

## A TRINITARIAN EPISTEMOLOGY DEFENDED: A REJOINDER TO NORMAN GEISLER

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In a recent article, Norman Geisler strongly criticizes an earlier article of mine<sup>1</sup> in which I not only contend that there are limitations to the applicability of logic but also propose an epistemology that recognizes these limitations and yet explains how truth is one. The Trinity is my model for this epistemology.

I proceed to show that Geisler's criticisms are not valid.

### I. MAJOR CRITICISMS ANSWERED

Though I did not specifically say so in my article on logic, I am unreservedly committed to all the evangelical doctrines. Geisler claims, however, that I am involved in some "heresies or near heresies" (G 62). He gives two examples under this heading:

1. He raises the question whether my statement that "there is a sense in which it is only the Father who is absolute" (D 376) does not mean that "the Son and Spirit are in some ontological sense *less* than absolute in their nature" and says that if this is so I am heretical (G 63). My response is that when one has in view the fact that the essence of the Son and of the Spirit is the one divine essence one must say that they are absolute, but when one has in view that they are persons one must say that they are not absolute because the Son is generated and the Spirit is spirated. That which is conditioned is not absolute. I do not see how such "contradictory" doctrine could be palatable to Geisler, but it is the clear implication of Chalcedonian orthodoxy—and the Chalcedonian teaching concerning God is included among the historic doctrines of all three major branches of Christendom.

2. Geisler raises the question whether the doctrine that "it is the function (of the Holy Spirit) to unify and to preserve the Unity (of the divine persons) unbroken" (D 377) does not imply "denial of the unchangeable unity of the one essence in God" (G 63). Geisler overlooks the fact that unity of essence is only unity of essence. It is not unity of persons. To offer a poor but perhaps helpful analogy, the unity of two bodies—as in marriage—does not imply the unity of the minds and purposes of the two persons involved.

In connection with his charge that I am involved in heresy or near heresy, Geisler claims that "if the logical basis for determining truth from falsity is denied, then all Christian truth is at one and the same time false." In this connection he states, "If it is not contradictory to affirm that God is both love and hate,

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<sup>1</sup>N. L. Geisler, "'Avoid . . . Contradictions' (1 Timothy 6:20): A Reply to John Dahms," *JETS* 22/1 (March 1979) 55-65; J. V. Dahms, "How Reliable Is Logic?," *JETS* 21/4 (December 1978) 369-380. Hereafter G with a number following refers to Geisler's article and page number, while D with a number following refers to my article and page number.

then he could be both." Geisler is begging the epistemological question. According to my epistemology, there is a point at which a test other than that of logic must be applied. Sometimes this is the test of empirical observation. Sometimes it is the test of aesthetic compatibility. On the other hand, according to my epistemology God cannot be both love and hate because, at this point, the law of contradiction is applicable as a test for truth (see D 378).

In another place (G 63) Geisler indicates that he does not relish my brief comment concerning ethics (D 380). This is because he thinks that one who opposes absolutism in ethics is one who has no absolutes in his ethics. This is just as erroneous as to think that one who opposes rationalism is one who does not use rational argument. Moreover, if Geisler had understood my article he would have known that the relevant absolute (or absolutes) is the first thing one ought to consider in determining what is right conduct in a given situation. But my view implies that empirical and aesthetic considerations ought also to be included. Therefore I contend that truly Christian ethics is not absolutist.<sup>2</sup>

Geisler declares that my view has "serious (even disastrous) implications for the doctrine of inerrancy" (G 55). He never deals with the issue specifically and can only draw such a conclusion from a misunderstanding of what my view is. Let it be known, moreover, that I believe in the inerrancy of Scripture. Of course, I assume that one's understanding of the nature of truth must be derived from the Bible, not from rationalism<sup>3</sup>—nor, for that matter, from romanticism or existentialism.<sup>4</sup>

The idea that the epistemology I propose is one that opens the door to "exegetical and theological nonsense" (G 65) is simply not true. Logic governs the understanding of statements and ideas. Rigorously careful observation of relevant empirical data is required. It is only then that the aesthetic judgment comes into play. The aesthetic sense adds nothing to the matter at hand. It only determines whether the ideas and the empirical data are really compatible when logic says they are not compatible. If it judges that they are not, truth is absent at some point. Of course this assumes that (a) the aesthetic sense is not purely a subjective matter (beauty is a universal) and (b) the aesthetic sense is functioning as it

<sup>2</sup>Absolutist ethics is not Biblical ethics for various reasons. We only mention two: (a) It is legalistic; (b) it allows the Holy Spirit no real place in the determination of what is right conduct in a given situation. It implies that one does not need wisdom to decide what he ought to do; what he needs is information.

<sup>3</sup>I am concerned lest error be so defined that it becomes impossible to believe in the incarnation, for example.

<sup>4</sup>In this connection there is a problem that has not been noticed, so far as I am aware. Whether Geisler is among them or not I do not know, but there are contenders for inerrancy who hold, as I think one must, that Scriptural statements are sometimes imprecise. (A comparison of Acts 26:12-18 with Acts 22:6-21 is instructive. It should be noted, however, that "about thirty years of age" in Luke 3:23 is not an imprecise statement in the sense intended here.) But if the Bible contains one imprecise statement, how can we be sure that any given statement is not imprecise? How can we be sure that the statement that God is righteous is not imprecise? How can we be sure that the statement that God is faithful is not imprecise? And if we cannot be sure, what good is an inerrant Bible? Now the advantage of my epistemology, unlike that of Geisler, is that it provides that the Bible may be precisely true when it deals with the essence of the gospel and yet have imprecision at other points. And, so far as I am yet aware, none of the statements of Scripture dealing with the essence of the gospel is imprecise. (It is to be understood, of course, that my discussion of this matter needs elaboration and refinement.)

ought. If it is not, truth is missed. That it does not always function as it ought is no more serious than the fact that fallacies often occur when people engage in logical argument.

