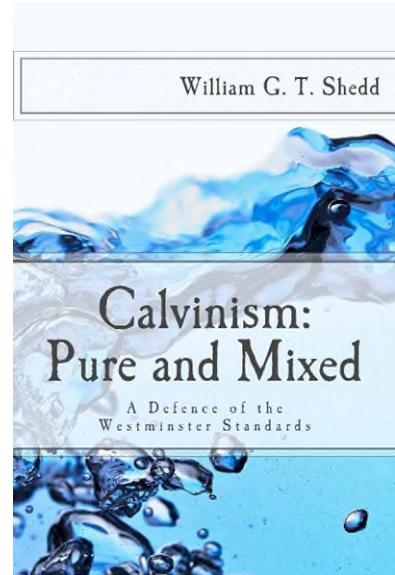


The Logical Problem

The central problem is that Shedd attempts to hold together exhaustive divine determination and a genuinely self-determining human will without first showing that those claims are logically compatible in the same respect.

This critique is therefore directed first at Shedd's formulation and only secondarily at Calvinism insofar as Calvinistic compatibilism supplies the framework that creates the tension.

“The Westminster Standards, in common with the Calvinistic creeds generally, begin with affirming the universal sovereignty of God over his entire universe: over heaven, earth, and hell; and comprehend all beings and all events under his dominion. Nothing comes to pass contrary to his decree. Nothing happens by chance. Even moral evil, which he abhors and forbids, occurs by ‘the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God;’ and yet occurs through the agency of the unforced and self-determining will of man as the efficient.”¹



Shedd is therefore making three claims:

- **A.** Nothing happens contrary to God's decree.
- **B.** God's decree encompasses even moral evil.
- **C.** Moral evil nevertheless occurs through the “unforced and self-determining will of man.”

And this is where the law of non-contradiction becomes relevant.

The law of non-contradiction is one of the foundational principles of rational thought. As Ted Honderich's *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* explains, “a theory in which this law fails...is an inconsistent theory.”² Manuel Velasquez likewise describes the law as “the foundation of logical reasoning.”³

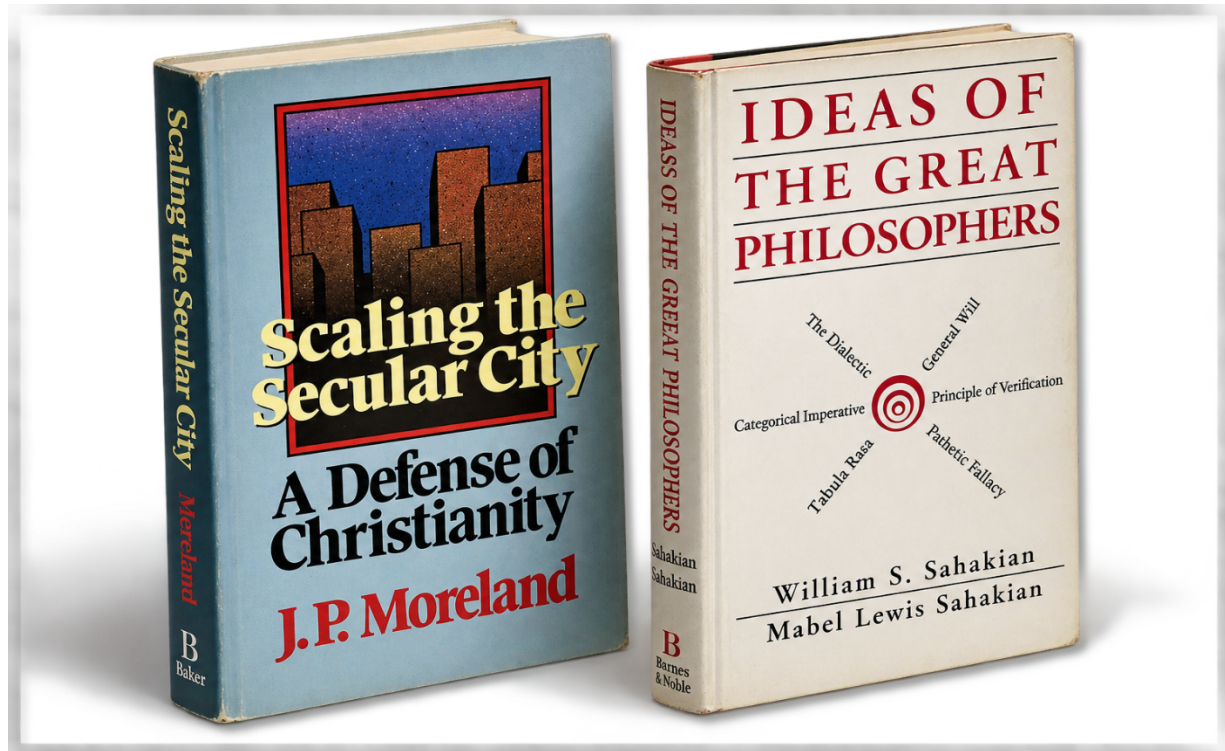
William S. Sahakian and Mabel Lewis Sahakian make the implication especially clear when discussing contradictory premises. They explain that when an argument contains premises

