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Toward a New Lutheran Dogmatics

Lowell C. Green

Doctrinal theology has traditionally been the heart of theological education and practice in the evangelical Lutheran church. At certain times in history, dogmatics, which is the science of Christian doctrine, has been especially strong—during the Reformation period, in Lutheran orthodoxy of the seventeenth century, during the nineteenth-century reawakening, and during the first half of the present century. However, concern for sound doctrine has lately been less prominent than concern for vigorous activity and practice. “Let’s not have ivory-tower theories but let’s save souls,” or “Let’s get out and fight for social justice.” Nevertheless, as my old teacher John C. Mattes used to say, “You can’t act right if you don’t think right!” And there is much uneasiness in “conservative” as well as “liberal” circles that all is not well. We desperately need an up-to-date doctrinal system in order to regain a satisfactory perspective for the teaching and work of the church. But it is widely lamented that there is no adequate dogmatics book.

Some would argue that the *Christian Dogmatics* of Francis Pieper is still adequate. This argument possibly presupposes that a dogmatics book is normative rather than deliberative. This is dangerously akin to the notion that certain biblical commentaries have so correctly grasped the meaning of the inspired texts that such commentaries are to be the norms as to how a given scriptural text should be interpreted. In evangelical Lutheran thought, not even the symbolical books are allowed to dictate the meaning of a biblical passage, let alone the pronouncements of private authors, prominent churchmen, or even parliamentary assemblages.

Moreover, although Pieper’s was the greatest dogmatics text ever written in North America, it had certain human weaknesses even when it was written, its English translation is not always reliable, and it is no longer up-to-date. It commands our respect and commends itself to our use, but it can no longer be our sole text of Christian doctrine. The reasons for this conclusion will appear several times as we proceed in the present essay. The chief concerns of Francis Pieper were that the doctrine of God be soundly taught, that the centrality of Jesus Christ as true God and true man be maintained, that the importance of the means of grace

be underscored, that the distinction of Law and Gospel predominate, and that the church always be mindful of pure doctrine. These must continue to be our chief concerns as we seek to preserve his contribution while we wrestle with the new problems of a new day.

A sound system of dogmatics must relate properly to the following five factors: (1) it must be soundly biblical; (2) it must stand in an historical perspective (tradition; the Creeds and Confessions); (3) it must be contemporary and enter into dialogue with several modern attacks or confirmations of the faith once delivered; (4) it must present the truths of the Christian faith in a systematic whole (else it is not a dogmatics at all) and, in so doing, must be wary of the intrusions of human reason and philosophy; (5) finally, it should be practical and relevant to the proclamation and activity of the church today. In regard to the last point, it might be recalled that, prior to the nineteenth-century Reformed theologian Schleiermacher, systematic theology had included the application of the sacred truth. It has only been in the last century and a half that homiletics, catechetics, liturgics, and pastoral methods have been separated from dogmatics. At the present stage in history a new dogmatic system would do well to incorporate brief discussions of the doctrinal foundations of these practical disciplines of the theological curriculum. For example, a catechisation of the Ten Commandments must wrestle with the difficult problem of how to explain the words, "We should fear and love God." Should Law and Gospel be combined so that "fear God" would mean to hold Him in loving and filial reverence, or should they be distinguished so that "fear God" would mean to dread the Law and "love God" would mean to cling to the promises of the Gospel? This issue needs to be discussed today.

I. The Problems of Writing Prolegomena

The most important part of a dogmatics book is the prolegomena, in which the over-arching problems of the theological point of departure, the confessional stance, the attitude toward the Scriptures, the systematic approach, and the manner in which God is to be considered, as well as the way in which Law and Gospel are to be distinguished, must all be dealt with as the groundwork is laid for the system as a whole. Carl Stange underscored the crucial nature of prolegomena when, after publishing the first

volume of his own dogmatics, he decided not to conclude the work as other tasks occupied his time; he stated that everything was contained in the first part and that the unfolding of several doctrines could be dispensed with when the prolegomena were available. Robert Preus demonstrated the importance of a good start when he published his impressive study of the prolegomena of the old Lutheran dogmaticians.

