

No Lie is of the Truth

1 John 2:21

By Phil Johnson

Truth may not be crossed by denials or equivocations; it may be concealed in silence. Except in the case of an oath, no man is bound to speak all he knows. We are not only allowed, but commanded, to be innocently serpentine.

Hall's Contemplations, 1:467

Thirty years ago this past summer, Darlene and I got married, and for our honeymoon, we drove from Chicago to Florida. In Florida I stopped to visit my friend Steve Kreloff, a pastor in a church in Clearwater.

But when we got there, Steve was in a counseling session or something, so the church secretary ushered us into a kind of waiting room. This waiting room served triple duty as the as the church's conference room and library, and it was lined with books, floor to ceiling. So (being the book junkie that I am) I started browsing the shelves. I especially like *old* books and one old binding caught my eye, so I picked up the book and began to read.

By the time Pastor Kreloff was ready to see us, I was totally engrossed in the book. (My lovely new bride was just sitting there tapping her toe. This was a defining moment in our marriage.) But seeing that I was already attached to this old book, Pastor Kreloff let me keep it. I still have it. For years it had an honored permanent position on the lamp table in our living room. Nowadays I keep it in my office at Grace to You.

The book is now more than a century old. It is called *A Lie Never Justifiable*, by Henry Clay Trumbull. And it was a whole book dealing with the question of whether it is ever right to tell a lie or not. Here is the section that captured my interest. Trumbull is explaining the experience that led him to write this book:

In the summer of 1863 [he writes] I was a prisoner of war in Columbia, South Carolina [this was obviously during the American Civil War]. The Federal prisoners were confined in the common jail, under military guard, and with no [word of honor] binding them not to attempt an escape. They were subject to the ordinary laws of war. Their captors were responsible for their detention in imprisonment, and it was their duty to escape from captivity, and to return to the army of the government to which they owed allegiance, if they could do so by any right means. . . .

Only he who has been a prisoner of war in a Southern prison in midsummer, or in a Northern prison in the dead of winter . . . can fully realize the heart-longings of a soldier prisoner to find release from his sufferings. . . [H]ow gladly such a man would find a way, consistent with the right, to escape, at any . . . risk. . . . Plans of escape were in frequent discussion among the restless Federal prisoners in Columbia, of whom I was one.

A plan proposed to me by a fellow-officer seemed to offer peculiar chances of success, and I gladly joined in it. But as its fuller details were considered, I found that a probable contingency would involve the telling of a

lie to an enemy, or a failure of the whole plan. At this my moral sense recoiled; and I expressed my unwillingness to tell a lie, even to regain my personal liberty

This opened an earnest discussion of the question whether there is such a thing as a "lie of necessity," or a justifiable lie. My friend was a pure-minded man of principle, ready to die for his convictions ; and he looked at this question with a sincere desire to know the right He argued that a condition of war suspended ordinary social relations between the combatants, and that the obligation of truth-speaking was . . . thus suspended. I, on the other hand, felt that a lie was necessarily a sin against God, and therefore was never justifiable.

My friend asked me whether I would hesitate to kill an enemy who was on guard over me . . . if it were essential to our escape. I replied that I would not hesitate to do so, any more than I would hesitate at it if we were over against each other in battle. In time of war the soldiers of both sides take the risks of a life-and-death struggle; and now that we were . . . prisoners it was our duty to escape if we could do so, even at the risk of our lives or of the lives of our captors, and it was their duty to prevent our escape at a similar risk.

My friend then asked me on what principle I could justify the taking of a man's life as an enemy, and yet not feel justified in telling him a lie in order to save his life and secure our liberty. How could it be claimed that it was more of a sin to tell a lie to a man . . . than to kill

him? I confessed that I could not at that time see the reason for the distinction, which my moral sense assured me was a real one, and I asked time to think of it. Thus it was that I came first to face a question of the ages, Is a lie ever justifiable?

And so Trumbull wrote the book to explain why he felt no lie—even under such extreme circumstances—could ever be deemed a righteous course of action.