In this connection it may be noted that Geisler declares that my view results in a situation like that of “the night in which all cows are black” (G 65). He can only say this because (a) he does not perceive the significance of logic in my view<sup>5</sup> and (b) he assumes, at least for the moment, either that there is no agreement whatever as to what is beautiful or that all things are to be perceived as equally beautiful.<sup>6</sup> I do not agree with either of these assumptions and shall have more to say in this connection later.

In pursuit of this topic Geisler also criticizes my view because it contains an element that is subjective. But I do not know why the Holy Spirit should not be relevant to epistemology. Indeed, I understand John 16:7-13 to imply that he has an essential part to play in it. Moreover, I note that the Holy Spirit has an essential place in the epistemology of John Calvin, though I disagree with him concerning the point at which the Holy Spirit is relevant for epistemology. To compare me with Kant and Schleiermacher in this connection (why was I not compared with Calvin, whom I mentioned in my article?) is to fail to give due consideration to the great difference—indeed, incompatibility—of my epistemology with either of theirs. Geisler is just as irresponsible here as I would be if I said that everyone who has a place for logic in his epistemology is to be classed with the rationalists.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Sometimes Geisler notes that I have a place for logic in my view. At other times he seems to have forgotten it temporarily.

<sup>6</sup>If Geisler is consistent with his statement that God needed evil (*Philosophy*, p. 373), he must affirm that evil is beautiful. Few will agree.

<sup>7</sup>Though I am not sure that he specifically says so, even when he affirms “the probability of the systematic coherence test for truth” (*Apologetics*, p. 146) it appears that Geisler must hold that it is logic, and logic alone, that unites truth. What else can he say but that if we could see logical connections as God sees them we would find that all truth is logically connected? But if I am correct in this he is shut up to monism, because one of the laws of logic is that one cannot have in his conclusions what he does not have in his premises. And surely it ought to be well known by now that monism and orthodoxy are incompatible.

Moreover, those who will not allow any other component than logical consistency in their test for truth make havoc of Scripture. I give only two of numerous examples: (1) Such folk must judge that the Israelites on Mount Carmel were irresponsible when they said, after the fire fell, “Yahweh, he is God” (1 Kgs 18:39). They should have continued to halt between two opinions. If they had responded logically they would have considered it possible that Elijah had engaged in trickery, or that Baal could have done the same had he not been heedless of his prophets—as Elijah suggested, albeit in mockery. (Though they could not have considered the point, we may note that the second beast, also known as the false prophet, “works great signs, even making fire come down from heaven in the sight of men” [Rev 13:13]). (2) Such folk must judge that Thomas was irresponsible when he declared, upon being provided with evidence that Jesus had risen, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28). His resurrection did not prove his deity. All it proved is that dead men do not necessarily stay dead. Indeed, the Bible promises that all God’s people who have died will one day rise from the dead immortal and incorruptible and “be caught up . . . in the clouds.” There is no logical reason why the firstfruits of those who sleep in death should be more divine than the rest. Now I can contend, as I do, that the Israelites on Mount Carmel and Thomas after Easter made the only response that aesthetic considerations allowed. But Geisler cannot justify them in any way. He must say that the Bible often commends the irresponsible. The effect on faith in the value of the Bible is patent.

## II. ARE MY DILEMMAS CONCERNING LOGIC FALSE?

1. *Concerning irrational numbers* (see D 370; G 59-60). (1) Geisler thinks that my problem in this connection is due to a misunderstanding of his position concerning the "logically necessary" and "the real." The fact is that what I pointed out in this connection was entirely independent of anything he had written. (2) The question is not whether irrational numbers exist as entities, as Geisler assumes. The problem is that they are evidently derived from real numbers by the application of the laws of logic and therefore, if logic always holds, must be real numbers, which they cannot be because the square of any number is always a positive number. Geisler has completely missed the point.

2. *Concerning Achilles and the tortoise* (see D 370; G 60). (1) Geisler states that I never specify what the contradiction is. I deemed it so obvious as to be unnecessary to specify that the contradiction is that Zeno has shown by logic that Achilles could not catch the tortoise but that all of us know by experience that Achilles could easily have caught the tortoise. (2) Geisler asserts that "the alleged paradoxes of Zeno have been exposed long ago." But it is at least doubtful that the refutations will stand scrutiny. To quote B. Russell again: "After being refuted by Aristotle, and by every subsequent philosopher from that day to our own, (Zeno's) arguments were reinstated. . . . Weierstrass . . . has at last shown that we live in an unchanging world, and that the arrow in its flight is truly at rest."<sup>8</sup>

(3) According to Geisler, "Zeno wrongly assumes that the real empirical world of space and motion are [*sic*] infinitely (and mathematically) divisible." This seems to mean that Zeno assumed that space and time are infinitely divisible. Certain of his arguments do take this for granted. But it was not an assumption on his part. It was a logical deduction. Such a view is logically required if space and time are divisible at all. If they are divisible at all, no matter how short the extension of either space or time it can be divided. This means that divisibility is infinite, if logic is always applicable.<sup>9</sup> The only way of avoiding the conclusion is by affirming that space and time are not divisible at all—a practical impossibility, I suggest—or by denying, as I do, that logic is always applicable.

(4) Geisler states that the problem is "in assuming that *mathematical divisibility* applies to all of reality" (*italics* his). But he has not shown that "all of reality" is involved in the matter under discussion. It is assumed, of course, that mathematical divisibility does apply to some of reality. And anyone who speaks of half a mile, or half an hour, assumes that *mathematical* divisibility applies to space and time. (5) In this connection Geisler states that I confuse "logic and mathematics." He provides no evidence.

