

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Marstonian Mysticism The Anti-Theology of Gorge W. Marston John W. Robbins

In 1960 a little book by an Orthodox Presbyterian minister appeared, entitled *The Voice of Authority*. The book was reprinted in 1978 by a California publishing house, and as a consequence, came to this writer's attention.

After having read the book two times (it is only 116 pages), I have been tempted to think that it was written by two different men, one man eminently sane, and the other more than slightly daffy. The proper conclusion, however, appears to be that it is a mishmash of confusion—a pinch of orthodox Christianity and a handful of neo-orthodoxy—and thus typical of much so-called Reformed theology in the twentieth century. Because it is typical of much contemporary "Reformed" theology, a closer look at this little book could be quite instructive.

A Little Orthodoxy

Let us begin with the pinch of orthodox Christianity. Marston presents some excellent statements on exegetical method. On page 59 he writes:

Consider the unity of this Book. In reality, this is not a book but a library consisting of sixty-six books written by more than thirty different authors over a period of some fifteen hundred years. Three

different languages are found in the Bible. The racial and cultural backgrounds of the writers are marked by variety. These men wrote under varying circumstances. They had no opportunity to get together beforehand and map out the Book; to agree on policy; to adopt principles which would guide them in their writing. The unity of these books is most remarkable. The various writers are in absolute agreement. They do not contradict but supplement one another in their message. These books are so unified in their teaching that we think of them as one book. Where else could one find a library consisting of sixty-six volumes, written by thirty or more authorities in a given field, where all the writers are in absolute agreement? How can we account for the unity which we find in the Bible? Here is the answer. Behind the minds and pens of these writers was the mind of the Almighty God. The unity of the Book attests its divine authorship.

Marston follows this statement with another, equally excellent, on page 64:

There is a third rule to be observed. Scripture must be interpreted in the light of Scripture. This rule is based upon the

unity of the Book. It recognizes the Bible as the Word of God. It assumes that God is self-consistent, that what He says on a certain subject in one part of the Bible is bound to be in harmony with what He says elsewhere in this Book on the same subject... No one passage may be interpreted in a way which will bring it in conflict with the teaching of other passages in the Bible. Because the Bible is the Word of God, Scripture cannot contradict Scripture... Unless the interpretation given a certain passage is in harmony with the total teaching of the Bible, it cannot be correct.

Marston illustrates this principle for the reader by referring to *John* 3:17:

John 3:17 reads as follows, "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved." Some would interpret this verse to teach that God intends to save all men. This interpretation, however, must be rejected because it conflicts with the teaching of such passages, for instance, as *John* 3:36, which contains the statement, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him." The conflict between this interpretation and the words of Christ as contained in *Matthew* 25:46 is even more apparent.

Now all of this is excellent (except for the fact that *John* 3:17 and *John* 3:36 do not logically conflict: Perhaps, a universalist might argue, all will believe, and that contention would have to be refuted by other verses). The principles are merely restatements of orthodox Christian doctrine, the best statement of which was made by the Reformers. Note well, however, that these statements are buried in the middle of Marston's book. The first part of the book—and again the latter part—present the diametrically opposed view of the neo-orthodox theologians. Marston surrounds a kernel of truth with a massive husk of neo-orthodoxy, and makes

assent to the neo-orthodox views the test of one's salvation, rather than assent to the truth.

A Lot of New-orthodoxy

Instead of teaching that the Biblical writers are in "absolute agreement"; that they "do not contradict but supplement one another"; that "what He [God] says on a certain subject in one part of the Bible is bound to be in harmony with what He says elsewhere in this Book on the same subject"; that "no one passage may be interpreted in a way which will bring it in conflict with the teaching of other passages in the Bible"; and that "Scripture cannot contradict Scripture," Marston declares that the Bible contains "mysteries" and "paradoxes" which are contradictions. These paradoxes are the exceptions (and they are major exceptions, containing the heart of the Christian faith, as we shall see) to the rule of the self-consistency of Scripture, for Marston writes:

True, as we have already seen, there are paradoxes in Holy Writ which contain truths that seem to be contradictory, but *aside from these*, unless the interpretation given a certain passage is in harmony with the total teaching of the Bible, it cannot be correct (page 65, emphasis added).