One reason this book fascinated me was that it challenged my own assumptions. I immediately thought of the biblical account of Rahab in Joshua 2. Here is what happened just before Joshua's armies entered the Promised Land. Turn to Joshua 2, and let's look at this to start with. Joshua tells us (verse 1) that Joshua sent two men to spy on Jericho. Verse 1 says they :

came into the house of a harlot whose name was Rahab, and lodged there." The king of Jericho heard they were there , and verse 3 tells us he "sent word to Rahab, saying, 'Bring out the men who have come to you, who have entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land.'

4 But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them, and she said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from." [Notice that Rahab is lying.]

5 "And it came about when it was time to shut the gate, at dark, that the men went out; I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them."

6 But she had brought them up to the roof and hidden them in the stalks of flax which she had laid in order on the roof. [Rahab then made a deal with the Israelites in return for their safety. In verse 10 she explains why she had this fear of their God:]

10 "For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed.

11 "And when we heard it, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. [So she professed faith in the God of Israel. And made a deal to save her won family. Then, according to verse 10,]

15 she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was on the city wall, so that she was living on the wall.

Now in the New Testament, both Hebrews 11 and James 2 commend Rahab for what she did. I always had thought that since this all took place during a virtual state of war, Rahab's lie was justified—what moralists sometimes refer to as "a lie of necessity."

I could also think of other circumstances when we are permitted to *deceive our opponents*. A running-back in football needs to be able to fake well enough to make the defender think he is going to cut one way, and then he actually turns and runs the other way. That is misleading. It is *deliberately* deceptive. But very few people would ever think to contend seriously that a fakeout like that poses any kind of moral dilemma. We all understand that deception under in circumstances like that is justified. And so from all those things, I had always reasoned that there were times when lying is justified.

But this book made me begin to think more deeply about the issue.

A year after we were married, Darlene and I *moved* to Florida. There we met a dear couple who became very close friends. The husband was a policeman who had often worked undercover in some drug investigations. In those circumstances he had to deceive people by lying about who he was. As an undercover cop, he had to play a role that was a 24-hour-a-day lie.

In fact, this man had come to Christ in the midst of one of these undercover assignments, because he found so much in his own heart that was as evil as the role he was playing. And it frightened him. He came face to face with the reality that he was a sinner. And that is what turned him to Christ.

Soon after his conversion, he asked to be excused from undercover duties. He told me that as a Christian he could not justify so much deception and all the other evil aspects of the lifestyle that was necessary to pretend he was part of the drug culture.

That got me thinking even more deeply about the issue of *truth* and *falsehood* and what Scripture says about lying. And so this morning I want to call your attention to some of these things and try to help you think through some of the issues involved. What we're dealing with here is the very issue of truth itself. It raises some of the hardest moral and ethical questions I know, and There's no way we can cover it all in one hour. So I want to highlight four major lessons we can learn from Scripture about truth and what it is.

1. TRUTH REFLECTS THE VERY NATURE OF GOD

Our primary text for this morning is found in 1 John 2:21. Here, the apostle writes, "I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it, and because no lie is of the truth." And I want to focus on that final phrase, "no lie is of the truth."

"No lie is of the truth." At first sight that might seem to be a classic *tautology*. A tautology is a statement that merely repeats the same thought in different words and therefore says nothing important. It's a rather obvious statement: "No lie is of the truth." But it turns out it's not a tautology at all; it's a definition. And it goes to the heart of the issues we are talking about. In those few short words are contained a world of moral and philosophical truth. "No lie is of the truth."

That simple proposition suggests, first of all, that no lie can ultimately advance the cause of truth. Even Rahab's lie *per se* did not advance the cause of truth. When God defeated Jericho, He did it by miraculous means. That demonstrated, among other things, that the truth would have been triumphant here even without Rahab's lie. She wasn't *condemned* for her lie, but notice that when Scripture *commends* her, it is because she believed—not because she told a lie.

The moral superiority of truth over falsehood is one of those truths we all know instinctively. Our conscience tells us that the truth is good and lies are evil. Every society known to man—including the most primitive pagan tribal society—places a higher premium on the truth than on a lie.

