

In Light of Logic

Dilemmas: True and False

In the last issue of *The Contender*, we identified Aristotle's law of thought called the "Principle of the Excluded Middle." This principle asserts that a statement in proposition form, that is, a statement that makes a judgment about something ("A is B"), is either true or false. Thus, there is no middle ground when it comes to evaluating the specific truth claims of a given statement or proposition. In other words, if a statement that purports to make a truth claim is not a true statement, then it is false. This means that a "half-truth" is, logically speaking, an *untruth*, or a false statement. In fact, we must be on guard to recognize and refute "half-truths" that gain ascendancy in the popular mind only because they are accepted uncritically.

A simple question often reveals these half-truths and hidden assumptions: Is that statement really true as it is stated? If not, how could it be restated to be a true statement? If we love the *true* God we should develop a love for the *truth* and engage in this discipline to speak the truth ourselves, as well as recognize when truth or falsehood is presented to us. Thinking this way also encourages us to live with integrity and truth. If we realize when we speak or live a lie, we are much quicker to repent and get back into the light.

The True Dilemma

Logically speaking, a dilemma is an argument intended to put one's opponent in the position where he is forced to choose between two alternatives, both of which are distasteful, unpleasant or contradictory to his own argument. As Irving Copi observed, the dilemma is "perhaps the most powerful instrument of persuasion ever devised. It is a devastating weapon in controversy." It can also be mightily abused, as we shall see.

The true dilemma is equivalent to the law of the excluded middle, and we can flesh out the concept biblically. Elijah used it with devastating effectiveness as recorded in 1 Kings 18:21 (KJV):

And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word.

Not saying a word is an appropriate response to being captured in a true dilemma. Jesus put his detractors in a similar position when his authority was challenged and he put them in the dilemma of having to choose whether John the Baptist was "of God" or "of men."

Luke 20:1-8 (KJV)

(1) And it came to pass, that on one of those days, as he taught the people in the temple, and preached the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes came upon him with the elders,

(2) And spake unto him, saying, Tell us, by what authority doest thou these things? or who is he that gave thee this authority?

(3) And he answered and said unto them, I will also ask you one thing; and answer me:

(4) The baptism of John, was it from heaven, or of men?

(5) And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say, Why then believed ye him not?

(6) But and if we say, Of men; all the people will stone us: for they be persuaded that John was a prophet.

(7) And they answered, that they could not tell whence it was.

(8) And Jesus said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.

Another example of a true dilemma was the situation that was presented to Jesus in the case of the woman caught in the act of adultery.

John 8:4-7 (NIV)

(4) "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery.

(5) In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"

(6) They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger.

(7) When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

Jesus knew that he was in a true dilemma, which accounts for his slow, thoughtful response. The Law of Moses was quoted correctly and was applicable in the situation (except that it stated that both parties be brought in for judgment). For him to show compassion on the woman by relieving her of the consequences of the law when there were witnesses against her would leave him open to the charge of failing to uphold the law. This would have nullified his Messianic ministry. But to give his consent to her stoning would have run counter to what he was teaching about God accepting the publicans and sinners and it was against Roman law for the Jews to execute anyone. His response is an amazing example of being open to the spirit of God, which directed him to an imaginative solution to the problem. He *elevated* the reality of sin rather than dismiss it, causing those who sat in judgment of the woman to have to account for their own sins. At the same time, he affirmed that the woman herself had sinned. All were thus called to account for their sin, and all were blessed by the grace of God.

The False Dilemma: Go Between the Horns

Identifying the complete truth or falsehood of a statement as also crucial to avoid being put in a "false dilemma," one of the enemy's favorite ploys. Satan's strategic use of

the false dilemma is clearly seen in the fact that the enemies of Jesus often employed this fallacious reasoning to attempt to put him on the defensive.

Emotionally, intellectually or practically, we often appear to be put into a dilemma when in fact we have other options. If our house is too small for our growing family, for instance, we are tempted to think that we are in a dilemma: we have to stay or move. If we think we can't afford to move, then we feel that we have to stay and are stuck between "the horns" of an apparent dilemma.

But have we considered all our options? Can we remodel our existing house? Can we get a house that is a *much* bigger and have our mother move in with us and help us pay the mortgage? Upon imaginative and prayerful reflection, we often see that we have alternatives that help get us out of the dilemma that is presented by circumstances that often seem out of our control. Sometimes, as in the case of Paul's "thorn in the flesh," the answer is to trust in the Lord and in the adequacy of his grace to help us endure adversity. Sometimes it seems that God is working on a solution that we simply have to wait to see come into concretion.

Feeling squeezed and powerless between two distasteful alternatives is highly stressful and results in anxiety, or literally a "divided mind." In prayer, the spirit of God will often direct us to use our imagination to explore other options. There's a wise old saying, "When presented with only two alternatives, choose the third." This is also known as "going between the horns of a dilemma." Since the false dilemma is one of the Devil's favorite instruments of enslavement, it is fitting that a dilemma is said to have "horns." This helps us remember that if we are put in a false dilemma, the Enemy is probably behind it.

Cohen cites an example of going between the horns of a dilemma in the following argument against the giving of grades to motivate students to study harder:

If a student is fond of learning, he needs no stimulus, and if he dislikes learning, no stimulus will be of any avail. But any student is either fond of learning or dislikes it. Therefore a stimulus is either needless or of no avail.

