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Fathers, Brethren, and Distant Relatives: The Family of Theological Discourse.

By JAROSLAV PELIKAN

FOR the theologian, one Book is enough, and a thousand books are not too many. This paradox interprets the meaning and prescribes the role of the theological library. For the task of the theologian, of every theologian, is the exposition of the Sacred Scriptures. Yet to perform his task of expounding that one Book the theologian needs a great many books.

Theology must be exegetical, or it is not theology. The great theologians of the church's past and present are usually celebrated for their systematic formulations rather than for their exegetical insights. The controversies of theological history are generally read as conflicts over specific doctrines, such as the Trinity or original sin, rather than as debates about the interpretation of the Bible. But a careful study of the corpus of the writings of St. Athanasius, for example, reveals that the central issue and content of his battle against the Arian heresy was not a dogmatic formulation, not even the famous *homoousios,* but the interpretation of Biblical passages such as the eighth chapter of Proverbs within the context of the church's liturgical obedience. And what carried the day for Christian orthodoxy at Nicaea or at Chalcedon or, for that matter, in the Formula of Concord was (apart from the political authority that was invoked in support of orthodoxy on each of these occasions) the restoration of exegetical sanity in place of the dogmatic vagaries on both extremes, the victory of Biblical modesty over the high-flown language and thought of the theological smart alecks on the left hand and on the right. Thus, in an axiom that I first heard exactly 20 years ago this fall from the theologian and exegete to whose blessed memory this library is being dedicated, "theologia debet esse grammatica."

It may seem gratuitous to issue this reminder at a seminary committed to the Lutheran Confessions, with their constant insistence upon fidelity to "dem reinen lautern Brunnen Israels," the Holy Scriptures. Yet it has been a continuing temptation of Lutheran theologians to substitute concept for function, to battle heroically for the real presence of the body and blood of our Lord in the bread and wine of the Sacrament and then to let the sacramental life of the church dwindle to monthly or even quarterly celebrations, or to suppose that a formal statement of the authority and inspiration of Scripture in the Prolegomena of a dogmatics was some sort of guarantee that the material of the dogmatics would be Biblical. Even in the usual Lutheran interpretation of Martin Luther, a systematizing tendency has predominated, always with the observation that Luther was not altogether systematic. But he *was* systematic, in addition to being intuitive, experimental, wide-ranging, and committed. In short, Luther was a Biblical theologian, a *Doctor in Biblia.* It was as *Doctor in Biblia,* not merely as a believer or even as an ordained clergyman,

that he knew himself to be called "to expound the Scriptures for all the world and to teach everybody."

For Luther the theologian, this one Book was enough. But he knew all along, and was reminded over and over in his theological development, that he could not make sense of this one Book or be obedient to its message without support and instruction from a thousand books. In 1524, in his letter to the councilmen of Germany, Luther therefore turned his attention to the fitting out of a library in accordance with the principles of the Reformation.

> My advice is not to heap together all manner of books indiscriminately and think only of the number and size of the collection. I would make a judicious selection . . . and furnish my library with the right sort of books, consulting with scholars [*gelehrte Leute*] as to my choice.
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> First of all, there would be the Holy Scriptures, in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and German, and any other language in which they might be found. Next, the best commentaries, and, if I could find them, the most ancient, in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin. Then, books that would be helpful in learning the languages, such as the poets and orators, regardless of whether they were pagan or Christian, Greek or Latin. . . . After that would come books on the liberal arts, and all the other arts [including law and medicine]. . . . Among the foremost would be the chronicles and histories. . . . Now that God has today so graciously bestowed upon us an abundance of arts, scholars, and books, it is time to reap and gather in the best as well as we can and lay up treasure in order to preserve for the future something from these years of jubilee, and not lose this bountiful harvest.

From the research of Walter Friedensburg and of Ernest Schwiebert it appears that some such schema as this was at the foundation of the collection in the Wittenberg library, established in 1512, the same year that Luther became a Doctor of Sacred Scripture and a professor there.

Careful analysis of Luther's words suggests that if theology is to be faithful to its responsibility as an exposition of the Book, it will need to equip the family of theological discourse with three categories of authorship: fathers, brethren, and distant relatives. Or, to put the three categories into the abstract language that theology seems to demand, a theological library will help theology, in its exegetical task, to cultivate:

1) a deep regard for the theological tradition;
2) a fraternal consideration of our theological contemporaries; and
3) an appreciative attention to nontheological thought.