I believe this is part of the knowledge of God Paul says is innate in the human heart. In Romans 2:15, Paul calls

this "the law written in our hearts," and he says our conscience bears witness to that innate sense of what's good and evil. Our conscience is not infallible, but the fact that we have a conscience—that we can *feel* guilt—affirms what Paul says in Romans 1:19-20. He is describing the innate moral sense that is an essential aspect of human consciousness, and Paul is explaining where that came from. He writes (Romans 1:19), "That which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. [20] For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse."

We know instinctively—or we *should know*—that God is a God of truth. And Scripture affirms this fact about God repeatedly. He is, above all, a God of truth. Write these references down. I'm afraid if you try to turn to them all we will move too fast:

- ! Psalm 31:5-6: "Thou hast redeemed me, O *Lord God of truth*. I have hated them that regard lying vanities: but I trust in the Lord"
- ! Psalm 146:6: "[God] keeps truth for ever" (146:6).
- ! Even the false prophet Balaam acknowledged (Numbers 23:19): "God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" That verse speaks in very sweeping terms. It categorically states that God Himself will not lie. And it specifically guarantees that God will fulfill His promises of blessing.
- ! On the other hand, 1 Samuel 15:29 affirms that God will also fulfill His threats of *judgment*. This passage

speaks particularly of God's judgment on the house of Saul: "The Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind: for He is not a man that He should change His mind."

! And in Ezekiel 24:14, He says, "I the Lord have spoken it: it shall come to pass, and I will do it; I will not go back, neither will I spare, neither will I repent."

The Holy Spirit is called "the Spirit of truth" (Jn. 15:26). And 1 John 5:7 adds, "It is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is the truth."

In a similar vein, Christ said, "I am the . . . Truth" (Jn. 14:6). So all three members of the Godhead are linked with truth. Truth is essential to the very concept of deity. In fact, God is who determines what truth is. Read the introduction and first chapter of *The Truth War* if you haven't read it yet. John MacArthur shows that truth is so linked to God that the whole concept of truth is nonsense apart from God. (That's the problem with the spirit of the current age. Secular thinkers have started to realize that having denied God, they have no way to process truth at all, so now they deny the existence of truth altogether.) No wonder. God is truth.

In contrast, Scripture says that Satan "is a liar, and the father of lies" (Jn. 8:44). He, along with "everyone who loves and practices lying," is excluded from heaven (according to Rev. 22:15). In fact, "all liars shall have their part in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone" (Rev. 21:8). So Scripture makes a stark contrast between all liars and the God of truth.

From beginning to end Scripture condemns all lying:

! "You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by My name" (Lev. 19:11-12).

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- ! We're told that a lying tongue is an abomination to the Lord (Prov. 6:16-17).
 - ! "A false witness will not go unpunished, And he who tells lies will not escape" (Proverbs 19:5); and verse 9 repeats the same idea, almost verbatim: "A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who tells lies will perish."
 - ! "It is better to be a poor man than a liar" (v. 22).
 - ! Truthfulness is the test of one's character: "A faithful witness will not lie, but a false witness speaks lies" (14:5).

Lying characterizes all wickedness: "The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies" (Ps. 58:3). "They delight in falsehood; They bless with their mouth, But inwardly they curse" (62:4). That's why the psalmist prayed, "Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips, From a deceitful tongue" (Ps. 120:2).

There is, as you can see, a very high priority on truthfulness throughout Scripture. As Christians we are commanded, "Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices" (Col. 3:9). "Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another" (Eph. 4:25).

Obviously all those things give truthfulness a very lofty position of virtue. "Truth reflects the very nature of God." That's our first point. Let's move on to the second. (These are not alliterated, rhymed, or in any way made easy to remember, so you'd better be writing them down.) Second:

2. THERE ARE TIMES WHEN IT IS RIGHT TO CONCEAL THE TRUTH.

It is important to see that concealing or suppressing the truth is not the moral equivalent of lying. Far from being a sin, concealment of the truth is often a duty. Every elder and pastor of this church is both morally and legally obligated to keep confidential anything personal someone tells us in private counseling sessions. (That is, provided they're not confessing something we are legally or morally obligated to report, like child abuse, or some gross sin they refuse to repent of that calls for church discipline).