¹ W. G. T. Shedd, *Calvinism: Mixed and Pure: A Defence of the Westminster Standards* (1893), 37.

² Ted Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 625.

³ Manuel Velasquez, *Philosophy: A Text with Readings* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2001), 51.

that contradict one another, “one premise cancels out the other.” It may be possible for one proposition or the other to be true, but contradictory propositions cannot be true simultaneously.⁴



J. P. Moreland makes this principle especially useful by showing how a proposition can also undermine itself. As he puts it, “When a statement fails to satisfy itself (i.e., to conform to its own criteria of validity or acceptability), it is self-refuting...,” in other words, “A” cannot be both “non-A” and “A” at the same time.⁵ His examples include statements such as “I cannot say a word in English” when spoken in English, “I do not exist,” and “there are no truths.” In each case, the statement defeats itself because its truth would require the very thing it denies.

⁴ William S. Sahakian and Mabel Lewis Sahakian, *Ideas of the Great Philosophers* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966), 23, under “Contradictory Premises.”

Contradictory Premises - Self-Contradictions are necessarily false; consequently, when an argument contains premises which contradict each other, no conclusion is possible. Any conclusion would involve the *fallacy of contradictory premises*; that is, it would constitute a *self-contradiction*. When contradictory premises are present in an argument, one premise cancels out the other. It is possible for one or the other of the two premises to be true, but not for both to be simultaneously true. Note the contradictory premises in the following questions: “If God is all-powerful, can he put himself out of existence, then come to life with twice the power he had originally?” “Can God make a stone so heavy that he cannot lift it?” “Can God make a round square?” “What would happen if an irresistible force met an immovable object?” (page 23)

⁵ J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), 92.

This distinction is important because the problem under consideration is not merely that Shedd's formulation is difficult to understand. The question is whether the propositions themselves are logically compatible.

The appeal to mystery cannot resolve the issue unless the relevant terms are first stabilized: “determines” must identify the factor that makes one outcome certain rather than merely foreknown, “self-determining” must clarify whether the will ultimately settles between alternatives, “ultimate determiner” must distinguish the immediate agent from the decisive causal source, and “permission” must explain whether God merely allows an outcome or decrees the conditions that render it certain.

That principle matters here.

The question is not whether we can place Shedd's statements together in the same paragraph. Obviously, we can. The question is whether they can all be true in the same sense at the same time.

If “self-determining” means that the human will genuinely determines which choice it will make, then God's exhaustive decree cannot simultaneously be the determining cause of that same choice. But if God's decree determines which choice the person will inevitably make, then the person may be the immediate agent of that choice, but calling his will “self-determining” becomes problematic.

So consider the two propositions at the heart of Shedd's formulation:

God's decree determines that this particular human action will occur.

And:

The human will is itself self-determining with respect to this particular action.

If “self-determining” means only that the person acts voluntarily according to desire, Shedd may be describing compatibilist freedom; if it means that the person could ultimately determine otherwise under the same conditions, he is invoking libertarian freedom, and the two uses cannot be treated as interchangeable.

The person can be the immediate agent who chooses and can act willingly without external compulsion, but agency and voluntariness do not by themselves establish that the will is the ultimate determiner of the action.

That distinction brings us to the real philosophical question:

Could the person have determined otherwise?

If God's decree has made one particular outcome certain, then the important question isn't merely whether the person wanted to do it. The question is whether he possessed the genuine ability to determine an alternative outcome.

And that is why simply calling the will “unforced” does not settle the question. Nor does calling it “self-determining.” Those terms themselves require definition. If “unforced” merely means that nobody externally coerced the person, there is no contradiction in saying that he acted willingly.