To evade the unpleasant implications of this argument, the middle term must be evaluated for truth or falsehood: "any student is either fond of learning or dislikes it." Is this a true statement? No. Actually, many students are not emotionally invested in learning to the point that they are either "fond of" or "dislike" it. Many students are emotionally indifferent and are studying to complete a course of study for a degree or a career for which they are studying. Draining the argument of its emotional aspect eliminates the dilemma and its unpleasant conclusions. One can then evaluate the argument on its own merits and see that the conclusion is not demanded by the premises.

Excluded Middle vs. False Dilemma

The law of the excluded middle must be carefully distinguished from the false dilemma. The former recognizes that any proposition that claims to make a judgment about someone or something is either true or it is false. But this is not to deny that sometimes it is impossible to make black and white judgments. Many times our analysis of what is true results in an appreciation of how difficult it is to make life a black-and-white proposition. It is full of gray, and it often takes the use of our “gray matter” to figure out what is true and false, right and wrong in any given situation.

Indeed, understanding the significance of the law of the excluded middle helps alert us to false claims and misjudgments and the dangers of a “black-and-white” mentality. For instance, some Bible preachers will attempt to motivate sincere believers to act morally by asserting that “everything is either from God or the Devil.” But if everything is either of God or the Devil, where does *baseball* fit into the picture? We would be hard pressed to conclude that either God or the Devil has much at stake over the game. When we search for a way out of this false dilemma, we find a third category: **man**. Many things are man’s invention and are not influenced or inspired by either God or the Devil. One can be a godly, natural or demonized baseball player, umpire, fan or peanut vendor.

Cult leaders and abusive organizations foster an “all or nothing” mentality with respect to their own teachings. “Either this ministry is of God or it’s not. Get in or get out.” This kind of thinking creates a false dilemma and leaves followers in the position of having few options if and when they disagree with a particular doctrine or practice. They then stay because they are intimidated to do otherwise, or they leave under a cloud of condemnation. Healthy teachers and organizations do not demand absolute loyalty, nor do they demonize people who choose to leave. One can make particular judgments about the validity of their teachings and practices, and choose to stay or go on the basis of one’s own conscience, sense of mission or faith.

Sometimes general statements are made in conversation, in literature and even the Bible that are not really intended to be understood as making universal claims. For example, Psalm 116:11 says that “all men are liars.” However, we see that this is not the judgment of God but of the psalmist himself, who prefaced this statement by saying, “In my dismay I said, ‘All men are liars.’” We see from the context of his statement that he was not intending to make a categorical statement about mankind that was true in an absolute sense, but rather using language the way we all use it – to vent our emotions.

But is it a true statement? No, because Jesus Christ is a man, and yet never lied. Therefore, it is not true to say that in every case men are liars. Nevertheless, because Jesus was probably the only man who ever lived without lying, the statement is nearly universally true, and therefore is accepted as a “general truth.”

Many such general truths have important exceptions. For instance, “lying is wrong.” In common understanding, to “lie” is to not tell the truth. But we must look at the biblical evidence. Rahab lied about the Jewish spies:

Joshua 2:4 and 5 (NIV)

(4) Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from. At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, the men left.

(5) I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them."

Yet she is considered a heroine of the faith "because she welcomed the spies" (Heb. 11:31 – NIV). She clearly was not self-interested only, for she risked her life for the spies. She was interested in being a part of what the true God was doing in the situation, and lied to save the lives of the spies.

As recorded in 2 Samuel 12:1-4, the prophet Nathan went to David with a story about a man whose little lamb had been killed and eaten, and told the story as if the event had really occurred. David was outraged and demanded justice. Had Nathan told him it was only a story, David would probably only have been amused, but not convicted of his sin. In this case, Nathan's intent was not to conceal the truth but to actually highlight it.

Based upon these two biblical examples, we would have to say that it is not a true statement to say that "lying is always immoral." It is *almost* always immoral, but sometimes it is appropriate because of some higher virtue or purpose being called for. We would also have to consider revising our understanding of what "lying" is. "Lying," biblically, is to intentionally misrepresent the truth primarily for personal gain. Analysis of the subtleties of what constitutes "lying" forces us to acknowledge that this is not a black-and-white issue.

Reasoning this way helps us out of many ethical dilemmas, which frequently crop up in the life of a believer. Sometimes in living out our faith we find that to be loving trumps being truthful, if we perceive that to be truthful about a particular thing will cause unnecessary distress to someone we love. We "fudge" the truth, not for personal gain, but to serve the other person. We sometimes must "hold" the truth and wait until the time is right to speak it. This puts us in the position of having to withhold the truth, by evasion or avoidance as much as possible. But sometimes, as in the case of Rahab, a blatant lie is excusable under the circumstances. Sometimes truth and love conflict, and in the interests of truly loving others we choose love in accordance with the Scripture (1 Cor. 13:1ff).

Even God demonstrated this commitment to love over truth in the way that He inspired the Old Testament to be written. He led the Israelites to believe that He was in absolute control of their circumstances, and that everything that happened to them was as a direct result of His actions. "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away," said Job (Job 1:21). Not until Jesus Christ came was the truth revealed about God's goodness and His loving nature. The tyranny and power of sin was also revealed in Christ, helping to explain a lot about the nature of sowing and reaping. The spiritual battle and the influence of the Devil and demons was also not revealed until Christ.

For the sake of the spiritually blind and immature, God let Himself be misjudged and misunderstood, knowing that eventually He would be vindicated and well-represented by His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. It is in him that we see the true picture of the true God. God is good, and the Devil is bad. That is one statement that is black and white, and excludes any middle ground whatsoever. It is too bad that so many Christians fail to employ the rigors of logic that would help them resolve the apparent contradictions between the Old and New Testaments.