3. *Concerning whole and parts* (see D 370-371; G 60). According to Geisler, "Dahms insists that the obvious fact that the 'whole' is often 'more' than the sum of the individual parts proves that logic is not universally applicable. But the very fact that he can differentiate 'whole' and 'sum of individual parts' shows that the logical law of noncontradiction does apply to this kind of situation too.

<sup>8</sup>B. Russell, *Mysticism and Logic*, 63. In my article (D 370 n. 11) I set forth, in accord with my view of logic, how one may still believe that we live in a changing world.

<sup>9</sup>Whatever may be true of what is complex, this must be true of such presumably simple "things" as space and time.

How else could one know there was a *difference* unless A ('whole') is not non-A ('sum of individual parts')? In other words, we mean something different by 'whole' (we mean wholeness) than the mere sum of individual parts. . . ." (italics his).

I can only make sense of Geisler's criticism if (a) he is confusing the form of words with the content of words and (b) he fails to understand what S. Harris, whom I quoted, stated concerning the importance of the law of excluded middle in relation to the matter under discussion. Certainly the laws of logic enable me to distinguish the word "whole" (or "wholeness") from the words "sum of the parts." But what Geisler seems to miss is that those same laws of logic, and particularly the law of excluded middle, require me to believe that the *meaning* of the word "whole" (or "wholeness") is the same as the *meaning* of the phrase "sum of the parts." It is only empirical observation that informs me that the *meaning* of the word "whole" is not the same as the *meaning* of "sum of the parts." What logic tells me contradicts what empirical observation tells me.

4. *Concerning illogicality in ethics* (see D 371; G 60-61). Geisler charges me with confusing cause and motive when I state that ethical choices are choices determined by good motives. He says that a "*motive or purpose* does not produce a garage. One needs a *cause* (the carpenter) to produce a garage" (italics his). The fact is that Geisler confuses secondary cause with primary cause. In other words, he confuses cause and agent. Indeed, it is precisely the *motive or purpose* that produces a garage. Nothing else could—except perhaps an arbitrary, and therefore irresponsible, decision to have a garage built.<sup>10</sup>

Geisler goes on to interpret my statement, "If one takes ethics seriously it is necessary to be illogical," as though I meant it to apply to everything in relation to ethics. It is because of this unwarranted interpretation that he can say that I am able to "call evil good and good evil," or to say that "love" can mean "hate." The fact is that my insistence that logic always applies when "being" is under consideration makes it impossible for me to call good evil or to say that "love" means "hate."

5. *Concerning aesthetics* (see D 372; G 61). Geisler says that a discord or dissonance in a piece of good music does not involve a logical contradiction, merely a contrast. But he seems to miss the point that the idea that such a discord or dissonance could enhance the aesthetic value of the composition contradicts what the "logic" of the music in the composition implies concerning good music in it. Believing what is logically contradictory really is involved.

In this connection Geisler argues that one cannot understand what is contradictory. He illustrates by saying that it is impossible to understand a square circle and asks how one can understand "what is impossible." Two comments: (a) If it is impossible ever to understand what is contradictory, it is impossible to understand much good music. And there is much else that occurs, as we have shown, that cannot be understood. Note that it is not just that it is not understood; it cannot be understood. (b) Geisler makes the false assumption that all contradictions are of the same kind, the kind to which square circles belong. Certainly it is impossible to understand such contradictions—i.e., contradictory statements about "being" or "essence" only. It is our contention, however, that a

<sup>10</sup>We leave aside the question whether there are arbitrary decisions.

true statement about "being" or "essence" may contradict a true statement about "becoming" or "existence" and that such a contradiction is understandable provided that one does not make the false assumption Geisler seems to make—that the intellect is the only organ of understanding.<sup>11</sup>

6. *Concerning the incarnation* (see D 373; G 61-62). (1) Geisler asks why the two-natures doctrine should "bother" me "if the law of noncontradiction does not necessarily apply to these kinds of things." Where he gets the idea that it bothers me I cannot imagine, because it does not. My point in bringing it up was that it should bother those who think as Geisler does. (2) Geisler states that I do not "prove that there is a contradiction here." This is because I only use such language as "seem to be" and "be that as it may." Leaving aside the fact that Geisler uses "seem(s) to be" frequently—twice in this very paragraph—and expects what he says to be impressive, we shall have occasion later to point out that it is impossible to distinguish between what appears to be real and what is real.

(3) Concerning my statement that the two natures of Jesus are "united" in one person, Geisler says that "'united' seems to be equivalent of 'identical with' or 'assimilated to,'" in which case I contradict the Chalcedonian doctrine that the two natures are "without confusion." But there is no reason whatever to suggest that "united" means "identical with" or "assimilated to." Being united in marriage does not mean that two persons become identical with each other or assimilated to each other. Moreover P. Schaff, the great authority on creeds, states that the Chalcedonian Christology teaches "an actual and abiding *union* of the two (God and man) in one personal life" (italics mine).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, if Geisler does not believe in the union of the two natures in Jesus he is a Nestorian. (4) Geisler claims that I confuse the "what" and the "how" when I suggest that the two-natures doctrine involves one in contradiction. Does he really believe that he can affirm that the one person Jesus could not grow weary (because divine) and did grow weary (because human) without contradiction? If he can, I can also say that the statement, "A cat is not a cat," is only called a contradiction by those who confuse "what" and "how"—that is, I can say it if I take Geisler's position for a moment.