But if “self-determining” means that the person's will ultimately determined which of genuinely available alternatives would occur, then exhaustive divine determination presents a serious logical problem.

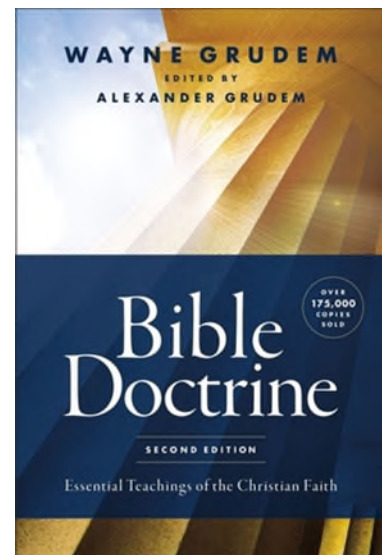
The issue, then, is not whether God can know something we do not understand. The issue is whether two mutually exclusive descriptions of the same human choice can both be true in the same sense.

Mystery, Contradiction, and the Limits of the Calvinist Reconciliation

It is important at the outset to distinguish between a mystery and a contradiction. Christianity unquestionably contains truths whose full explanation exceeds human comprehension. The existence of mystery, therefore, is not itself problematic. The more precise question is whether an appeal to mystery acknowledges the limits of human understanding concerning truths revealed in Scripture, or whether it is being employed to reconcile propositions that are themselves incompatible.

This framework now applies directly to the Calvinist appeal to mystery. Wayne Grudem recognizes that Christianity contains truths that exceed full human comprehension, but he also insists that Scripture does not require belief in contradiction.

But it should also be said that Scripture does not ask us to believe in a contradiction. A contradiction would be “There is one God and there is not one God,” or “God is three persons and God is not three persons,” or even (which is similar to the previous statement) “God is three persons and God is one person.” But to say that “God is three persons and there is one God” is not a contradiction.⁶



⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 168.

The significance of Grudem's observation is not that mystery is illegitimate, but that mystery cannot simply be invoked as a substitute for theological coherence. Doctrine may transcend our comprehension without being contradictory.

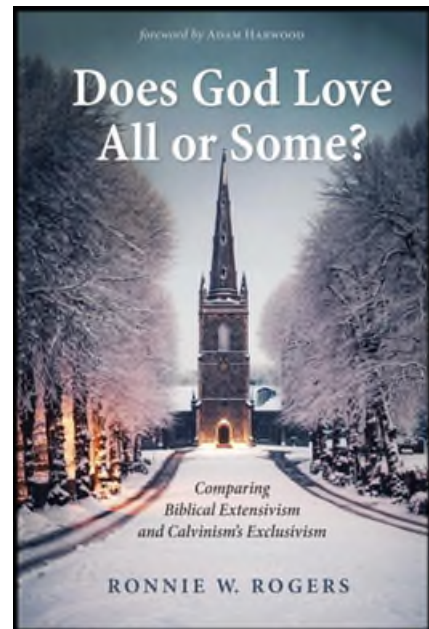
Rogers advances the argument by moving the issue from general logical coherence to the source of the alleged mystery: if the difficulty arises only after Calvinistic premises are added, then the burden rests on those premises rather than on biblical mystery itself.

This distinction is especially significant in William G. T. Shedd's treatment of the origin of sin. Shedd acknowledges that the relationship between God's permissive decree and the entrance of sin presents an "inscrutable mystery." Yet Rogers argues that the mystery arises precisely because Calvinism combines divine determinism with compatibilism. Within compatibilism, the creature freely acts according to his strongest desire, *but that desire itself is determined by antecedent conditions*. Consequently, the creature's choice is free in the compatibilist sense while, given the identical antecedent conditions, he could not actually have chosen otherwise.

Compatibilism is therefore not an escape from determinism but a particular account of freedom within determinism. John Hendryx explicitly acknowledges that "compatibilism is a form of determinism," adding that it is "no less deterministic than hard determinism," so the key question becomes whether responsibility and voluntariness are enough to justify calling the will self-determining.

MacArthur sharpens the causal issue by framing God as the primary cause and human beings as secondary causes "moved by the primary cause." Even if MacArthur rejects the conclusion that God is morally responsible for evil, his formulation confirms the analytical question: can a will moved by a determining primary cause also be called the ultimate determiner of its own choice?

