

CHRISTIAN DOGMATICS

REFORMED THEOLOGY
FOR THE CHURCH CATHOLIC

Edited by
Michael Allen and
Scott R. Swain


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For our children:
Jackson and Will Allen
and
Caroline, Sophia, Josiah, and Micah Swain

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INTRODUCTION

MICHAEL ALLEN AND SCOTT R. SWAIN

Christian Dogmatics and the Theological Task

Dogmatic reasoning is the concerted attempt of the church to discipline its hearing of and testimony to the gospel according to that same gospel, specifically, to the promise that God makes himself known to and by his people. As Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson has articulated so well, “The church has a mission: to see to the speaking of the gospel, whether to the world as message of salvation or to God as appeal and praise.”¹ This is no easy mission, for the world is not eager to hear this message, and we are not naturally prone to profess it. Even regenerate Christians continue to resist the shape of the gospel at times and to return to their sinful ways. The practice of dogmatics nevertheless goes forward in its mission vis-à-vis the gospel because it is moved along by the promise and provision of the Lord. The possibility of faithful service in the task of dogmatics does not arise from within the resources of dogmatics itself but from within the infinite depths of the Triune God who speaks to his church and who wills through his church to shed abroad the knowledge and love of himself.

This volume includes essays on most of the major topics (*loci*) of dogmatics. They are written by accomplished theologians from across the world. The contributors bring differing areas of specialization and theological affiliation to the table and therefore do not constitute a unified school of thought

1. Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 11.

on various methodological and theological matters (including some matters discussed herein). What binds the different essays together is their attempt to draw on the fecund resources of Holy Scripture within the context of the catholic church of the Reformed confessions.² The contributors to this volume are all committed to the proposition that theological renewal comes through dependence upon the generative resources of the Triune God in and through the gospel and that such dependence is best expressed in our particular historical moment by way of retrieval. In other words, theological fruitfulness in the future will be possible only if we first tend faithfully to the past: specifically, to the confession of our ancestors in the faith and to the root of that confession in the scriptural witness that God has generated through his Word and Spirit. Thus this volume seeks to bridge the classical and the contemporary by enlisting the contribution of some of today's leading theologians and by aligning itself with the catholic and Reformational heritage of the church. In this manner, these essays are meant to contribute to the flourishing of theology within the church today.

Because this commitment to renewal through retrieval functions on the margins of contemporary strategies for market success in our contemporary society (where it is invoked only when the retro might sell), and, still further, because it often exists even on the periphery of contemporary church life (where it is mostly perpetuated only for sentimental rather than principled reasons), we will reflect briefly on the theological impetus for such a commitment as more than a mere stratagem for success but, profoundly, as a promise of the gospel itself.

Renewal

Theology does not come easily. Better put, faithful theology comes by grace or not at all, while idolatry comes quite naturally to those of us who make our bed east of Eden. John Calvin famously referred to our hearts as idol-making factories.³ In a world of spin and with a heart full of idols, true wisdom and

2. In parallel to the intent expressed thirty years ago to address the catholic church from the Lutheran confession specifically, as stated by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., preface to *Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 1:xviii. That multiauthor confessional dogmatics exemplified for the editors what was needed now in addressing the catholic church from the Reformed confessional theology.

3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 1.11.8. Calvin made similar comments in his exegetical material, e.g., *Commentary on Ezekiel* 1:13, 80; *Commentary on 2 Corinthians* 11:3, 141.

genuinely faithful speech seem impossible. Idolatry without and within appears to throw all theological efforts into question. So, “The central theological principle of the Bible [is] the rejection of idolatry.”⁴