But again, suppressing or concealing the truth is not the same as lying. It seems rather obvious that the mere fact a thing is true does not mean that we are morally obligated to make it known.

All of us are perfectly within our rights, for example, to conceal the pin number on our bank cards from anyone who tries to find it out.

And here are some biblical examples where truth was concealed—or should have been:

- ! Second Kings 20:12-19 describes Hezekiah's error in revealing the riches of Judah to Babylon.
- ! Jesus commanded the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ (Matt. 16:20). At that particular time in His earthly ministry it would have been wrong for them to proclaim the full truth about Him.
- ! Jesus told them on another occasion, "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now" (Jn. 16:12). There were true things he needed to conceal from them for the time being.

! And on the road to Emmaus He did not disclose to them who He was (Lk. 24:13-31). In fact, Scripture indicates that as "they approached the village where they were going . . . He acted as though He would go farther" (v. 28). In other words, for a brief time, He allowed them to think he was continuing His journey. By what means He did this is not clear, but we can safely conclude, I think, that the sinless Son of God did not tell them a lie. I believe they simply *assumed* he was going farther, and He made no attempt by either words or actions to correct that misconception. Again, he concealed the truth from them. This is not the same as a lie.

God certainly has a right to reveal what He desires and conceal what He desires. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29).

We are told elsewhere that Jesus purposely concealed truth from unbelievers by teaching in parables. He allowed them in their unbelief to be blinded to the truth of what He was saying. He concealed the truth from them.

So looking back at the account of Rahab, we can conclude that her act of hiding the spies poses no real moral dilemma. We also ought to note that she is commended in Hebrews 11:31 simply because she "Welcomed the spies in peace"—that is she did not turn them in to the authorities. She concealed them. And James 2:25 also commends her because she "received the messengers and sent them out by another way." So she is commended for

allowing them to escape. But never is she commended for telling a lie.

This brings us, however, to the most difficult moral issue with regard to the truth. There are times, I think, when Scripture indicates it is right to *mislead* an adversary—not by actually telling a lie, but by purposely creating a diversion or snare for him. This is point three:

3. A MISLEADING MANEUVER IN A WAR OR CONTEST IS NOT MORALLY THE SAME AS A LIE.

There are times in Scripture where the people of God actively misled their enemies, and I believe Scripture suggests they were right to do so.

For example, God Himself commanded Joshua to set a trap for the people of Ai. Starting in verse 1 of Joshua 8, we read this: "Now the LORD said to Joshua, 'Do not fear or be dismayed. Take all the people of war with you and arise, go up to Ai; see, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, his people, his city, and his land. [2] And you shall do to Ai and its king just as you did to Jericho and its king; you shall take only its spoil and its cattle as plunder for yourselves. Set an ambush for the city behind it.'"

In other words, they were to deceive the inhabitants of Ai into thinking the Israelite armies were attacking from the front. They would draw the people away from the city, then attack from the rear. This was a sneaky tactic, and verses 4-7 tell us how it was supposed to work:

4 [Joshua] commanded them, saying, "See, you are going to ambush the city from behind it. Do not go very far from the city, but all of you be ready.

5 "Then I and all the people who are with me will approach the city. And it will come about when they come out to meet us as at the first, that we will flee before them.

6 "And they will come out after us until we have drawn them away from the city, for they will say, 'They are fleeing before us as at the first.' So we will flee before them.

7 "And you shall rise from your ambush and take possession of the city, for the LORD your God will deliver it into your hand.

And that is precisely what they did. We cannot conclude that it was immoral, because God Himself commanded it. Don't put it in the same category as a lie. This was an act of military cunning. And I think we'll see in a moment that there is a crucial difference.

Now I should note that Henry Clay Trumbull, the author of the book I referred to at the beginning, suggests that this kind of deception *is* tantamount to lying. He defines a lie as "*the affirming, by word or by action, of that which is not true, with the purpose of deceiving*" (p. 47). To Trumbull, the intent to deceive is what constitutes the essence of the lie. (He points out, by the way, that it is possible to state an untruth that is not technically a lie, as when someone playfully says on a very cold day, "Nice summer weather we're having." That's sarcasm. It's not a lie. So an untrue statement alone does not constitute a lie. Trumbull says that the intent to deceive does.

