

Introduction

This work aims at instruction for today in the primary theology of Christianity. I take “primary theology” to be the gospel narrative given in canonical Scripture and parsed by the creeds of the ecumenical church and the Reformation confession of justification by faith. I take “today” to indicate the better understanding of these sources and norms than in the past made available by modern, historical-critical method, by the irenic ecumenical method of dialogue, and by the situation of post-Christendom in which Euro-Americans pursue Christian theology.

This book then is intended for spiritually motivated and intellectually serious seekers both within and without the churches. By these, I have in mind those who want to understand the cognitive claims of that faith in God which the gospel brings, as the church catholic has understood the matter and still seeks to understand it better, under the assumption that the development of doctrine and the task of critical dogmatics are unfinished. The starting-point in this task, as Augustine put it, the *initium fidei*, is faith in God who comes in His Word. This “God” is the One in whom alone, according to the First Table of the Commandments, faith is to be invested, whose name is not to be taken in vain but spoken truthfully in accord with the divine self-donation of the gospel, whose purpose in speaking is to gain the doxological echo of the redeemed people of God. Theology is about God and exists in response to the prophetic and apostolic *Deus dixit* (God has spoken). As such, theology is an autonomous, nonspeculative discipline that is written “from faith for faith.” Such theology advances, strictly speaking, one and only one proposition: *God the almighty Father is determined to redeem the creation through His Son, Jesus Christ, and bring it to fulfillment by His Spirit.* All other doctrines are but articulations or extrapolations of this one, fundamental claim about true deity.

While efforts in the church’s primary theology are common enough, this book is unusual in its approach in that it seeks to utilize and indeed in part to reconcile several competing, if not today conflicting, disciplinary traditions within the domain of Christian thought: Patristic studies, Reformation theology, and liberal Protestant historical criticism. In this book, all three of these methods are at work—alongside as well a tacit dialogue with the philosophy

of religion! Such a cross-disciplinary approach, as it seems nowadays, will predictably displease purists in each of the foregoing camps; of necessity it qualifies the exclusive procedures of each method and relativizes the insights of each by those of the other. Yet in the author's view such a synthetic approach is urgently necessitated by the sudden and perilous polarization emerging between these traditions of theology today after so much apparent ecumenical progress in the preceding century.

I have argued elsewhere that for Luther the Bible and the ecumenical creeds together form a hermeneutical whole: it is not the Bible as such but the canonical Bible rightly interpreted by the ecumenical creeds and the Reformation confession of justification that constitutes the written word of God, the source and norm of doctrinal theology.¹ In another work, I sought to lay out the *Wirkungsgeschichte* (the history of the interpretative effects) of this Reformation theology to the present day via Leibniz rather than Kant,² since the latter made Luther's emphatically *kataphatic* (revealed) theology impossible under the epistemic conditions of modernity. In the chapters that follow, I wish to focus attention in the other direction, retrospectively, back to what twentieth-century Protestant theologian T. F. Torrance so rightly called the *evangelical* theology of the ancient, Greek-speaking *catholic* church.³ Historians likewise have undertaken this task with great success, for example, J. N. D. Kelly⁴ and Jaroslav Pelikan,⁵ and most recently the splendid and eminently useful textbook of Tarmo Toom.⁶ I will shamelessly draw on their expertise in coming chapters. I am deeply inspired in what follows by a seminal analysis made some years ago by systematic theologian Robert W. Jenson.⁷ But for various reasons, others have not found convincing the case for the primary theology of the church as both evangelical and catholic—thus this new effort.

Pivotal to the new case being made are several equally unusual theses, which I will simply list here in preliminary, dense formulation by way of preview. One is a historical-critical account of the pivotal role played by the Gospel of John as a theological interpretation of the Synoptic tradition in the development of early Christian doctrinal theology. This is an account following British theologian Sir Edwyn Hoskyns and European scholar Udo Schnelle (but not Rudolf Bultmann).⁸ This location of John's theology in the development of Christian doctrine, I argue, corroborates the insight of Reformation theology into the primal (historically speaking, the "apocalyptic") form of the Pauline gospel as God's word in the resurrection of the Crucified One, signifying and effecting the justification of the godless (not the justification of the existentialist).⁹