But grace does come, and it brings theology along with it. God sends a Word, and his Word does not return void. God speaks into the chaos, and his speech does bring order, beauty, and goodness. God does these things, so theology is by grace or not at all. Grace does not undercut or circumvent intellectual reflection. Rather, grace comes as this promise: “Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything” (2 Tim. 2:7). The nature of God’s gift is illumining. It does not augment our intellectual activity; it provides the context, conditions, and character for its proper functioning. B. B. Warfield, the noted twentieth-century Presbyterian theologian from Princeton Seminary, was asked which was more vital to theological work: ten hours of study or ten minutes on one’s knees in prayer. Warfield retorted that ten hours of prayerful study on one’s knees was surely the order of the day.⁵ His pastoral reminder points to a profound theological truth: the life of faith does not manifest itself in habits of inactivity but in free service and loving self-sacrifice. And Karl Barth, another famed Reformed theologian of the twentieth century, concurred with his assessment that “prayer without study would be empty; study without prayer would be blind.”⁶

Theology is not easy, and it is not natural, not for those of us who are sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, plagued by sin’s onset. But theology is a genuinely human practice and really does take shape in the context of the body of Christ. Minds are renewed. Eyes are opened. Congregations do hear. Grace takes the common, even the corrupt, and sets it apart for a sacred use. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). Indeed, “The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world . . . the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (John 1:9, 18). So the saints do know their Lord and, in knowing him, love him. Our theological ventures are premised upon this promise: behold, the Lord makes all things new, including our sinful reason and our darkened suppression of the knowledge of the one true God.

4. Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 10.

5. “The Religious Life of Theological Students,” in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 1:412.

6. Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (New York: Anchor, 1964), 151.

Retrieval

Renewal is promised by the “giver of life,” but we do well to ask how his lordly grace is bestowed and what effect his *modus operandi* should exercise on our intellectual efforts. A healthy dose of Christian anthropology puts the lie to any premonition that the path forward lies in cutting ties with the past. While we must put to death our sin, the way to glory surely does not involve a detachment from nature or from our history, at least not our history within the economy of salvation. Indeed, what we find is that the “great cloud of witnesses” draws us out of our delusions and overwhelms us with an illuminating testimony. With Nicholas Lash we confess, “Christian doctrine . . . functions, or should function, as a set of protocols against idolatry.”⁷

Many evangelicals have felt duty bound to shirk tradition and, specifically, the role of creeds and confessions in the church for the sake of maintaining an emphasis on God’s action in revealing himself to us. For these saints, tradition has become a surrogate or substitute for God’s own revelation. Contrary to the words of Lash, they view tradition as itself an idol, not a protocol against idolatry. Yet this sort of maneuver fails to honor the biblical emphasis on the way in which Jesus Christ reveals himself to us through the ongoing practices of his people. To keep the heritage of the church at bay, then, is not merely to make a judgment call about its history or to adopt a particular path for intellectual progress; no, to do so is to adopt a posture of disbelief in the promise of Jesus. Hilary of Poitiers writes that “only in receiving can we know,” and the Lord has determined that our reception of this knowledge come through the witness of one generation to another.⁸ To do so is to honor the fifth commandment, believing that in doing so we might live long and blessed in the divine kingdom.

Dogmatics is the disciplined effort to have our eyes and mouths retrained by the gospel. In so doing we inhabit the classroom of the communion of saints, and we seek to learn from its instruction. We read the creeds of the ecumenical church, and we study the confessions of the Protestant Reformation. We go to school in the texts of the ancient church fathers and the medieval doctors of the faith. We consider the modern articulations of the gospel and the contemporary testimonies to God’s Word. Dogmatics is receptive, believing that the Word of Christ dwells richly not merely when savored by individuals but also when sung and spoken by the people of God (Col. 3:16–17).

7. Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and End of “Religion”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 194.

8. Hilary of Poitiers, *The Trinity*, in vol. 6 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, ed. W. Sanday, trans. E. W. Watson and L. Pullan (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 2.35.