This creates a significant difficulty for Shedd's appeal to divine permission. Shedd can distinguish God's permission from direct efficiency and can affirm that the creature freely apostatized. But if God sovereignly established the nature and antecedent conditions from which the creature's desires necessarily arose, then describing the fall as something God merely permitted does not by itself explain how the fall was not also encompassed within the determinative structure of God's decree. Rogers therefore observes that Shedd's



language concerning the unfallen will possessing the power to remain holy, while simultaneously acknowledging that its apostasy became certain through a permissive decree, exposes rather than resolves the underlying tension. Shedd himself concludes that the manner in which a non-efficient permissive decree makes the fall certain is an “inscrutable mystery.”⁷

The same pattern becomes even more conspicuous when the issue moves from the origin of sin to God's salvific will.

Here the testimony of David Engelsma is particularly significant precisely because Engelsma is not attempting to soften the implications of historic Calvinism. He states:

“That God is gracious only to some in predestination, but gracious to all in the gospel, and that God wills only some to be saved in predestination but wills all to be saved by the gospel, is flat, irreconcilable contradiction. It is not paradox, but contradiction. I speak reverently: God Himself cannot reconcile these teachings.”⁸

⁷ Ronnie W. Rogers, *Does God Love All or Some? Comparing Biblical Extensivism and Calvinism's Exclusivism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 54–60.

⁸ David J. Engelsma, “Is the Denial of the ‘Well-Meant Offer’ Hyper-Calvinism?,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 23, no. 2 (April 1990): 60. (Fuller quote from this “high Calvinist”):

It is part of our defence of the denial of the offer that we take the offensive against the offer. We charge that the offer involves a Calvinist in sheer contradiction. That God is gracious only to some in predestination, but gracious to all in the gospel, and that God wills only some to be saved in predestination but wills all to be saved by the gospel, is flat, irreconcilable contradiction. It is not paradox, but contradiction. I speak reverently: God Himself cannot reconcile these teachings. Nor is there any similarity between this contradiction and the truth of the Trinity that surpasses our understanding. The truth of the Trinity is not contradictory, for it holds that God is one in being and three in persons, not, therefore, one and three in the very same respects.

There is no relief for the sheer contradiction in which the offer involves a Calvinist in the doctrine of “common grace,” as though the grace of predestination were a different kind of grace from that revealed in the gospel. For the offer exactly teaches that the grace of God for all is grace shown in the preaching of the gospel. This grace is not some non-saving favour directed towards a prosperous earthly life, but saving grace, the grace of God in His dear Son, a grace that desires eternal salvation for all who hear the gospel. The offer proposes universal saving grace—precisely that which is denied by predestination.

Nor is there any relief from this absolute, intolerable contradiction in a distinction between God's hidden will and God's revealed will. This is attempted as some kind of explanation and mitigation of the contradiction: The desire to save all (of the offer) is God's revealed will; the will to save only some (of predestination) is His hidden will. But this effort to relieve the tension of the contradiction in which the offer involves Calvinists gets us nowhere. For one thing, the will of God to save only some and not all is not hidden, but revealed. It is found on every page of Scripture. It is Jesus' teaching in Matthew 22:14: God has eternally chosen only some (“few”) to be saved, in distinction from the others (“many”). For another thing, the distinction leaves us right where we were before the distinction was invented: God has two, diametrically opposite, conflicting wills.

Such teaching is destructive of truth and fatal to knowledge of truth. Such teaching thrusts confusion and strife into the very being of God: Does God, or does He not, desire every human to be saved? Is God, or is He not, in His own being, gracious in Jesus to every human? I make bold to suggest that the god of the offer had a very peculiar way of displaying his grace to all and of carrying out his will to save all in the time of the old covenant, when he showed his word unto Jacob, but did not deal so with any nation (cf. Psalm 147:19-20). Is it presumptuous humbly to request of the offer-god worshipped by professing Calvinists that he make up his mind between the alternatives of the offer (the will to save all) and of predestination (the will to damn some)?

Engelsma then makes an observation that is particularly important to the common appeal to the Trinity as an analogy for this problem. The Trinity is mysterious, but it is not contradictory, because God is one in being and three in persons—not one and three in the same respect. That distinction is crucial. The Christian does not say:

God is one person and three persons.

Nor does he say:

God is one being and three beings.

The apparent numerical conflict disappears because the predicates are being asserted in different respects.

Consequently, to call every difficult Calvinistic reconciliation a “mystery” does not establish that the reconciliation is legitimate. One must first demonstrate that the propositions are compatible.