Another unusual thesis is the theoretical account of the critique of epistemology and revision of metaphysics detected in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, following the pioneering study of Jenson previously mentioned.¹⁰ At stake in this is the status of the important (though ambiguous) doctrine of divine simplicity (the metaphysical doctrine that God's being

is uncompounded, and so indivisible, hence indestructible, and so to be thought as the pure act of being itself) with its correlate of divine impassibility. This doctrine derives from the negative theology of the Platonist tradition; recently Catholic theologian Lewis Ayres has impressively defended its role in the trinitarian development.¹¹ But I argue throughout this book that “simplicity” is and can be no more than a rule of reverent speech: so speak of the singular creator of all else that His ineffable singularity as cause of all causes (though not maker of all choices) is respected. But what the theological notion of simplicity is not and cannot provide is any positive account of God’s being, that is, the more or less traditional notion that God is God as a timeless, spaceless, incommunicable, self-identical nature, especially when such divine essence is actually thought of as a “fourth” reality over against the Father and the Son in the Spirit. Against this I will argue *esse deum dare*, that is, that for God to be God is to give; moreover, this self-donation has a time and space of its own as the divine life of the Trinity, which makes a place and finds a time also for us. This ontology of charity is what I designate the *complexity* of divine life, in complement, not contradiction, of “simplicity”—rightly understood—that is, as qualifying the suffering of the man Christ as divine suffering, “impassible passibility.”

Yet a third unusual thesis of this book is that the Reformation’s parsing of the gospel as justification of the sinner by faith alone correlates with the articulate faith in the triune God, as Wilhelm Maurer once uncovered.¹² Indeed, without this trinitarian articulation of the One who is believed, I argue that Reformation theology collapses into existentialist anthropology and systematic apologetics of the sort that moral philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre once pilloried as giving unbelievers less and less in which to disbelieve.¹³ In contrast, I find an ethical correlation between Trinitarianism and the ethos of the early Christian martyrs—in pointed contrast to the at times insightful, now fashionable but in the author’s view profoundly confused thesis of German theologian Walter Bauer about coeval orthodoxy and heresy in early Christianity.¹⁴ Simultaneously, and in mutually reinforcing ways, this book argues for all three of these theses in accounting for the rise and enduring normativity of creedal Christianity’s trinitarian interpretation of the word “God.”

Like medicine and law, which were theology’s former colleagues in the higher university faculties, the technical language of theology derives terminology from Latin as well as Greek and Hebrew. This vocabulary can be intimidating for beginners, for whom the ideas of Christian theology, even paraphrased into their own native tongue, are already demanding enough. Add to this the need to fathom the twists and turns of an intellectual tradition approaching two thousand years in duration. Yet such is the inescapable element of drudgery in learning, which cannot be eliminated this side of the eschaton. As in any other discipline, it is necessary to absorb the technical jargon, which efficiently captures complex ideas that in turn contain, as it were, episodes in Christian

intellectual history. Learning this vocabulary is the beginning of fluency in a specialized discourse. I have tried by immediate paraphrase or parenthetical comment to explain such technical terms on the first occasion of their use in this book, and I spend what more accomplished theologians might consider inordinate time and indeed homiletical effort unpacking ideas for new learners.

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Sources and Abbreviations

Generally citations from the church fathers are drawn from the Hendrickson Press 1995 reprint of *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (hereafter ANF), ed. Alexander Roberts, D.D., and James Donaldson, LL.D., and *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (hereafter NPNF), second series, ed. Philip Schaff, D.D., and Henry Wace, D.D. The first occurrence of a given writing, will be footnoted. Thereafter, references will be given in the text in parentheses following the citation, supplying abbreviated title, chapter, and verse or other enumeration provided by the editors of ANF or NPNF, but without page numbers. Thus, for example, Athenagoras's "A Plea for the Christians [Apology]," chap. 24, ANF, vol. 2, p. 191, would be given as (Apol 24). On occasion, I have utilized more felicitous contemporary translations of the church fathers, as found especially in the theologically astute series *The Message of the Fathers of the Church* (Michael Glazier, 1987). In such cases, I credit the editor/translator on the first occasion of such a citation and thereafter the same abbreviated title with chapter. Citations from *Luther's Works—American Edition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan et. al. (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press) are given as LW followed by volume and page numbers, for example, LW 12:27. On occasions where the title of the Luther writing and/or its date are important to a proper assessment of the citation's weight, that is provided as well.