7. *Concerning the Trinity*. Geisler falsely accuses me of "dismissing the legitimate distinction between essence and person" (G 62; cf. D 373-374). I only dismiss the kind of relationship between them that involves one in an ultimate dualism of essence and person. Moreover Geisler is in error when he states that "all the orthodox need do is show that there is a legitimate distinction between essence and person." One must not leave the door open to dualism, whether Gnostic or otherwise. The problem becomes especially acute when there is not just one

<sup>11</sup>It may be noted that friendship can never really be understood merely by examining statements about it and observing it in others. One must himself "feel" it. The aesthetic sense often has an important place in understanding.

It is easy to see why Geisler must convince himself that he believes in no contradictions of any kind. If it can be shown that people cannot help believing in just one contradiction, his case is lost.

I am puzzled as to how Geisler can say that God is "simple . . . has no composition" (*Philosophy*, p. 204) and yet is a Trinity. On the surface, at least, this appears to be a contradiction of the kind my epistemology would not tolerate, let alone his.

<sup>12</sup>*The Creeds of Christendom*, 1. 30.

essence and one person involved<sup>13</sup> but one essence and three persons—three persons, moreover, who fulfill different roles and therefore must be ontologically different in some way if arbitrariness, and therefore untrustworthiness, is not to be affirmed of God. One essence and one person cannot be united so as to avoid dualism while maintaining the distinction between essence and person, unless essence determines person and person determines essence. But where three persons are different, as has been indicated, it is *logically* impossible to have the one essence and the three persons united in this way.<sup>14</sup> Geisler is mistaken when he thinks that all that is lacking is an explanation of the three persons and the one essence.

Geisler criticizes me on the basis that I “cannot avoid making logical assertions about the Trinity.” The criticism is invalid because my view requires the making of logical assertions of the kind I make.

Geisler states that “if the doctrine of the Trinity is contradictory, then it is not even intelligible. But what is not even intelligible is not believable (at least not by a rational being).” But man is not merely a rational being, and to separate his intellect from the other components of man’s being—as Geisler seems to do—is to commit oneself to an anthropology incompatible, I submit, with the Scriptural view of the unity of man. (This is not to say that the intellect is not to be distinguished from the other components of man’s being.) At least when he is functioning as God intended, the whole man is involved in understanding—not just his intellect, as Geisler seems to think. And to suggest that one cannot understand some things that are not logical is to beg the epistemological question.

Geisler states that the examples I bring forward, some of which he does not attempt to criticize, “are at best only apparent contradictions, not real ones,” “often only conflicts rather than real contradictions” (G 62). But how can two statements conflict if they are not contradictory? Moreover, how does one distinguish between apparent contradictions and real ones? Geisler gives no criterion. And he cannot, for there is none. In the strict sense all contradictions are only apparent contradictions. Even “square circles” and “a cat is not a cat” are, strictly speaking, only apparent contradictions. Indeed the philosophies of Berkeley and Kant, and the skepticism of Hume, are made possible by the fact that there is no way by which the mind alone can press beyond the apparent to the *Ding an Sich*. So long as apparent contradictions continue to be apparent contradictions, there is no way of distinguishing real contradictions from them.<sup>15</sup>

Geisler calls my examples “straw men.” His reasons for so doing have not survived scrutiny. That they are “manufactured,” as he claims, is not true. I did not invent the problems of irrational numbers, virtue, the fall of Satan, the incarnation, etc. And I am far from the first to recognize them as problems for those who believe as Geisler does. In fact many conservatives have turned liberal or neo-

<sup>13</sup>Plato seemingly could not see how even one essence and one person could be united so as to escape dualism.

<sup>14</sup>I have the impression that Geisler has never thought through the implications of the fact that Christianity is incompatible both with monism and with dualism.

<sup>15</sup>An apparent contradiction can only be shown to be other than a real contradiction by bringing forth a consideration or considerations that remove the appearance of a contradiction.

orthodox simply because they became convinced that some of the important doctrines of orthodoxy involve logical contradictions.<sup>16</sup>

Geisler's last point concerning my "arguments against the universal applicability of the laws of logic" is that I prove "that logic is inescapable in all our thoughts and statements about reality" (G 62). He says that if this is so I have refuted my claim that logic does not have universal applicability. Of course I prove that logic is inescapable in all our thoughts and statements about reality. In fact my epistemology demands it. My epistemology insists that logic be rigorously applied when "being" is considered, and all reality is characterized by being. But reality is also characterized by becoming.<sup>17</sup> It is in connection with "becoming," and especially in how it is that being and becoming are united in real entities, that logic fails us.<sup>18</sup>

It may be added that Geisler virtually admits that he has no explanation for the "conflicts" in statements of truth that he agrees I have demonstrated. But I do have an explanation. In this connection I draw attention to his own statement concerning competing views: "Whichever view *best* fits and is *most* consistent must suffice."<sup>19</sup> Though by "consistent" he probably means "logically consistent," it is gratuitous to suggest that this is the only kind of consistency there is. Indeed, when Christians appeal to the love of God as an adequate explanation for certain of his deeds they imply that there is a kind of consistency that is other than logical consistency. Since my view fits the facts better than his and is just as consistent as his, my view is to be preferred to his.

### III. ALLEGED CONFUSIONS IN MY PAPER

1. It is said that I confuse "cause" and "motive" when I say that "if a choice is motivated, it is not free" (G 56; D 371). Geisler says, "If true, this would mean that because one's motive in buying an ice cream cone was to satisfy his hankering for a cold delicious chocolate delight he was not free to pass by the ice cream parlor. This would mean that obesity is a necessity as long as one desires any delicacies." Geisler is correct, assuming (a) that another motive or other motives do not thwart and (b) that circumstances—e.g., a hormonal imbalance, lack of money, etc.—do not thwart. If there is such a thing as an arbitrary choice it too could alter the picture but, if it did, the choice made would not be a motivated choice and hence would be irrelevant to what I stated. Geisler may not like such conclusions, but there is no logical alternative. (I have previously dealt with his

<sup>16</sup>While writing the last few paragraphs I was interrupted by a young man who told me that prior to reading my article in *JETS* he had just about concluded that he would have to disregard what his mind told him if he was to be an orthodox Christian any longer. My article convinced him that he did not need to come to such a conclusion.

