

# A Discussion of Antinomy

by Dean Harvey

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"Antinomy" comes from two Greek words, anti, a preposition meaning "against," or "instead of," and nomos, law, with the resultant etymological meaning of "against law" or "instead of law."

The Shorter Oxford Dictionary defines antinomy as "A contradiction between conclusions which seem equally logical, reasonable, or necessary..."

J. I. Packer has defined antinomy in theology as: "...an apparent incompatibility between two apparent truths. An antinomy exists when a pair of principles stand side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both understandable. There are cogent reasons for believing each of them; each rests on clear and solid evidence; but it is a mystery to you how they can be squared with each other. You see that each must be true on its own, but you do not see how they can both be true together.

"It is not a figure of speech, but an observed relation between two statements of fact. It is not deliberately manufactured; it is forced upon us by the facts themselves. It is unavoidable, and it is insoluble. We do not invent it, and we cannot explain it. Nor is there any way to get rid of it, save by falsifying the very facts that led us to it.

"What should one do, then, with an antinomy? Accept it for what it is, and learn to live with it. Refuse to regard the apparent inconsistency as real; put down the semblance of contradiction to the deficiency in your own understanding; think of the two principles as, not rival alternatives, but, in some way that you do not grasp, complementary to each other. Be careful, therefore, not to set them at loggerheads, nor to make deductions from either that would cut across the other (such deductions would, for that very reason, be certainly unsound). Use each within the limits of its own sphere of reference...teach yourself to think of reality in a way that provides for their peaceful coexistence, remembering that reality itself has proved actually to contain them both. This is how antinomies must be handled, whether in nature or in Scripture."

The title of Packer's book indicates that he will try to resolve what he thinks of as an antinomy. If God is sovereign (in the accepted evangelical sense that He controls everything), what is the purpose of our being involved in evangelism? Pinnock's title also refers to what is usually called an antinomy; how does man have a free will if God is sovereign (and controls everything)? I believe that there are paradoxes, but not any antinomies in Scripture. If there is something which seems to be an antinomy, then we need to study some more, there is something we do not understand.