the Bible, allowing it to say whatever it wished and believing everything it said, when I read a Calvin scholar say that it was characteristic of the great Frenchman to believe that while the individual doctrines of the Bible were clear and comprehensible their relationship to one another was often incomprehensible. We are given information sufficient to know that God exists in the three persons. We are given information sufficient to have no doubt that there is but one God. But how those two truths are related to one another is incomprehensible to us. We are taught to believe, and very clearly, that everything that happens in this world has been foreordained. We are also taught to believe that human beings act without compulsion and make decisions that are the real causes of what happens in the world. We can understand both truths very easily. But understanding how they relate to one another is another thing entirely.

In other words, I came to realize that living with mystery was in fact the Reformed way, but a part of my tradition that I had not been taught, or at least, that had never been emphasized. Through the years I have accumulated a library of citations from men who considered it a point of great importance that mysteries or paradoxes confront us at every turn in Holy Scripture. Indeed, as J.I. Packer once put it: “All doctrines terminate in mystery; for they deal with the works of God.” [Ryken, *J.I. Packer*, 238] The prince of the Puritan theologians, John Owen, said a similar thing.

“...what we call darkness in divine subjects is nothing else than their celestial glory and splendor striking on the weak ball of our eyes, the rays of which we are not able in this life...to bear.” [Vol. X, 487]

But the longer I lived with this thought – the prevalence of mystery in biblical teaching – the more I noticed how often the Bible taught all manner of subjects in the same way it taught the unity and triple personality of God or the deity and humanity of Jesus. It would say one thing here, a quite different thing there and make no effort to harmonize the two assertions, no matter how difficult it was to understand how both were true at the same time. That each was true was not difficult to believe but that both were true was, so much so that virtually every Christian tended to choose one truth or the other, so difficult was it to believe both at the same time. The tension between truths was obvious and inevitable but the Bible nevertheless made no effort to

explain how this and that could be true at one and the same time. It was characteristic of the Bible to leave us to live with the tension of competing truths.

Through the years I have accumulated examples of this phenomenon in the teaching of the Bible. I have organized them in three groups: 1) theology, 2) Christian life and experience, and 3) ethics. All together I have some 70 of these tensions listed and would find it easy to add more. Let me give you just a few examples.

In the theology section besides the ones I have already mentioned – the Holy Trinity; the hypostatic union; divine sovereignty and human freedom and accountability; and divine election and God's desire that all be saved – there are such tension laden paradoxes as:

1. Paul's assertion in Romans 6 that we have been freed from the power of sin, sin shall not have dominion over us, cheek to jowl with his assertion in Romans 7 that 30 years into his Christian life he was still a bond slave of sin. We read in 1 John that the Christian does not sin but Paul said that he was sinning all the time!
2. Or consider Paul's statement in Ephesians 2 that we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God has prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. How do you then relate that statement to Paul's description of the Christian man who built poorly on the foundation and *all his works were burned up*; he was saved, but as through fire.
3. Or think of how often we are told that the Lord Jesus is coming "quickly" though now these 2,000 years have passed with yet no sign of his appearing, and Peter speaks of people taking the long delay to mean Jesus is never coming.

In the area of Christian experience think of such paradoxes as these.

1. We are told in unmistakable terms that when a person believes in Jesus his sins are taken away. There is no more condemnation for the man who is in Christ Jesus. But both Jesus and John tell us that we must confess our sins or they will not be forgiven. Which is it: once-for-all forgiveness or repeated forgiveness upon confession? It is both, but *how* it is both is not an easy thing to explain – if you've ever tried to answer that question by reconnaissance in Christian systematic theologies, you'll discover how difficult it is to explain those two truths at the same time – which is why the issue is so rarely addressed in Christian teaching and preaching.
2. We are told that if we delight ourselves in the Lord he will give us the desires of our hearts. But we find people in the Bible and in our own experience who were not given the desires of their hearts. We find the Psalmists and Christians we know repeatedly pleading with God to give them the desires of their hearts; they have delighted themselves in the Lord and they are confused because he has not given them the desires of their hearts.
3. We are told that if we ask God he will give us what we ask for. You're familiar with those texts. That's exactly what the Bible says. But, of course, there are many examples in the Bible of men and women who were not given what they asked for, Jesus himself among them. Unanswered prayer is one of the most serious causes of doubt in the Christian life.