<sup>17</sup>Inasmuch as the Son is generated and the Spirit spirated, there is a sense in which God is characterized not only by "being" but also by what is at least analogous to "becoming."

<sup>18</sup>Geisler seems not to be aware of the philosophical problem of the unity of being and becoming. If logic unites them, either (a) becoming is really only being—there is no such thing as change—or (b) being is really only becoming. There is no such thing as looking at the same book twice. The rule of logic that one cannot have in his conclusion what is not in his premises forces one of these conclusions.

<sup>19</sup>*Apologetics*, p. 146 (italics his).

claim that I confuse “cause” and “motive.”)

2. Geisler says, “Dahms confuses a necessary condition with a result. He argues that if permitting evil is a necessary *condition* for producing some good *results*, this thereby pronounces the evil conditions to be good” (G 56; italics his). In this statement Geisler misrepresents what I said (see D 372 n. 21). I stated that if God *needs* a world in which “evil actually occurs” in order that “the greatest moral good (may be) achievable”—Geisler’s position in *Philosophy*, p. 373—then God needs evil, and that in that case evil is ultimately good.

When Geisler goes on in this connection to point out that God brings good out of evil without thereby making evil good, and that pain is sometimes necessary to attain pleasure, he is irrelevant. He is confusing what God does in an evil world, and what may be necessary in an evil world, with the kind of world God needed.

3. In charging me with confusing “discord” and “contradiction” Geisler states that “discords may be *contrary* to an accepted set of musical rules, but they certainly are not logically *contradictory* to them. A musical contradiction would be to call for two different notes at one and the same time in one and the same place.” But that is exactly what we have when a discord or dissonance enhances a musical composition. Aesthetics *calls for* one note, and the “logic” of the music *calls for* a different note “at one and the same time in one and the same place.” Concerning painting, Geisler states, “The discordant element is not an actual contradiction but a *contrast* or interruption of the basic symmetry” (G 57; italics his). He is wrong on the basis of his own definition. If the discordant enhances the beauty, aesthetics *calls for* one thing and the symmetry of the composition *calls for* another “in one and the same place.”

Geisler states in this connection that I do “not seem to understand what a logical contradiction really is.” The real problem is that Geisler does not see contradictions that are drawn to his attention.

4. Geisler charges me with confusing “paradox” and “self-stultification,” with suggesting that “a self-defeating endeavor is” “the same as a paradox or contradiction.” An examination of D 376, to which he refers in this connection, will show that what he says is completely groundless. All I say about self-stultification is that the universal application of the law of noncontradiction is “sometimes . . . the very cause of self-stultification.” (It is self-stultifying or self-defeating when it causes one to reject a true statement, when one’s concern, presumably, is to know what the truth is.)

#### IV. ALLEGED SELF-DEFEATING STATEMENTS

Geisler states that I use “logic often in the very way that (I am) denying it should be used” (G 57). He follows with what are alleged to be six examples. But he makes no attempt to show that they are relevant—that is, he fails to show that in them I use logic “of the existential and the aesthetic” when I am not “considering them in the abstract” (D 378). And not only does he fail to show their relevance; four of the alleged examples are a clear misrepresentation of what I say. (1) “He (Dahms) uses the principle of excluded middle (either A or non-A) by distinguishing a ‘complex whole’ from the ‘sum’ of all its parts, arguing that the former is more than the latter” (G 57; cf. D 370-371). The statement is not clear, but I assume he means that I use the principle of excluded middle in the argu-

ment in which I distinguish a complex whole from the sum of all its parts.<sup>20</sup> But the point in the argument in which it is introduced is thoroughly in accord with my position as to when logic may be used and when it may not. (2) "He (Dahms) asserts that an act must be either free or determined but not both" (G 57). What I actually assert is that "for an action to be virtuous it must . . . be both determined and free" (D 371)! (3) "He (Dahms) rejects the distinction between an essence and a mode in God because it cannot be true 'without involving contradiction'" (G 57). I do *not* reject the distinction between an essence and a mode in God. What I do reject, as previously noted, is such a view of their relationship that one is involved in a metaphysical dualism (see D 374). (4) "He (Dahms) speaks approvingly of the Arians because they were 'more logical than orthodox Christians.'" It is *not* true that I speak "approvingly" of the Arians for this or any other reason (see D 374). (5) "Dahms approves of being 'quite' logical" (G 57). Of course I do, in certain circumstances. My view requires it. Actually, however, the phrase I use at the point in question is "quite illogical" (D 374). But perhaps this is just a slip such as we all make.<sup>21</sup> (6) "He (Dahms) speaks against 'fallacious reasoning.' But how, we may ask, could one know correct from incorrect reasoning apart from the law of noncontradiction?" (G 57; cf. D 375). Again Geisler assumes that I can never use logic, though my epistemology insists on it much of the time, including such a time as here mentioned. Elsewhere Geisler shows that he is aware that the use of logic has an important place in my view (e.g., G 58-59), but here—and in some other places—he forgets it.

In the next paragraph Geisler states, "Dahms admits the self-defeating nature of his assertions." This statement is *not* true.