Dogmatics must be biblical but should not be biblicistic. The difference, stated as briefly as possible, is that biblicism is an approach to biblical studies in which the proper context is overlooked, appropriate methods of interpretation are omitted, and the interpreter tries to jump back across the two millennia which separate us from the writers of Holy Writ. Nor should dogmatics be "Biblical Theology," even when the latter is carried out properly. The disciplines of "Theology of the Old Testament" and "Theology of the New Testament" belong to those departments of the theological institution, whereas dogmatics belongs to systematic theology. It is unfortunate that many teachers of dogmatics are actually biblical scholars rather than systematicians.

Dogmatics must be systematic. This fact does not mean that dogmatics should be philosophical; in fact, it should be carefully distinguished from philosophy. But it does mean that the task of the dogmatician is to present the truths of the Christian faith as a connected whole. Generally European theologians have made more successful systematicians than North Americans. Americans often have trouble maintaining a systematic stance without the intrusion of human reason or philosophy. The difficulty of presenting the truths of the Christian faith in a connected whole is increased by the practice of some larger American seminaries where the dogmatics course is parcelled out among a number of different professors, so that Professor A teaches only prolegomena, Professor B teaches Christology, and Professor C handles the doctrine of the church and the ministry. It is hard to see how Professor C can properly teach the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper if he has not thoroughly worked with Christology, or how Professor B can appropriately make Christology the center of a system of which he hardly is conscious if he does not struggle with the preliminary problems or has never taught the prolegomena. And Professor A is in the position of someone who goes to a movie and then leaves early without finding out what happened.

II. The Underlying Principle

What shall be the underlying principle of the entire dogmatic system, as it is to be presented in the prolegomena? We can only point out several general possibilities in this essay and leave a detailed presentation for fuller treatment in a book. However, reference can be made to several possibilities. That principle might be theocentric or it might be anthropocentric. It might be a person or it might be a thing. There has been a widespread tendency, especially among Fundamentalists and some conservative Lutherans, to propose the doctrine of the Sacred Scriptures as the underlying principle of dogmatics. In spite of the fact that such a procedure has many factors to commend it, we cannot go that way. The Holy Scriptures must, indeed, receive total acceptance; furthermore, they must be the source and norm for our theology. But they cannot be made the underlying principle, that is, the chief factor of Christian doctrine. The Scriptures have been given by inspiration of God, it is true; but God Himself must be the chief factor and the underlying principle of dogmatics.

This fact means that a dogmatic system which claims to represent the posture of Luther and of the Lutheran Confessions must start out with the doctrine of God, hidden in the majesty of the Law (*Deus absconditus*) and revealed in the Jesus of the Gospel (*Deus revelatus*). This approach rules out the rationalistic derivation of a doctrine of God through Dionysian philosophy, as practiced in the Middle Ages. This method, traditional in older Lutheran dogmatics, set up a doctrine of divine attributes in order to determine what God was like. Through the *via eminentiae* superior qualities of man were referred to God, with the inevitable conclusion that God possessed these qualities in the superlative: God was all-wise (omniscient), all-powerful (omnipotent), etc. Through the *via negationis* negative qualities of man were found reversed in God: God was sin-less, death-less, change-less, etc. Through the *via causalitatis* God was said to be made known through His works such as creation; the Creator of such a remarkable universe had to possess certain qualities such as power, majesty, beauty, wisdom, etc. This procedure is objectionable for several reasons. (1) At best, it is the peering into the things that God has not chosen to tell us and is, therefore, an act of disobedience. (2) It sets aside God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ and substitutes an action of reason and is, therefore, almost an act of idolatry. (3) It obscures the contrast between God Hidden

and Revealed, between Law and Gospel. Since no Dionysian philosophy can penetrate the wonder of God made man and since nothing can be added to the Gospel that Christ has not revealed, this methodology can only add to the Law. And since it claims to be a "revelation," it lends an inappropriate weight to the Law and tends to compete with the revelation of God in Christ. (4) Since the attributes of God that are thereby derived do not tend to distinguish between majestic qualities and merciful qualities of God and since the grace of God in Christ is not included in this procedure, the balance of Law and Gospel is disturbed. (5) Since attributing something to God is human work, the theologian tends to be "creating God" (cf. *Deus ex machina*). The value of such activity as a good work is questionable. (6) Since the lists of attributes derived from reason are supported with biblical "proof texts," sound hermeneutics is offended and proper doctrine of Scripture is done violence.