But R. L. Dabney writes,

The sober mind cannot but feel that there is an extreme, to which [this] view cannot be pushed. I presume that no man would feel himself guilty for deceiving a mad dog in order to destroy him, or for misleading an assassin

from his victim, when helpless . . . to prevent murder [by any other means].

This brings us again to the running-back who fakes a cut inside in order to mislead a defender. Trumbull, I think, would actually conclude that this sort of fake-out in a sporting event is morally wrong. In fact, he points out that the balk (a fake pitching motion) is against the rules of baseball. Ok, but that's a specific rule. Fake motions aren't forbidden to the runners in baseball, or to players in any other sport. That seems to me to take the whole moral dilemma to a ridiculous extreme.

In most sports, as well as all wars, misleading maneuvers are a part of the game—expected by the adversary.

Why are these sorts of actions not morally equivalent to lying? I believe it is *because they do not involve an actual denial of the truth*. And it is the denial of truth that I believe constitutes a lie. That, I believe, is what 1 John 2:21 is teaching: "No lie is of the truth."

To make someone think you're going to shoot a basketball when you really mean to pass it to a teammate is not a denial of the truth. It's a legitimate fake tactic. To allow your wife to think you're taking her to a neighborly dinner party—when you've really set her up for a surprise birthday party—is not the same as a lie. Why? Because it is not a denial of the truth. When Jesus allowed the disciples to think He was traveling beyond Emmaus, that did not involve a denial of the truth. Therefore it was nothing like a lie.

Rahab's lie was different, because she actively and blatantly denied the truth. Perhaps she could have misled the enemies of God through some other tactic and been totally justified. But she lied. I'm not trying to come down hard on her here, and certainly I'm not going to condemn her for a lie when Scripture commends her for her faith. I'm not suggesting that her lie was some kind of monstrous, grievous sin. Scripture doesn't treat it that way, and in all candor, I probably would have done what she did in that same situation.

In fact, let me be clear about this, because someone is bound to ask whether *I* wouldn't be willing to lie to protect my wife and children from evil intruders bent on killing them. My response is that I pray God will never put me to such a test. But I would be lying right now if I did not admit to you that under such circumstances I would probably take the same course of action Rahab took. Such is the weakness of the flesh and the difficulty of the dilemma this question poses. Let's be aware of that because it is a reminder of our sinful frailty, and let's cultivate a love for the truth.

But my main point about Rahab is that there's no moral justification given to us in Scripture for her lie, and therefore no one should treat it as some kind of precedent that makes situational lying OK. And therefore it is worth noting once more that even Scripture commends her for her faith without approving the lie she told.

Let me quickly refer to one other problem passage. Second Thessalonians 2:11 says of certain unbelievers,

"God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false."

Here God cannot be charged with lying, because his plain Word is true and available to these people. But they are unbelievers who reject the plain truth of His word, so God subjects them to a deluding influence. God is not the agent of deception here. *He* does not deny the truth; on the contrary, He has proclaimed it very plainly in His Word—what Peter calls the "more sure word" of Scripture. But since these people have rejected the infallible, perfectly truthful Word, God simply turns them over to a deluding influence and allows them to be deceived. He is neither the agent of deception nor the denier of truth—so He cannot be charged with wrongdoing.

So we see repeated examples in Scripture where misleading someone does not necessarily constitute a lie; but denial of the truth *always* does.

Now we can't spend a lot of time on this, because we need to move on. But I want to admit freely to you that at some point all these questions become extremely tricky moral dilemmas. And I want to pause at this point to give you a couple of cautions to bear in mind while you ponder these issues. These are some bonus points that *will* be on the final exam:

1. At all costs, we want to avoid situation ethics. Right and wrong are not to be determined subjectively on a case-by-case basis.
2. None of us is qualified to set our own ethical judgments above the clear commands of Scripture.