These two themes—the major, neo-orthodox theme of the paradoxical Scriptures, and the minor, orthodox theme of the harmony of Scripture—are antithetical and contradictory. Either the Scriptures are in "absolute agreement" or they contain truths which "cannot possibly be reconciled before the bar of human reason." Either "no one passage may be interpreted in a way which will bring it in conflict with the teaching of other passages in the Bible" or there are irreconcilable truths in the Bible. Either Scriptures "do not contradict but supplement one another" or they "seem to be contradictory." Either A or non-A. Not both A and non-A. Marston's position is logically absurd and Scripturally false.

What is worse, Marston makes this mysticism—this assertion of contradictories—the test of orthodoxy: "Those who cannot accept a paradox must reject the doctrine of the Trinity" (page 17). "If one refuses to

accept paradoxes he must, if logical, also reject the Lord Jesus Christ" (page 21). If that be so, Marston should state whether John Calvin was or was not a Christian, for it was Calvin who wrote that "no one can be more averse to paradox than I am, and in subtleties I find no delight at all" (Letter to Laelius Socinus, 1551).

Marston defines a paradox as follows:

A paradox is not, as Barth thinks, two truths which are actually contradictory. Truth is not irrational. Nor is a paradox two truths which are difficult to reconcile but can be reconciled before the bar of human reason. That is a seeming paradox. But when two truths, both taught unmistakably in the infallible Word of God, cannot possibly be reconciled before the bar of human reason, then you have a paradox.

There are several things to be noted about this definition. The first is that there is no difference between a contradiction and a paradox, despite Marston's unsupported assertion that there is. A paradox is "two truths ... [which] cannot possibly be reconciled before the bar of human reason." Is not a contradiction also two truths which cannot possibly be reconciled before the bar of human reason? Marston apparently believes that by using two words, he can create a difference. What is the difference? He does not say. (In correspondence with the writer, Marston states flatly, "A paradox consists of two statements which are contradictory." Letter dated May 10, 1979.)

The reason for making this distinction without a difference becomes clearer when the matter of Karl Barth comes up. Marston is anxious to differentiate between his position and Barth's, and his concern is amply justified, for the two positions are quite similar. Marston attempts to put some distance between his view of the Incarnation as paradoxical and Barth's view of the Incarnation as paradoxical. On pages 24 and 25 he spends a few paragraphs in this attempt, and concludes, "One nature cannot be both human and divine. This is a real contradiction." Marston is right, of course; it is a

real contradiction, and Marston recognizes it as such because it cannot be reconciled before the bar of human reason. The authors of the Creed of Chalcedon also recognized this view as a real contradiction. The important point is that Marston, using his stated principles of the paradoxical nature of Scripture and the necessity for curbing human logic, cannot assert that Barth's position is wrong. By undercutting Scripture and logic, Marston leaves himself no ground on which to stand. There is, we are forced to conclude, no difference between his paradoxes and Barth's. Both agree that the Bible is paradoxical, that human reason is impotent in reconciling at least some of the truths of Scripture, and that one's salvation depends upon one's accepting logical absurdities. They differ merely in which truths are paradoxical and which are not. Of course, Marston maintains that the truths are paradoxical (contradictory) only to finite minds. They are not contradictory to God, he says. The neo-orthodox would disagree, and, strangely enough, logic would be on their side; for if the only revelation we have is paradoxical, on what ground does Marston deny that God's mind, as well as finite minds, is confronted with irreconcilable truths? Has Marston had a special, non-paradoxical, revelation on this point? How does he know "truth is not irrational" if the major truths revealed to us are contradictory?

The Incarnation is not the only paradox Marston (or Barth, for that matter) finds in Scripture. Marston names a least five more: the Trinity, God's sovereignty and man's "free moral agency," the holiness of God and the origin of sin, unconditional election and the sincere offer of the Gospel, and limited atonement and a universal offer of salvation. A seventh, man's inability and accountability, he tells us, is believed to be a paradox by some, but he himself thinks that those two truths are reconcilable before the bar of human reason. Marston does not say whether his list of paradoxes is complete. Perhaps there are more; we are not told. In any case, Barth finds more, and so do some others, as Marston acknowledges. This is not a minor point, for if one's salvation—or at least one's orthodoxy—depends upon accepting paradoxes, we must have a complete list of the alleged paradoxes. Half measures will not do. Marston's entire argument is

that these paradoxes cannot be reconciled; that is, they are not his subjective difficulties in understanding the Bible: They are objectively there. If that be so, then a complete list is absolutely necessary if we are ever to be sure that we are not going to hell for our rationalistic and impious attempt to do the impossible: Reconcile irreconcilable truths.