He goes on to state correctly that I agree that "we cannot escape self-stultification in denying that logic applies to all our *statements* about reality" (italics mine.) But immediately after this he states that in my view "when we apply logic to *all* of reality it too ends in self-stultification. But how can he have it both ways?" (G 57; italics his). The latter statement inexactly represents my position, to say the least. According to my position logic does apply to all our *statements* about reality. But there are times when true statements about reality are found to be logically contradictory, as I have been at pains to show. To insist, at such times, that logic must apply means that one must deny one or the other of the true statements. But that is self-defeating or self-stultifying in the sense that truth is sacrificed at the same time as one's primary concern, presumably, is a concern to have the truth.<sup>22</sup>

Geisler wonders how I can state that logic does not apply to becoming, when the very assertion that "logic does not apply to becoming" must be a logical statement about becoming (G 58). The answer is that the statement that "logic does not apply to becoming" is a statement about becoming in the abstract and therefore does not violate the rule it expresses.

<sup>20</sup>Actually it is in a quotation from S. Harris, *The Philosophical Basis of Theism*, p. 59, that the principle of excluded middle is so used.

<sup>21</sup>If we count the last instance, Geisler manages to misrepresent me four times in a very few lines.

<sup>22</sup>What I have stated here also answers the argument in the succeeding paragraph where Geisler questions how one who applies logic universally could ever be charged with self-stultification.

In the next paragraph Geisler says that in my view logic does not apply to "concrete reality." This is a misrepresentation of my view. I could never say such a thing, because the concrete is always characterized by being. (It is also characterized by becoming, or by what is analogous thereto.)

In the next paragraph Geisler says, "Another argument implied in Dahms' limitation of logic to what is 'humanly necessary' is that logic does not necessarily apply to God" (G 58). The fact is that *nowhere* do I suggest that logic is limited to what is "humanly necessary." Nor do I suggest, or imply, that "logic does not necessarily apply to God." I do imply that there are *some* things about a Trinitarian view of God that are contradictory. But that is quite different from what Geisler attributes to me. The entire paragraph is therefore irrelevant.

Next Geisler considers my statement, "Our reliance on logic in this paper is justified by the fact that we only use it of the existential and the aesthetic when we are considering them in the abstract" (G 58; D 378). His first criticism is that this is "special pleading." It is *not* special pleading. I have just said, "It would appear that it (logic) is thoroughly reliable when dealing with the nominal (being). . . ." When dealing with the existential and the aesthetic *in the abstract*, one is dealing with the "being" aspect of it.

Next Geisler criticizes my statement as follows: "Those taking the opposing view could make the same point but insist that logic undeniably applies to *all of reality* (which Dahms denies), insofar as it is being considered intellectually (i.e., in the abstract). Stated this way there would be no real disagreement with those (whom Dahms opposes) who would say that the statement 'logic applies to all of reality' is equivalent to 'being (all being) is intelligible.' If this is the case then all Dahms' efforts are futile, for he would have to admit that logic does apply to all reality insofar as it can be thought or expressed in words, which is all his opponent needs to claim to prove Dahms wrong" (italics his). Obviously Geisler does not understand my position. I do *not* deny that "logic undeniably applies to all of reality . . . insofar as it is being considered intellectually (i.e., in the abstract)." I do "admit that logic does apply to all reality *insofar as it can be thought or expressed in words*" (italics mine). Indeed, what I say about logic applying to "being" requires it. Moreover I agree that "being (all being) is intelligible," provided that "being" is not equated with reality. Reality is always characterized by being, but also by *becoming*, or by what is analogous to becoming. Since the intellect can only deal with the abstract, it can only deal with one component of reality. For example, it can grasp the concept of humanity, but the particularity of an existential person eludes it. If the intellect were the sole organ of knowledge, man would have a seriously defective grasp of reality. His only knowledge of apple pie would be the knowledge of conceptions about it. His only knowledge of love would be the knowledge of conceptions about it. His only knowledge of God would be the knowledge of conceptions about him. Insofar as knowledge is concerned he would be no better off than the demons, who have true conceptions of God (Jas 2:19-20). This is not to deny the significance of conceptions in epistemology. Indeed, in my view all knowledge begins with the knowledge of conceptions and always includes the knowledge of conceptions. But if the content of knowledge is exhausted by such, it is defective knowledge indeed.

This leads me to comment on the concept of intelligibility. If we define the intelligible as that which is "apprehensible by the intellect only; purely concep-

tual,"<sup>23</sup> the definition that it seems to me Geisler is assuming, then knowledge that is restricted to the intelligible is a sadly defective knowledge. But, of course, once we are outside the realm of the intelligible we are outside the realm of the logical. So if we are to have knowledge that is not seriously defective we must have an epistemology which, though it begins with the intelligible and never leaves the intelligible behind, includes more than the intelligible (assuming the definition of "intelligible" given above). I propose such an epistemology. I cannot find that Geisler does.<sup>24</sup>

Geisler makes another comment on my statement concerning the existential and the aesthetic in the abstract, saying, "If Dahms assumes a complete disjunction between 'reality' and 'thought' (or 'being' and the 'abstract'), then he is subject to the criticism that he is using the logical principle (of excluded middle) of reality (and thought) in order to disjoin them" (G 58). Comments: (1) I do not make "a complete disjunction" between reality and thought. In fact, I hold that thought is a function of *real* persons. Indeed he who makes a complete disjunction between them must hold (and think!) that there is no such thing as thought. (2) I do not make a complete disjunction between "'being' and the 'abstract.'" One could only do so by disregarding the accepted meanings of the words. (3) Geisler seems to confuse the form and the meaning of words. Logic enables one to distinguish the form of words. It does not define their meaning. It can only enable us to say that there is "a complete disjunction" between two concepts if it can show that the definitions thereof are mutually exclusive. (4) Geisler seems to imply that I have no right to use the laws of logic in considering the nominal. But my epistemology requires it.

The next paragraph begins: "Dahms does indeed use logic of reality (not *merely* of the 'abstract')" (italics his). He goes on to give three examples from what I have written (G 58-59). In each case I am justified because logic is used in the area of "being," a point Geisler overlooks. But even apart from that consideration Geisler's paragraph only makes sense if an abstraction deals with something other than reality, whereas it really deals with one component of a particular reality—indeed, with the essence of it.