Indeed, Engelsma goes further. He rejects the attempt to resolve the difficulty through an appeal to different kinds of grace:

“There is no relief for the sheer contradiction ... in the doctrine of ‘common grace,’ as though the grace of predestination were a different kind of grace from that revealed in the gospel.”

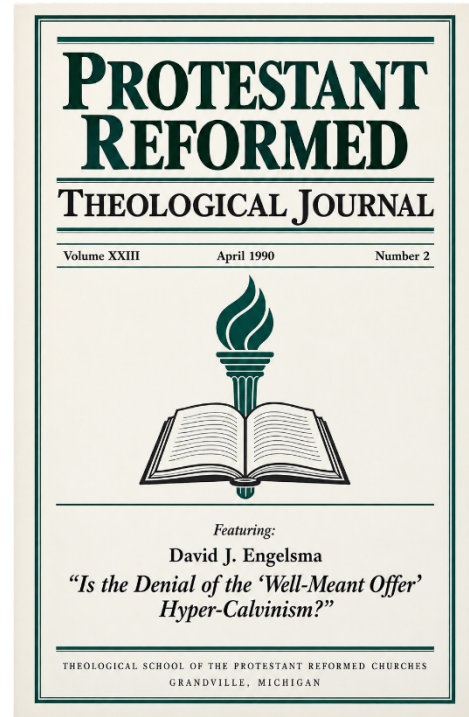
His argument is that the gospel offer itself is presented as saving grace directed toward those who hear it. If predestination simultaneously teaches that God has eternally determined that only some will receive saving grace, then the distinction between God's grace in the gospel and God's grace in predestination cannot simply be introduced as a terminological escape hatch.

And this is where Engelsma becomes especially valuable for our treatment of Shedd. The question is no longer merely:

Can we understand how these things work?

It becomes:

Are the things being asserted actually compatible?



That is a much more fundamental question.

Rogers then shows that the same pattern recurs across Calvinist treatments of compatibilism, the origin of sin, unconditional election, reprobation, the two wills of God, and the “good-faith offer.” Each mechanism—compatibilistic freedom, permissive decree, two wills, hypothetical otherwise-choice, and finally “mystery”—must be evaluated by whether it clarifies the propositions or merely relocates the contradiction.

Importantly, Rogers does not argue that every Calvinist who employs such language is intentionally deceptive. He explicitly says his use of “double talk” is not a charge of malicious intent. Rather, he uses the expression for language that obscures or elides the determinative implications of the system, allowing Calvinists to speak of genuine human choice, divine universal desire, or God's hatred of sin in ways that may sound libertarian or non-deterministic while the underlying theological definitions remain compatibilistic and decretal.

Thus the issue with Shedd's appeal to “inscrutable mystery” should not be caricatured as an objection to mystery itself. The issue is whether *mystery* has actually explained anything. If Shedd's premises entail that God could have created a world without sin, that God determined the conditions under which the creature would freely choose sin, and that the creature could not have chosen otherwise given those same conditions, then calling the relationship between God's decree and the certain occurrence of sin an “inscrutable mystery” does not remove those entailments. It merely marks the point at which the system can no longer provide an account that satisfies its own competing assertions.

And that brings us to the crucial distinction:

A mystery tells us that we do not know how two truths that Scripture teaches fit together. A contradiction occurs when two propositions cannot both be true in the same respect and at the same time. The former is a limitation upon our knowledge; the latter is a problem in the propositions themselves.

Consequently, the appeal to mystery must come after the compatibility of the propositions has been established, not before.

The issue, therefore, is not whether Christianity contains mysteries; it unquestionably does.

Nor is the issue whether finite human beings can comprehend every truth concerning the infinite God; they cannot.

The issue is whether “mystery” is being used to acknowledge the limits of human knowledge concerning what Scripture reveals, *or to protect a theological deduction from the consequences that follow from its own premises.*

A mystery may transcend comprehension without violating coherence. But when propositions asserted in the same respect cannot be reconciled, calling the resulting contradiction a “mystery” does not resolve it. It merely gives the contradiction a theological name.

We should not call something a “mystery” merely because we have not yet demonstrated that the propositions are compatible. Before mystery can be invoked, the terms must first be shown to be logically coherent.

That is the point at which Shedd's formulation deserves scrutiny: unless he can define divine determination, human self-determination, and divine permission in non-equivocal terms, the appeal to mystery does not answer the logical objection but marks the place where the system has stopped explaining itself.