There is also another point to be made, not any less serious: Marston, by asserting that there are paradoxes in Scripture, has opened the floodgates of irrationalism; for he has asserted that at least some of the Scriptures are irrational, that they cannot possibly be reconciled before the bar of human reason. Marston may personally object to some of Barth's paradoxes, but he has no *reason* to do so. The Scriptures are paradoxical, and human reason is not to be trusted, he says.

Some hypothetical theologian might assert that the two truths—(1) a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law, and (2) by works a man is justified and not by faith only—are both taught unmistakably in Scripture and cannot possibly be reconciled. He might, if he were a Marstonian, make the test of orthodoxy belief in this paradox. (Marston writes: "While the Bible teaches salvation by faith alone, it does not also teach salvation by faith and works. If it did, that would be a paradox." Letter dated May 10, 1979. The reader should understand that Marston apparently means "justification" rather than "salvation.") To answer our hypothetical theologian, Marston would have to appeal to the laws of logic, but how could he? He agrees with the hypothetical theologian that human reason is impotent when dealing with divine truth and that the Scriptures are paradoxical. Marston would have no answer to the hypothetical theologian, except to say that while Scripture is paradoxical, this is not one of the paradoxes. Yet if piety consists in one's willingness to curb logic, and if the precedent for paradoxes has already been established, would not Marston obviously be impious in denying this to be a paradox? By deliberately offending the laws of logic in one point, Marston has forfeited any right to criticize any other view as illogical or unscriptural. One

wonders where we would be today had Martin Luther or John Calvin been a Marstonian mystic.

Further Difficulties

There are, moreover, still other serious problems with Marston's view. He holds that the paradoxes are really there; that they are not simply problems in his own mind. They are objective paradoxes, not subjective paradoxes. A subjective paradox is not a paradox at all, according to Marston, but a "seeming paradox." Those who believe that man's responsibility and man's inability constitute a paradox are wrong, he says. That would be an example of a seeming paradox. Yet if the paradoxes are objective, how many are there? This writer finds none of Marston's alleged paradoxes to be irreconcilable before the bar of human reason. That is not to say that the writer has absolutely no difficulty understanding some teachings of the Bible; it is to say that he does not know enough to state categorically as Marston does that some truths "cannot possibly be reconciled before the bar of human reason." This writer has not made all the logical deductions from Scripture that may possibly be made, as Marston apparently has. So this writer is in no position to make the sort of sweeping claims Marston makes. The claim this writer does make is that the list Marston presents is not a list of paradoxes in Scripture at all, but a list of the different ways Marston has misunderstood Scripture. He has projected his subjective misinterpretations of Scripture—misinterpretations arrived at by violating his own exegetical rule against interpreting passages so that they conflict with other passages—into the Scripture itself. This may be clear by comparing two statements from his book. On page 66 he writes:

If the seeker should find certain truths which do not seem to fit together, he simply sets them aside until he finds other truths which are necessary to bridge the gap. If the searcher should fail to find them, he may assume that the inadequacy is within himself.

This is an excellent statement of true Christian humility, but Marston himself disregards it. Rather

than "setting aside" the truths which do not seem to him to fit together, Marston makes assent to their alleged irreconcilability the test of orthodoxy. Rather than assuming that "the inadequacy is within himself," Marston asserts that it is Scripture and human logic that are inadequate. He recommends this statement for others, but fails to live by it himself. When he finds two truths that he cannot fit together properly, he does not say, "This doctrine (the Trinity), which lies at the very heart of the Christian faith, is one which I am presently unable to understand correctly; but I pray that the Holy Spirit will enlighten my mind, cause me to see my error, and lead me into all truth." No. Instead he publishes a book with the following words: "This mystery, which lies at the very heart of the Christian faith is one which the finite mind cannot solve. The truth must be accepted by faith" (pages 17-18). Marston acknowledges no *personal* inadequacy at all (just the opposite, in fact). Rather than confessing his failure to understand Scripture correctly, he puts the blame on his environment: It is not his misunderstanding of the doctrine that causes the problem; it is that the doctrine cannot be understood by the finite mind. Note that Marston does not say, "George Marston's mind"; he says, "finite mind." George Marston, we must assume if we are to reach the conclusion he reaches and wants us to reach, does not err. The Scriptures really are paradoxical. What George Marston does not understand, cannot be understood by the "finite mind." Isn't the assumption clear? Marston's claim necessarily presupposes that George Marston is the most intelligent creature who ever was, is, or will be. Not merely the most intelligent human being, but the most intelligent *creature*, for he speaks of the "finite mind." What George Marston does not understand, cannot be understood by anyone except, possibly, God himself.