The following paragraph begins: "Another example where Dahms applies logic to the way things really are. . . ." It ends: "Here again logic is being used of reality to deny it of reality, which is a self-destructive assertion" (G 59). Now of course I apply logic to the way things really are, so long as their "being" is under consideration. My epistemology requires it. But to say that in what I have written "logic is being used of reality to deny it of reality" has no justification whatever.

We come to the final paragraph of this section of Geisler's paper. He says, "Dahms' elaboration of his own model of reality proves that the laws of logic are inescapable in any truth claims about reality" (G 59). This statement is both true and irrelevant. It is irrelevant because it fails to consider the matter in relation to the components of reality.

<sup>23</sup>The definition is from *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 5th ed., p. 524.

<sup>24</sup>Though being and becoming must be distinguished and never confused, they are so closely united that reality is not dualistic. (Note the parallel with the Trinity and the incarnation.) This has important epistemological implications, including the fact that one can and must use propositions in discussing the existential and the aesthetic and must construct those propositions according to the laws of logic.

“He (Dahms) has shown clearly the inescapability of the universal applicability of the laws of logic.” I submit that I have demonstrated that this is not true. Some of the evidence I have advanced Geisler has not attacked (fall of Satan, God sending his Son to die), and I submit that I have shown that his attack on the other evidence has in every case been unsuccessful. (One piece of incontrovertible evidence is enough to destroy Geisler’s case.)

“He has neither offered us a way around logic nor succeeded in proving that logic is not universally applicable to all truth claims about reality.” My epistemology will not allow me to seek “a way around logic.” It only sets limits to the applicability of logic and explains what applies when logic is not applicable. I have dealt with the question of the applicability of logic to all truth claims just above.

“There is no reality anywhere that can both be and not be at the same time and in the same sense.” True—but irrelevant, because reality not only has being; it is becoming as well as being. The same answer must be given to his next statement: “Certainly no truth statements can be successfully made to affirm that something exists and not exists simultaneously in the same sense.”

“Any claim that ‘there is some reality to which logic does not apply’ is itself a logical (i.e., noncontradictory) claim about that reality, which is inconsistent and self-defeating.” First, I repeat that I never state that there is any reality to which logic does not apply. My epistemology will not allow it. Second, I do not see why the statement is self-defeating unless one assumes a monism in which there is no ultimate distinction between thought and reality.<sup>25</sup>

“Logic cannot be denied of any reality without using it of reality in the very denial.” This is obvious, but again it is of no relevance unless one is a monist.

“The statement that ‘logic does not apply to God’ is an application of logic to God through language by the very fact that we cannot consider the statement true or false unless it is noncontradictory.” (1) It is obvious that we “cannot consider the statement true or false unless it is noncontradictory.” (2) I did not state that “logic does not apply to God.” I did imply that a Trinitarian view of God implies *some* things that are *logically* contradictory. I contend that *aesthetically* they are not only noncontradictory but highly satisfying.

## V. ADDITIONAL MATTERS

1. Geisler, in his title and first sentence, quotes against me 1 Tim 6:20: “Avoid contradictions.” But it is the “contradictions (*antitheseis*) of knowledge falsely so called” that are to be avoided. It is doubtful that contradictions of the kind I am concerned with are in view. And even if they are, it is the contradictions of “knowledge *falsely so called*” that are in view. To assume that my position is falsely called knowledge is to beg the question.

2. Geisler’s intimation that I am unwilling to apply the law of noncontradiction to all the statements of Scripture (G 55) can only result from a failure to understand my epistemology, which requires rigorous application of the law of noncontradiction to *all* the statements of the Bible.

3. Geisler’s intimation that his article in *Christianity Today*, May 10, 1977,

<sup>25</sup>A distinction need not imply a “complete disjunction.” It is also compatible with thought being a function of *real* persons, at least in my view.

had a part in prompting my article on logic (G 55) is not true. I have no memory of his article.

4. Geisler's assertion that I set forth "what many NT scholars imply or tacitly believe" (G 55) is irresponsible. My epistemology was developed independently, and I know of none like it. His judgment at this point seems to be due to a gratuitous assumption that "an 'existential' view of language" is at the root of what I say (see G 55 n. 2). The fact that I hold that knowledge *begins* with what is propositional (D 376-377) means that my view is incompatible with existentialism.<sup>26</sup>

5. Geisler's intimation that I have a "distaste for the laws of logic" (G 55 n. 2) is patently false (D 378). Just because I do not think that logic can do all that he thinks it can is no reason to suggest that I have a distaste for it or for its laws.

6. The error in my quotation of Van Til (D 373; G 55 and n. 4) is regretted. It was due solely to a typist's mistake that I failed to catch in proofreading. My comment on the quotation had the correct reading in view.

7. I did *not* misrepresent Geisler, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 100, when I stated that he held that "the rationally inescapable is the real" (D 369; G 55 and n. 5). He evidently changed his mind on the matter by the time he wrote *Christian Apologetics*, p. 43.

8. I fail to see any misrepresentation of Geisler when I stated that in his view "self-stultification" is the result of failure to "employ the law of noncontradiction" (D 376; G 56). Though his actual use of the term "self-stultification" is in another connection (see *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 100), would he not say that failure to employ the law of noncontradiction renders any statement "wholly futile or ineffectual" because one thereby frustrates what is presumably his intention—i.e., the intention to set forth what is true in a meaningful statement?<sup>27</sup> But if I am in error on this point, the issues between us are not materially affected.