"The best commentaries, and, if I could find them, the most ancient, in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin" — these words of Luther suggest that, next only to the Scriptures themselves, a theological library (and therefore a theological scholar or a theological student) needs to pay attention to the fathers of the church. Yet an examination of theological libraries and of theological scholarship in the churches of America would certainly not discover a preponderance of interest in the theological tradition. Two tendencies in American theology, which are often set into opposition with each other, militate against a deep regard for the theological tradition. One is the proclivity of the American theological public for theological fads, or, as they are usually called, current theological

trends. As in Germany, so in the United States 10 years later, one must be à la mode, "up on" not only the most up-to-date theological author, but his most recently published (or better yet his still unpublished) book. Whether it is called name-dropping or gamesmanship or status-seeking, there is something about the temper of Protestant theology that obliges its devotees to wait eagerly for the latest ukase from Basel or Marburg (or St. Louis or New Haven). Against this bondage to caprice the study of the church fathers is a real bulwark. For to discover that some members of the Christian community saw more deeply into the message of Scripture than I, and that they did so even before I went to seminary, is to learn that all of us continue to be pupils of the fathers. Current trends surely need to act as a counterbalance to the dead weight of the past, and so they deserve a place in our library and in our research, as I shall point out in a moment. But they also deserve to be cut down to size by the Greek and Latin fathers.

An alliance with the Greek and Latin fathers can also help guard theology against another besetting vice, that of parochialism; it is not insignificant that the very word "parochialism" comes from the life of the church. A parochialism of taste in our theological reading may be inoculated against the passing fad, but only at the cost of large portions of the theological tradition. Then the term "fathers" or "our fathers" becomes the designation for the linear ancestors of the theological *Tendenz* of a particular church body or seminary — the theological fad lengthened in time but not deepened in perception and catholicity. And if the fathers of the whole church are studied at all, they are immediately haled before the bar of professorial judgment. It is an almost axiomatic correlation that any theology which is deaf to the testimony of the fathers, even if this deafness is rationalized by an appeal to *Sola Scriptura,* tends to be deaf as well to any Word of God that challenges the conventional exegesis of the Scriptures. The eclipse of a vital doctrine of the Trinity in the Protestant theology of the 19th century on almost all sides was due, in so-called liberal theology, to a moralistic and idealistic reading of Scripture; and in so-called evangelical theology, to a preoccupation with the divinity of Christ at the expense of the doctrine of the Trinity. In both cases a parochial theology impoverished itself by failing to heed the voice of the great theological tradition, which was not merely spinning exegetical fancies when it set forth the doctrine of the Trinity as the summary of the witness of the Scriptures to the being and the revelation of God.

In the same way, the orthodox Lutheran theology of the past two centuries has sometimes concentrated upon an elaboration of the Christology of Martin Chemnitz in opposition to various modern doctrines of Christ, rather than upon an explication of the decree of the Council of Chalcedon, which would have provided a more effective antidote to those doctrines. Behind this posture was a definition of theological orthodoxy as dogmatic precision, which is true but is only half of the definition; for orthodoxy implies exegetical amplitude as well as doctrinal precision. And it was characteristic of the orthodoxy of the ancient church, and of all authentic orthodoxy since, that when it formulated its propositions with dogmatic precision, it did not

do so by sacrificing exegetical amplitude. The decree of Chalcedon fixes the limits of orthodox language, worship, and speculation about the person of our Lord. Within these limits, which circumscribe the Christology of Chemnitz, the variety and the richness of Biblical language about Christ can all find a place. Not the orthodox but the heretics were generally the ones who fastened upon a single idea, which may perhaps have been correct enough in itself, but blocked the rest of the teaching of Scripture out of view. To be rescued from the error of theological overemphasis, the sin that doth so easily beset us, we need the passion of the theological tradition for the πλήρωμα, the plenitude that is in Christ. And this means that we assign priority in our library to the tradition of patristic thought.