But Marston's conceit is not exhausted yet. He claims to have found paradoxes in Scripture—truths irreconcilable before the bar of human reason. These are *really* irreconcilable—not merely difficult to reconcile—and, as such, are irreconcilable in this life and in the life to come, since we will still be finite human beings with human reason then, too. The assertion of contradictions in the Bible once was a standard claim of unbelievers, and a common

objection to Christianity. Now, by the alchemy of the modern theologian, it is transformed into an argument for Christianity and even the mark of divine truth! Tertullian may never have said it, but Marston does, though not in so many words: "I believe because it is absurd." Marston's position is that of Soren Kierkegaard, father of existentialism and neo-orthodoxy:

Ready to completely discard the Bible, which appeared to him to be filled with the absurd, the contradictory and the paradoxical, Kierkegaard suddenly saw a solution. It is because God is timeless and spaceless, and man is in time and space, that the Bible presents so many problems. Man has no categories, no mental containers in which to receive ...eternal truth. There is a disjunction, a Chinese wall before God and man ("Neo-orthodoxy," *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*).

The trouble with orthodoxy, according to the neo-orthodox, is that it tries to dissolve these paradoxes into a rational, logically coherent system... The Bible ...is full of paradoxes. God is One and Three; Christ is God and Man; Man is *non posse non peccare*, yet free; faith is an act and a gift, and so on ("Neo-orthodoxy," *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*).

Marston, of course, does not say that there is a "Chinese wall" between God and man. He uses the words "qualitative difference." Nor does he explicitly fall into Van Til's error (at least not in this book) that God and man have no univocal knowledge. That error is completely destructive of Christianity, for it destroys the possibility of revelation. Nevertheless, Christians should realize that anyone, be he a professed believer or a raging infidel, who claims to have found irreconcilable truths in the Bible is the epitome of conceit. He is thereby claiming, whether he expressly makes such claims or not, (1) that he has understood the Scriptures correctly; (2) that he has made and examined all possible deductions from the propositions of the Bible; and (3) that there is no logical way to reconcile the paradoxical statements.

Unless he has done these things, he cannot truthfully say that there are irreconcilable truths in the Bible. Marston's claim assumes infallibility and omniscience: What Marston does not understand cannot possibly be understood.

Pious Arrogance

This hubris, amazingly enough, is presented to the reader as pious humility. Somehow—the reader is asked to believe—it is humble and meek to say that there are irreconcilable truths in the Bible, that George Marston is the most intelligent creature ever made, that logic must be curbed, and that God cannot express himself coherently. Marston's claim must be recognized for what it actually is: an attack on revelation; on the unity, in errancy, and perspicuity of Scripture; and on the omnipotence of God. God is so hamstrung by Marston's "qualitative difference" that he is unable to reveal many truths to man in a coherent, non contradictory way. It is no wonder that Reformed churches are virtually impotent in the twentieth century. Their theology is neo-orthodox. They have no sure word from God. They have two words, one contradicting the other. They speak logical nonsense, and deservedly are ignored by the world. Until this anti-theology is repudiated, the impotence of the Reformed churches will continue.

Like Marston, many so-called Reformed writers have inferred a "qualitative difference between God and man which the telescope of the human mind is not qualified to penetrate. Can a dog understand his master?" (page 11). This Creator-creature epistemological gap is so wide that not even God can bridge it: "It is true that God has revealed certain things about Himself to man... The fact that man was made in the image of God, however, does not eliminate the qualitative distinction between the nature of God and the nature of man. God in His essence is beyond our understanding" (page 11). Marston finds more common ground with the existentialists, for he, William Barrett, Soren Kierkegaard, and Karl Barth affirm that "Religious truth ... Is concerned with matters which are basically above and beyond the reach of reason."