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3. Our obligation to speak the truth is a duty we owe to God Himself, not just to our fellow man. A lie is a sin against God, not just against the person to whom we tell the lie.
 4. We ought to love the truth and be committed to it at all costs. There are clearly times when our duty requires that we refuse to deny the truth, even though it may cost us our very lives. Heaven will be populated by martyrs who have paid that very price. So the argument that the truth may cost us our lives is ultimately no argument whatsoever in favor of a lie.

We have to move on from the moral questions to my final main point. There are countless real and hypothetical scenarios we could cite to illustrate the difficulty of this idea, and we could easily talk about it for hours. But it's enough this morning just to acknowledge that this is a very difficult command, and it sets a standard that is virtually impossible for fallen creatures to obey. But (of course) the same thing is true of all the law's moral standards. We saw that when we studied the Ten Commandments. So the impossibility of obeying this standard is no argument against the standard itself. It is never justifiable for us to deny the truth.

This is point four in the big outline, four lessons we draw from 1 Jn. 2:21.

4. THERE ARE PROFOUND THEOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL RAMIFICATIONS IN THIS STATEMENT, "NO LIE IS OF THE TRUTH."

And I want to look at some of those issues right now. This requires that we shift gears a little bit. We've been pondering *moral* issues. Now I want to turn to some philosophical ones.

I remind you that God is a God of absolute truth. This is affirmed by many statements in Scripture. Here's a sampling:

! "Thy word is true from the beginning: and every one of thy righteous judgments endureth for ever" (Psa. 119:60).

! "Thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name" (Psa. 138:2).

! "Thy word is truth" (Jn. 17:17).

! "God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" (Num. 23:19).

! "Let God be true, but every man a liar" (Rom. 3:4).

(I admitted that I might cave in and lie if faced with a dilemma like Rahab's. Let's be clear about this: God never would.)

! "The testimony of the Lord is sure . . . The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether" (Psa. 19:7, 9).

—and on and on we could go for the rest of the morning. This is a huge issue in Scripture. Truth is obviously a very important matter. Just search the cross references of those verses to see how many similar statements there are, affirming that God is a God of truth.

Now pay especially close attention to the argument that is made in Hebrews 6:17-18:

"God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, in order that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement, we who have fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us."

In other words, God's word alone is sure enough, because it is *impossible* for Him to lie. But to underscore the point when He made a covenant with His people, He affirmed His promise with an oath. *That's* how sure God's covenant with His people is.

So to sum up, God Himself *is* truth (cf. Jn. 14:6). To deny truth is to deny God. That is why unbelief is such a deadly sin.

There's one major philosophical ramification of this truth I want to stress. I believe this verse, "no lie is of the truth," proves a very basic principle of all rational philosophy. I'm speaking of a principle known as "the law of contradiction." Some people call it "the law of non-contradiction." It's the same idea, either way.

This principle is fundamental to all truth. And I believe contemporary Christian theology is in serious trouble, precisely because many theologians have denied the law of contradiction. *What is this law?* you ask.

Glad you asked.

The law of contradiction simply states that if a proposition is true, its antithesis cannot also be true. Two conflicting propositions cannot both be true at the same time and in the same sense. In philosophy you hear this expressed different ways: X cannot be non-X. A thing

cannot be and not be simultaneously. Nothing can have contradictory or inconsistent qualities at the same time and in the same manner. Those statements all mean the same thing. They express the law of contradiction.

All logic depends on this simple principle. In fact, all rational thought and discourse depends on it. Until a little more than a hundred years ago, the law of contradiction was almost universally accepted by philosophers as a self-evident truth. Francis Schaeffer attributed the decline of 20th-century society to the demise of the law of contradiction. Schaeffer suggested that when philosophy abandons this rule it abandons rational thinking completely and sinks beneath "the line of despair." Schaeffer said when you reach that point, suicide is the only sensible course of action.

Scripture very clearly affirms the law of contradiction, in many verses besides the one we're looking at. Second Timothy 2:13, for example, says "[God] cannot deny himself." If God is truth and the determiner of all truth, and He cannot deny himself, then truth by definition cannot contradict itself.

Lots of well-meaning Christians, however, seem to operate with the misconception nowadays that biblical revelation is somehow exempt from the law of contradiction. They suggest that God's truth can contravene logic if God is so pleased. They often point to the doctrine of the Trinity, or pit divine sovereignty against human responsibility—and say these things prove that revealed truth is sometimes self-contradictory.