As you see, these are not merely theoretical issues. It is in the tension between such truths that the Christian lives each and every day. Why do we struggle to want to go to prayer meeting when the Lord says, “Ask, and it will be given to you.” “Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you”? Because we know well enough that we’ve prayed for many things the Lord has not given us. Finally in the area of ethics we have such paradoxes as these:

1. Think of the passages that emphasize in a most beautiful way the equality of man and woman in Christ and those passages that draw an emphatic distinction between them, especially in the matter of male authority. We live in a period in which many Christians have sought to find a way to silence one or the other set of texts in some large part because the Bible simply says both things; it doesn’t harmonize the two realities. If the Bible said straightaway that sexual equality *and* male headship are both true and only together do we have the whole truth about men and women the debate would have been very different over these last 30 years..
2. We are told to guard the unity of the church at all costs and, at the same time, to guard the gospel at all costs. But it often seems as if only one of those obligations can be met at any time. Guarding the truth often requires splitting the church and maintaining unity often requires compromising the truth. How can we be equally committed to both fidelity to the truth and to the unity of the body of Christ?
3. Or think of such obvious examples as the two statements in Galatians 6: we are to bear one another’s burdens but a few verses later each is to bear his own load; or the two imperatives next to one another in Proverbs 26: “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself.” *And* “Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.”

Everywhere we look in the Bible we find this competition between truths. It is the way God has chosen to teach us the truth. It forces us to reckon with truth we would otherwise ignore. It has caused no end of trouble, to be sure, but the Lord knew that before he wrote the Bible as he did. It is too easy for truth to die the death of many qualifications. You know how that goes: *this is the truth* but, of course, I don’t mean by it this or that or this other thing. By the time all the qualifications have been listed the truth itself is forgotten or reduced to insignificance. Truth is much more powerful when it is left unqualified and uncompromised, all the more, when we’re not actually capable of bringing all of that truth into some harmony in our finite minds. God can do it, but we cannot.

Take the sovereignty of God. God rules over all; everything happens according to his will. “No one comes to me unless my Father who is in heaven draws him.” We get that and a thousand other texts like those. We know what they mean. We cannot evade their force. But then consider these other statements. “Whosoever will may come.” “We have not because we ask not.” Jesus said, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how many times would I have gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks, but you would not.” We get those too. They make perfect sense to us. What we struggle to understand is how those two different sets of statements are to be reconciled to one another. *That* is the mystery. But it is in the tension between the two truths that the Christian is to live his or her life, believing both, refusing to choose between them. No matter what a Christian’s theological party may be, I guarantee you, he or she is living in the tension between the two. When something bad happens the rankest Arminian never thinks to think or to say to God, “I know you can’t do anything about this. I

know this isn't under your control. I just need to talk to you about it." Of course not! Every Christian knows better. Every Christian with a Bible in his hand knows better than to say such a thing. We may not know how both are true at the same time, but we know both are true.

As those of you who have been here any length of time know, this has become a principle with me, to teach what the Bible is teaching in any passage, without qualification or equivocation and then, in another passage that teaches a quite different truth, to do the same. I want to preach as the Bible reads. I want to believe and want you to believe whatever the Bible teaches us whether or not we can understand how that truth can be reconciled to or harmonized with some other truth equally clearly taught in the Bible. If the Bible doesn't make a simple harmony of these truths it is a certainty that I can't!

How are we to explain that if God wants all to be saved he does not save them? I have no idea. You don't either. How are we to explain why God blames men for not believing the gospel when faith is and must be his gift? I cannot say. Are men justly responsible for their sin and unbelief? Absolutely, of course they are. The Bible teaches that they are in a thousand places. What is more, we instinctively know that this is so. We deal with one another, all human beings do as responsible, accountable agents. We know that we are. We're not robots. Nobody's pulling our strings. We are thinking, feeling, and willing creatures. What we do matters. This is not a charade; God is not tricking us. This is simply a fact. We make choices. They matter.

But is it God who saves sinners by drawing them to Christ by the power of his Spirit? Absolutely, of course it is. The Bible leaves us in no doubt about that. And our experience leaves us in no doubt about that either. We know our own hearts. We know we are helpless before the power of sin. We know how impossible it would be for us to transform our own hearts. Both are true, our freedom, responsibility, and accountability *and* our absolute dependence upon the grace and power of God. How both are true; how to explain the harmony of those truths; that is far beyond us.

And so it is with a great deal of the Bible's teaching. The doctrines are clear; crystal clear. We don't have any difficulty understanding what the Bible is teaching us about this or that. It is the interrelationship between Biblical truths that creates the mystery. Our minds are finite, far too small to embrace the truth as the infinite God knows it. He knew what we could understand and wrote the Bible accordingly. This is not a perspective that is always embraced in our circles. In fact I have found few of our men for whom it is as important an insight as it has become for me in both my reading and my preaching of the Bible. Our new minister may not think in just this way. He may be more inclined to qualify truth in one passage of the Bible by appeal to truth in some other passage. That is common enough in our tradition. He too will believe the Bible's teaching, but he may think about its complexity in a different way than I do. We should all be prepared for such changes.