It must be the axiom of a sound Lutheran dogmatic system that we cannot know anything about God except what He has chosen to make known to us. Other world religions have some knowledge of the Law, but only Christianity has the Gospel. Since the doctrine of the Law does not attain its full significance until the Gospel teaches us that God's Son took upon Himself the full weight of the Law and, since the decisive point with respect to the Law is that its power to condemn was checked by the deed of Good Friday, only Christianity has an adequate understanding of the Law. However, the Law in itself is not a true revelation of God because it presents God the Judge rather than God the Savior. The veil has not truly been pulled aside until God has shown me that He has reconciled me to Himself in Christ; since this is the message we call the Gospel, revelation (in its specific sense) does not take place aside from this message of redemption in the Gospel. Therefore, the Law (which is called revelation in a general sense) is not revelation in that same specific sense.

Because there is a questionable tendency to allow a doctrine of the Holy Scriptures to be equated with revelation, a special caution is necessary. We must beware of a doctrine of the Scriptures which obscures the distinction between Law and Gospel or the distinction between Old Covenant and New Testament. The primary revelation of God was not a book but a person, the God-Man. The divinely inspired book is the record of the revelation of God in Christ (2 Cor. 5). Since the Lutheran Confessions point

out the necessity of distinguishing Law and Gospel, not all parts of the Bible are of equal importance. Certainly, the civil and ceremonial laws which have been done away are no longer relevant to the Christian, notwithstanding attempts of modern liturgiologists to build principles of worship upon Old Testament practices.

The inspired, infallible, and inerrant Holy Scriptures are the source and norm of dogmatics. However, one must beware of a biblicistic *sola scriptura*, which was taught neither by Luther nor by the Lutheran Confessions. The teachings of our Christian faith were explicated in the course of thousands of years of doctrinal development, in which the Holy Spirit faithfully led the church to new understanding of sacred truth. There is no warrant for ignoring the creeds and confessions of the church and subjecting the flock of Christ to the vagaries of subjectivistic interpretations of the Bible. The hundreds of sects and cults of our day are a poignant warning against unhistorical, uncontextual biblicism.

The Sacred Scriptures must be interpreted according to the soundest hermeneutical methods and instruments available. There is no reason why we should follow a false legalism in which the hermeneutical methods of some previous age must circumscribe our work today. Whether it be rabbinical methods or even those of Luther, old methodologies must not stifle modern capabilities.

An important principle in Lutheran hermeneutics is the distinction between the Old Covenant, or Old Testament, and the New Testament. This is an insight which Reformed writers have avoided and, since most commentaries for students limited to the English language are of Reformed authorship, it is an insight that is being lost among Lutherans in America. Such clichés as type and anti-type, as well as the concepts associated with such terms as *Heilsgeschichte*, covenant, and dispensationalism, tend to blur the Lutheran distinction concerned and to confound Law and Gospel. The clearest presentation of the distinction between the Old and New Testaments is given by Martin Chemnitz in his *Examination of the Council of Trent* (I:iv:6ff).

III. Views and Concepts Requiring Treatment

No previous work in Lutheran dogmatics has devoted enough attention to that philosophy which is characteristic of our country, American Pragmatism. Through John Dewey it down-graded