9. Geisler says, "He (Dahms) holds that the result of rejecting logic leads to the conclusion that Calvinism and Arminianism are both 'half-truths.' Technically he is wrong. If logic does not apply, then both views could be 'whole truths.' That is to say, even though Calvinism and Arminianism are mutually exclusive, nonetheless they could both be completely true. This would be so because contradictories would both be true if the law of noncontradiction does not apply. What is more startling is that if logic does not apply, then both positions could be wholly false (as well as wholly true) at the same time and in the same sense!" (G 63). If one rejects logic, these deductions are all correct. But the simple fact is that I do not reject logic. I give it a place of primary importance, even though I contend that it has certain limitations. So the whole paragraph is irrelevant. (Also he inaccurately reports what I said concerning Calvinism and Arminianism.)

10. Geisler says, "According to Dahms if one gives up the universal applicability of the law of noncontradiction then 'some important adjustments in doctrine, ethics, apologetics, and so forth, will be necessary' (p. 380). . . . If logic does not

<sup>26</sup>Geisler hints that I am "philosophically unsophisticated" (G 55 n. 2). I leave it to others to decide which of us is the better philosopher.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, p. 1411, sub "stultify": "to render absurdly or wholly futile or ineffectual, esp. by degrading or frustrating means."

apply to all of these all the time, then we will need more than 'some important adjustments'—we will have to give up believing in any truth in these areas altogether. But then he comes to what may be a 'hidden agenda' in the last sentence of the article. At least it is a dangerous (but necessary) implication of his view. After claiming that the gain for giving up the dominance of Aristotelian logic will be 'enormous,' Dahms adds that 'not the least in the matter of gain will be the ease with which various Biblical passages that have occasioned long debate and strong disagreement will now be assimilated' (p. 380). But if logic does not epistemologically dominate all truth claims, then 'ease' is not the word; all Biblical conflicts and difficulties will automatically disappear! They will not be 'assimilated'; they will be instantaneously annihilated! Think of the newfound freedom a NT exegete will have. No longer will he have to labor to explain how Matthew has one angel and John two angels at the empty tomb. If contradictions need not bother the exegete, then he can believe there was only one angel at the tomb at one and the same moment there were two. . . . If the laws of logic do not apply to all truth claims found in the NT text, then there is no way to know whether there are any truths there whatever, because one has lost (with logic) the very basis for distinguishing truth from falsity" (G 64-65).

Comments: (1) Geisler assumes that there is no other criterion than that of logic to adjudicate between statements. In my system logic has an important place in such matters, and where logic does not apply there is another criterion: the aesthetic judgment. Just because Geisler does not like the criterion I offer does not prove that it does not exist and is not the right one. (2) My epistemology will not allow me to believe that there was only one angel at the tomb at the same time that there were two. When dealing with "being" logic applies and is regulative, and "being" is the question here. (The same is true of the other example in Geisler's paragraph. I omitted that example in the quotation above.) (3) Geisler is begging the question when he asserts: "One has lost (with logic) the very basis for distinguishing truth from falsity."

11. Geisler says that I have "(1) exalted the aesthetic *above* the rational by investing it with the final unifying power in the universe and (2) placed ultimate unity *beyond* the rational in the aesthetic" (G 65; italics his). This is not accurate. I have demonstrated, I submit, that there are occasions when logic is unable to unite statements that are both true. In these cases I posit, under the guidance of ancient doctrine concerning the Trinity, that the aesthetic judgment can and does fulfill the unifying function. Also I am in accord with the Biblical doctrine that God is love and that love is the supreme commandment.<sup>28</sup> (I have dealt previously with Geisler's criticism of the aesthetic judgment as a subjective criterion.)

12. Geisler says, "Dahms gives no real guidance on" how one knows "when logic does or does not apply to reality" (G 63 n. 13). This is not true. I stated, "It would appear that it (logic) is thoroughly reliable when dealing with the nominal (being) but not when dealing with the verbal (becoming) or the aesthetic" (D 378). No doubt that statement needs refinement, but the basic guidance is there.

<sup>28</sup>If he is consistent Geisler must hold that God is law and that Christian ethics is legalistic.

13. Geisler raises the question whether one can avoid being "purely arbitrary or subjective" if one has aesthetic judgment as a criterion.<sup>29</sup> This would be true if beauty were merely in the eye of the beholder. But few would call garbage by the roadside, or a putrid sore, beautiful. Few would deny that a rose is beautiful. The fact that people usually agree on what is beautiful and what is not is surprising if beauty is purely arbitrary and subjective. The fact that there is less than universal agreement on the matter is, as we have noted before, no more serious than the fact that fallacies often occur in logical argument.<sup>30</sup> Also there is the important point that the Holy Spirit functions in the area of the aesthetic. He is at work in men to correct distortion in the appreciation of the beautiful and is thus epistemologically significant.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

1. Geisler has repeatedly misrepresented my position.

2. I believe I have shown that whenever Geisler criticizes my position his arguments are either irrelevant or do not survive careful scrutiny.

3. Geisler makes at least three *fundamental* mistakes: (a) He assumes that it is sufficient to show that logic is applicable to all of reality all of the time. What needs to be considered is the applicability of logic with respect to each of the aspects or components of reality (being and becoming and what unites them). (b) He assumes that contradictions are all of the same kind. (c) He assumes that knowledge is solely a matter of the intellect, rather than of the whole man. (At least he seems to assume this.) These mistakes not only negate the value of his criticism of my position; they also call into question the validity of his own epistemology.

4. The Trinitarian epistemology I propose needs elaboration and perhaps refinement as well. The same may be said of the material I have advanced in support of it. But careful examination of Geisler's attack on it has only served to increase my confidence in it.

<sup>29</sup>He also asks whether this would not be true of "existential or personal criteria." These are not relevant to my paper, so I disregard them.

<sup>30</sup>It is at least debatable whether wrong judgments concerning beauty are more numerous than logical fallacies.