The career of one of the most eminent theological scholars of confessional Lutheranism, the late great Werner Elert, whose *Structure of Lutheranism* is to appear in an English translation from Concordia Publishing House next month, is an illustration of this priority. Elert's historical research and literary production moved backwards through the centuries. Beginning with a book on the theology and philosophy of the 19th century, Elert proceeded to the classical period of Lutheran dogmatics and to the thought of Luther himself. From there he was driven to the early church, particularly to the Greek fathers; and his last two books (one of them, alas, left incomplete) dealt with early Christian thought. Without consciously imitating Elert, I have found myself pushed in the same direction, from Søren Kierkegaard through Lutheran Orthodoxy to the Confessions to Luther, and so to Athanasius, Augustine, Irenaeus, and Origen. This experience corroborates the judgment of the greatest historian of Christianity in our century, with whose theology one must find serious fault but upon whose scholarship all of us are still forced to depend, Adolf von Harnack:

> The center of gravity in the discipline of church history lies in the church history and historical theology of the first six centuries. I am not speaking *pro domo* here. Rather it is already acknowledged in wide circles and will, I hope, become universally recognized, that without a thorough knowledge of early church history a man is no more a real church historian than he would be a classical philologist without a knowledge of the golden age of Greek and Roman literature. . . . Only that scholar is eligible to be a church historian . . . who has a command of early church history.

Harnack was also one of the first to insist that we distort the fathers unless we read them as they wanted to be read, as heralds of the Word of God in the Bible. In the same direction Elert urged that the *Christusdogma* of a theologian or period has to be seen in the light of its *Christusbild,* which emerges from its exposition of the Scriptures, above all of the gospels. With the help of patristic exegesis, as set forth, for example, in Jean Daniélou's scintillating *Sacramentum futuri,* our exposition of Scripture will interpret the story of the Flood, the account of the binding of Isaac, and the history of the Exodus as a witness to the *chesed,* the promising and fulfilling faithfulness of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It remains to be seen whether a Christian exegesis that neglects this patristic tradition, or any exegesis so conceived and so

dedicated, can long endure. To penetrate to the renewing message of the Scriptures, ever ancient and ever new, theology cannot afford to ignore any of the resources available to it, least of all the resources of the fathers. The case for the theological library is, in the first place, a case in support of the fathers and in support of a deep regard for theological tradition.

Nevertheless a deep regard for tradition does not mean antiquarianism. According to a favorite bon mot whose origin I have never been able to trace, the difference between tradition and traditionalism is the difference between the living faith of the dead and the dead faith of the living. A theological library is not a wine cellar, in which only certain vintage years are to be permitted. If we are to hear and hearken to the Word of God, we shall need not only to show a deep regard for the theological tradition but also to give fraternal consideration to our theological contemporaries; not only the fathers but also the brethren must be given an opportunity to speak. For we cannot predict, and hence we dare not prescribe, the channels through which the Holy Spirit will shed illumination upon His Word and so upon His church.

To one who is a historian of the church and of its theology, there is, of course, considerable irritation in the ceaseless proliferation of theological print. One is often tempted to pray for a moratorium on journals, monographs, and especially German doctoral dissertations. But even the historian's scrutiny of the church's past often owes its most penetrating insights to current trends, understanding the fathers better because of the brethren. For the present revival of research on the history of the doctrine of the Trinity we are indebted not solely to historians like G. L. Prestige and Jacques Lebreton but above all to the dogmatics of Karl Barth. And so the theological library has special reason to heed the warning of the apostle to the Corinthians: "Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time" (2 Cor. 4:5). Those who are fathers to this generation were once brethren to another generation. Antiquarianism is the deadly enemy of living tradition and of faithfulness to the Scriptures.

Here it is necessary to clarify the meaning and scope of the word "brethren." As "fathers" can become the term for a small and select group who, like the founders of the Gnostic sects, have handed on a private version of apostolic truth; so "brethren" can be used to designate a closed corporation of theologians, the "good guys" as distinguished from the "bad guys." Or one may work himself into the habit of waxing enthusiastic about every tradition except his own and of hearkening to every brother except the brother at hand. How can the theologian listen to the brother whom he has not seen if he spurns the brother whom he has seen? "Brethren" therefore are not the members of a private club, but those who are baptized into the name of the Blessed and Undivided Trinity and who revere that holy name — not indeed as they ought but as they are able, with that imperfect obedience that characterizes us all. As the hymnal and the library of every segment of Christendom testify, better perhaps than its theology and life, we have much to learn and to receive from Christian brethren on both sides of all the various borders that separate us. And both the hymnal and the library must help to assure that when

the theologians or the bishops forget this, as they sometimes do, the church will still be able to learn it.