past values and educational methods and imbued our schools with "Progressive Education" or Instrumentalism, in which the child cannot learn from the past but learns only through his own experience. The loss of foreign languages and classical studies, as well as the idea of extracting truth from one's own consciousness (in contrast to the Third Article), together with the vogue of using "workbooks," has come from Deweyism. Furthermore, Dewey's rejection of any traditional values, particularly the Ten Commandments, and his claim that what is right and moral is what works for me ("pragmatism") have had profound impact upon American morality and immorality. His pupil, Shailer Mathews, applied progressive principles to religious education. This procedure led him to reject Biblical history, since "the experiences of previous generations have no relevance to the present frame of reference." Thus, the Dick-and-Jane story replaced Abraham, Joseph, and David in the Sunday School curriculum, and the futility of memorizing the catechism, Bible verses, and selected hymn stanzas seemed evident. Applied to church extension, church growth, and synodical programs, American Pragmatism suggested that the validity of a method was determined by its workability. Our purpose here is not to make negative criticisms or value judgments of any other sort, but by means of selected examples to make the reader aware of philosophical rivals to biblical teaching on the American scene, secular and ecclesial.

American Pragmatism has been neglected by systematic theologians nurtured only by European thinkers. The contrary is true of Existentialism, a distinctively European philosophy, whose impact on American thought has perhaps been exaggerated. Kierkegaard, Bultmann, and even Tillich were more European than American. Nevertheless, we must not ignore this school of thinking. Existentialism is basically the repudiation of history, with reality existing only in the present moment; since Americans sometimes lack a strong historical consciousness, they are vulnerable to such an approach. It eradicates the value of the cumulative experiences of Christianity, whether in history, creeds, or liturgies; it wants to be fully contemporaneous, instantaneous, and pragmatic. Its offshoot of demythologisation in the interpretation of the Bible is perhaps visible even among "conservatives" when a passage such as Acts 1:8, "Ye shall be witnesses of Me," is shorn of its historical context—the commission of the apostles as eye-witnesses to the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus—and is given a certain "timeless" quality (at odds

with the concept that God became man). Thereby, every Christian is a "witness," not because he has seen Jesus in His earthly ministry, nor even because he "witnesses" to the saving work of Christ accomplished in Palestine, but because he testifies to his own inward religious experience. This is not a far cry from Bultmann's insistence regarding Easter that it is irrelevant whether Christ rose from the dead historically; the only thing of importance is the question, "Is He risen (existentially) in me?" A hermeneutical procedure which does away with the problem of historical facticity to concentrate upon an internal experience is the essence of Bultmann's program of demythologisation, whether it is practiced by a "liberal" or by one who claims to support the inerrancy of the Scriptures.

A very insidious influence on Lutheranism in America has been the "covenant" thinking of Calvinists, Puritans, and other Reformed thinkers. It has influenced our course in such diverse forms as the notion of the "manifest destiny" of the American people (as the New Israel, the New Chosen People of God), the bitter experiences of anti-German persecution during World War I, the use of the Scofield Reference Bible with its dispensationalism and the related emergence of Jehovah's Witnesses, various approaches to the interpretation of the Old Testament, Zionism and American aid for Israel (including Arab resentment and the oil embargo), and the new ecumenical liturgics. The *Statement on Communion Practices*, published by the LCA and ALC in 1976 and later adopted by both, declared that the theme of the covenant was central to their interpretation of the Bible and their concept of worship and sacramental fellowship. And the notion that the Divine Service is a "celebration" on the part of God's covenant people is not lacking in the Missouri Synod. Its implications for "worship" as a human work and for freedom in establishing altar fellowship is obvious. The use of the NIV Bible reinforces the concept of God as "Sovereign Lord," the Reformed concept of "covenant," and the Bible as the "law" for God's "covenant people." Covenant notions underly such hymns as 241, 332, 492, 495, 544, and 567 in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*.

These are several examples of recent thinking in America where careful attention to ideological suppositions will help the theological student, pastor, or theologian to detect danger spots. Lutheranism in North America is situated in a *diaspora*. Lutheranism is not an isolated religion; it is an entire culture. The

question needs to be dealt with again and again: To what extent can Lutherans accommodate themselves to the strains of Puritanism, pragmatism, and autonomous culture in the surrounding world? In the above lines, the attempt has been made to show that Lutheran dogmatics is not some achievement of the past, but is the very contemporary act of thinking through the faith which is believed in dialogue with the world about us. The starting point is the treatment of the prolegomena to dogmatic theology.