Whereas some approaches to dogmatics suggest a pacified relation between the gospel and tradition, our approach cannot be so sanguine. The gospel does generate a tradition (1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Tim. 2:2): this Christ does give birth to Christians. Yet the history of the church is one of conflict marked by that famed Reformational claim that we are simultaneously the just and the sinful people of God. Thus our appropriation of ecclesial tradition must always be a critical traditioning wherein we seek to be shaped by the truth, goodness, and beauty of our heritage and not to be drawn into a pathology of untruth, evil, and ugliness by our native resources. Such critique goes back not only to the way our incarnate Lord addressed the religious traditions of his day but to the prophetic witness of old as well. Catholicity and tradition are not about calm conservatism, then, but about honoring the context within which God names and makes Christians and speaks and sustains Christian reasoning. We entrust ourselves to the guidance of the church because we believe the Triune God and because we honor the path he has set before us, not because we find any of our ancestors to offer infallible readings of the Holy Scriptures.⁹ Holy Scripture calls us to embrace “tradition”—the faithful transmission of biblical truth through time, rather than mere “custom”—which may simply be the historical perpetuation of error. We find a precious touchstone to this faithful tradition in the creeds and confessions of the church.

Renewal through Retrieval: Reformed Catholicity and the Theological Task

The essays that follow chart a catholic and Reformed path forward, then, by pointing backward. In varying places and to different ends, they look to a number of figures and texts as resources for the journey.

These essays are not merely ecclesial but also dogmatic in that they seek to reflect intellectually and synthetically on the task of the Christian confession. They are not systematic if that means unpacking doctrines by way of logical deduction from a principle. But they are systematic in a synthetic sense in that they attend to the full breadth of the biblical witness as well as the order, emphases, and coherence of that full swathe of canonical teaching. The attentive reader will notice that the Triune God is the center of reflection in the essays that follow, since Christian theology is about God and all things as they relate to him. More often than not, chapters move explicitly from reflection

9. For further reflection on a distinctly Reformed approach to catholicity and tradition, see Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).

on God's character (in and of himself) and only then (in light of the fullness and life that are his alone) to consider his works and wonders done for the sake of others: whether creation writ large or his covenant people.

This collection—and the wider practice of dogmatic theology of which it is but a piece—is not meant to replace the reading of Holy Scripture but to illuminate it. Just as pastors and evangelists serve to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:12), so these essays seek to equip saints for a more faithful hearing of and testimony to the words of the prophets and apostles. Zacharius Ursinus reflected that the “highest” purpose for studying church doctrine is to prepare us “for the reading, understanding, and exposition of the holy Scriptures. For as the doctrine of the catechism and common places (*loci communes*) are taken out of the Scriptures, and are directed by them as their rule, so they again lead us, as it were, by the hand to the Scriptures.”¹⁰ Dogmatic reasoning is meant to flow from and send one back to the task of exegesis. Like good art criticism, it is drawn from careful viewing of a specimen, but it is beneficial only if it aids further interaction with the specimen itself.

Such is our hope for this volume: that readers will find its chapters a reliable guide to the mysteries of the faith attested by the prophets and apostles and a prompt in the ongoing journey of theological reason between the darkness of Egypt and the light of Canaan. By listening to the witness of pilgrims before us and by attending to the broader terrain in which we roam, we hope that the task of journeying well—that is, faithfully—will be aided and encouraged.

Recognizing that faithfulness on this path depends wholly on the resources of the one who has accompanied the church even before the onset of our own pilgrimage, we conclude with a plea for divine assistance.

May our most great and wonderful God, who begat his own eternal Son Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, by eternal generation and sanctifies him to us by eternal predestination, that he may be our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption—may that same God also bestow upon us the spirit of wisdom, that growing stronger by his power we may increase in the saving treasures of this knowledge and wisdom unto the unity of faith and recognition of him, until we become a complete man according to the proper measure of the stature which is fitting for that most distinguished and glorious body in Christ Jesus our head and Savior, for his glory. Amen.¹¹

10. Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1985), 10.

11. Franciscus Junius, *A Treatise on True Theology: With the Life of Franciscus Junius*, trans. David C. Noe (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 234.