Had Marston taken the orthodox view, he would have made the point that the human mind cannot "search out" God (there are a number of verses stating this), and then he would have proceeded to emphasize the necessity for revelation if man is to know God. He does not do so. He is concerned to make an entirely different point: Not only is man unable to reach God, but God is unable to reach man in an intelligible fashion. At best, God reveals paradoxes when he speaks of himself and certain other major matters. God is so different from man that his word is unintelligible to men. The "qualitative difference" is a scrambler: God reveals himself, but the message is scrambled before it is communicated to men. This attack on God's omnipotence is an extremely serious matter, for as Marston himself notes,

Those who have rejected one or more of God's attributes have, in principle, rejected God. They may not realize what they have done. They may still call upon His name in prayer and seek to walk in outward conformity to His laws but in reality they have given to their own minds the place that belongs to God. These men have dared to sit in judgment upon God; to say what He can or cannot be, what He can or cannot do. The God who is thus rejected in principle, will in time be renounced in practice.

That is precisely what is happening in Reformed churches. The mystics, like Marston, say God *cannot* reveal himself coherently. They attack God's omnipotence. They have given their own minds the place that belongs to God, not in the professed service of logic and intelligibility, but in the service of paradoxes and irrationalism. They are guilty of the very sin which they claim to find in others. Yet they still call on his name in prayer and seek to walk in outward conformity to his laws.

The practical consequences of Marstonian mysticism are becoming clearer daily. First, there is the end of Christian theology. After all, if the heart of the Christian faith and other important doctrines are forever beyond human understanding, then theology is futile. Second, if we already have

theologians who have reached the zenith for finite minds, then what is the point of becoming a theologian? Third, if theology is futile, practice is all that is left, and the church concentrates on "practical" matters. The professing churches today eschew theology like the plague and run endless seminars on "practical" issues. Those few that do venture into theology teach anti-theology. What must soon follow is the rejection of Christianity altogether, for Christianity is a system of doctrine. Neo-orthodoxy is not Christianity, nor is Marstonian mysticism. They are anti-theologies.

The Perspicuity of Scripture

There remains, however, one final question: What motivates men like George Marston to write books like *The Voice of Authority*? Only God knows for sure, but this writer would like to suggest one possible answer: a desire for power. It is the same motive that led to the denial of the priesthood of believers in the Dark Ages. The principal obstacle to the creation of the sort of power structure desired by some persons in the church is the perspicuity of Scripture. If a power structure is to be created, if an elite is to emerge, then the perspicuity of Scripture must be denied. That is what the Romanists did, and that is what Marston attempts to do. A perspicuous Scripture is the voice of authority, for Christians can appeal to it directly without the mediation of men; but those who wish to lord it over Christians find it necessary to fabricate arguments showing why the Scriptures are mysterious and need human interpreters, if only to list the paradoxes that one must accept on pain of being declared an impious rationalist. These human interpreters become the voice of authority, for without their guidance, it would not be possible to understand Scripture aright, *i.e.*, paradoxically. Without their help, one might actually fall into the error of thinking that the Bible makes sense.

We are forced to conclude that *The Voice of Authority* is not the logical, self-consistent God speaking in non contradictory Scripture, but George W. Marston speaking in paradoxes. It is his understanding of the Scripture that is infallible; it is he, who, with the assurance of omniscience, states that there are truths in the Bible that cannot be

reconciled by "the finite mind." The test of one's faith is not whether one assents to the coherent system of truth revealed in the Bible, but whether one accepts the notion of paradox. For those Christians who believe that God is not the author of confusion; that his revelation is non contradictory; and that the regenerate man, guided by the Logic that illumines him (see *John* 1), is capable of understanding and believing that revelation, Marston's attempt to obscure the truth with paradoxes must be totally rejected. We must take Paul's warning seriously: "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ." For, as John wrote: "We know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, so that we may know him who is true."

Once, not so long ago, Calvinists were often castigated by their opponents for being "too logical." They accepted the witless insults as compliments, and wore them as badges of honor. Now, in this century, some who call themselves Calvinists use the same absurd accusation (absurd because it is not possible to be too logical) against genuine Calvinists who maintain that the Bible is non contradictory. Like Balaam, they bless, attempting to curse. It is our hope that all who call themselves Calvinists will once again merit the blessings of men like Balaam.