But Titus 1:2 tells us that "God . . . cannot lie." Therefore God's Word *must* be in harmony with the law of contradiction. A single clear, unresolvable contradiction would be enough to destroy the trustworthiness of the whole. That's why the enemies of truth are so eager to try to prove that God's Word contradicts itself.

We who love truth ought to jealously guard against any suggestion that God's revelation is internally inconsistent. But more than that, we need to defend the law of contradiction itself, because this is a *biblical* principle that is a vital part of the foundation for all truth.

I'm troubled when I hear terms like *paradox* and *antinomy* tossed around by Christians without sufficient explanation. People tend to write off everything they don't want to think carefully about by labeling it a paradox. Neo-orthodoxy built a whole theology of contradictory ideas by labeling every incongruity a "paradox." The New Age movement and our postmodern academicians do the same thing. But be warned: lots of people today use the term *paradox* to try to justify *real contradictions* in their worldview. Anyone who adopts a postmodern perspective on truth *needs* to accommodate those contradictions. Neoorthodox and postmodern religious leaders use the idea of paradox to baptize irrationality, and then they label it Christian. But it is not true Christianity. "No lie is of the truth." Truth by definition cannot contradict itself.

There *are* legitimate paradoxes in Scripture—but these are plays on words, not actual contradictions. Jesus Himself gave us many: The first shall be last; lose your life to gain it; he that would be first should be a servant to all, and so

on. Again these kinds of expressions are merely a play on words. We don't really imagine that they teach self-contradictory ideas.

But don't slap the label "paradox" on every difficult idea, and don't think you can justify irrational doctrine or free yourself from the duty of careful thinking by embracing a bunch of flat-out contradictions and calling them paradoxical.

I think it was J. I. Packer who popularized the term *antinomy* to describe the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. In my view that's even worse, because *antinomy* is technical term for "two equally binding laws that contradict one another." In legal terms if the city says you must keep your dog on a leash, but the county government defines a leash as animal cruelty and forbids it—that's an antinomy. It sets up a conflict of authority. It establishes a contradiction that is impossible to reconcile.

I don't believe any true contradiction exists between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. (If you believe these doctrines plainly contradict each other, you'll have to demonstrate where the contradiction lies. I don't believe any such "contradiction"—real or apparent—exists. But that's another message.)

The Trinity is certainly difficult to fathom. In fact, it's impossible for us to understand completely—but it is not self-contradictory. *We do not believe that God is three in the same sense that He is one.* Read the early church councils' teachings on the trinity and the two natures of Christ and you will see that historic orthodoxy has

carefully avoided the language of "contradiction." It was the critics' of the Trinity who claimed that this truth is self-contradictory. And until a hundred years ago or so, every credible theologian in history has understood that to treat the doctrine of the Trinity as self-contradictory is tantamount to saying that Christianity itself is false.

What Christians in earlier times understood—and many modern and postmodern Christians miss—is that whenever our language shifts into the vocabulary of antinomy and contradiction, the words themselves no longer communicate.

See, if we overthrow the law of contradiction, literally anything might be true. *Black* could mean *white* and *hot* could mean *cold* and everything would really mean nothing. If two contradictory propositions could both be true, then who are we to say that people who deny the deity of Christ are actually *wrong*? Perhaps if we see truth from a different angle, what seems false might actually be true and vice versa. See the problem? Ultimately, it means nothing really matters.

That is exactly where most modern men and women now live—in the abyss of existentialism and the postmodern fog of uncertainty about everything. People can hold world-views that flatly contradict one another—yet at the same time earnestly deny that either system must be right or wrong. "That may be truth for you," they say. "My truth can't sit in judgment on yours." That type of thinking may *seem* friendly and benign, but it destroys the significance of truth. It is as dangerous as the worst, soul-destroying heresy.

No lie is of the truth. And we who know the truth must be a city set on the hill. We're to be brightly burning beacons for the truth. Therefore we must oppose everything that is false. And we must hold fast to the knowledge that what is true cannot be false, and what is false cannot be true.