Our theological contemporaries have something to teach us and something to learn from us; Christian communication, even though its path be only through a library, is always a two-way street. In faithful obedience to the Word of God the church in every generation is obliged to stand up and be counted, to bear witness to the faith and to denounce error. But if this cuts Christian brethren off from one another and from the witness to the truth that even an erring brother may bring, what is called loyalty to truth may neglect the full implications of fidelity to the Word of God. Let me cite an example from the history of theology since the Reformation, the complex interrelation between the textual criticism of the Scriptures and loyalty to the authority of the Scriptures. It is possible to argue in favor of the thesis that loyalty to Biblical truth is the best doctrinal ground for scrupulous attention to variant readings; surely the rabbinical tradition shows that reverence for the written Word of God can motivate a meticulous campaign to keep all adulterations out of the text. But, in all honesty, does the history of the textual study of the New Testament since Johann Albrecht Bengel give comfort to this thesis? For example, the authenticity of the Johannine comma, 1 John 5:7, was questioned already by Erasmus and was attacked, for both theological and textual reasons, by the critical scholarship of the 18th and 19th centuries. It was defended — more, it must be admitted, for dogmatic than for textual reasons — by the champions of Biblical inspiration. Not until 1927 did the Pontifical Biblical Commission grant scholars the right to "incline toward an opinion in opposition to its authenticity"; and the most defensive and anxious chapters in the dogmatics of conservative Lutheran theologians were those devoted to "the newer textual criticism" of passages like the Johannine comma.

Nor is it only in the area of technical textual and historical scholarship that the witness of separated brethren may help us to be more loyal to the truth. Where would any interpretation of the New Testament be today without the help of Schlatter, C. H. Dodd, and the authors of the Kittel *Wörterbuch,* very few of whom would pass confessional muster? Or, to stay with the past, the history of Lutheran Pietism in the 18th century and the history of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod at the end of the 19th century compel the conclusion that it was, at least in part, the work and thought of Reformed and Arminian churches that led Lutheran theologians and church bodies to discover the fuller meaning of the missionary imperative in the New Testament. Proponents of Lutheran missions were denounced as Pietists and Crypto-Calvinists, which is exactly what many of them were; but to their urging the Lutheran churches owe much of their missionary zeal. Thus when theology forgets, the voices of the brethren may serve to remind it; and it is up to the theological library to let those voices be heard. For, as Luther says, "now that God has today so graciously bestowed upon us an abundance of arts, scholars, and books, it is time to reap and gather in the best as well as we can, and lay up treasure in order to preserve for the future

something from these years of jubilee, and not lose this bountiful harvest."

Martin Luther was, however, too honest a theological scholar to restrict either his own study or his prescription for a library to books by theologians or even to books by Christians. On the contrary, he wanted the library to contain "books that would be helpful in learning the languages, such as the poets and orators, *nicht angesehen ob sie Heiden oder Christen wären* . . . books on the liberal arts, and . . . among the foremost the chronicles and histories." The theological library and the theological scholar cannot be adequate to the task of interpreting the Scriptures unless they give appreciative attention also to their distant relatives in nontheological thought. The theological scholar is in constant danger of concentrating upon his specialty as though other disciplines did not exist. All the talk in the universities about the "cross-fertilization of knowledge" is, like so much of the modern literature on marriage, more an evidence of a breakdown than a testimony to renewal. In the same way what has somewhat awkwardly been called Christomonism is, despite its hostility to secularism, a capitulation to it, an unwillingness to admit that the nontheologian or even the non-Christian may have been granted insights into the nature of being and the meaning of language that will help the theologian hear the Word of God more faithfully and respond to it more completely.

The theological library, as well, I believe, as the theological curriculum, needs to pay appreciative attention to nontheological thought for a number of reasons. The first and most basic is the humanizing influence that only such thought can bring into the family of theological discourse. "First a human being, then a Christian" — whatever may be the various rights and wrongs of this formula of N. F. S. Grundtvig, it is correct in its insistence that in trying to be more than a natural human being a Christian (and therefore a theologian) must be careful not to be less than a natural human being. The preaching of the church can address itself to thoughtful men only if it assesses more appreciatively what the human spirit is able to accomplish by the sheer gift of divine creation. When a theology is informed by a sensitive study of nontheological thought, it will not dismiss the power of God in the natural order with the condescension — indeed, the slander — that has often marked evangelical thought. The Reformers and the fathers of the church knew what later theology has often forgotten, that the human possibilities of the reason and of the natural man do not have to be painted with tar in order to let the grace of God shine. Yes, only when one has learned, from those who stand outside the theological circle, how much the natural man *can* do, is one in a position to point out how much more the natural man *cannot* do unless he receives the cleansing of Christ and the healing power of grace and forgiveness in the Holy Spirit. On this account it is certainly valid to urge that the theologian learn through the study of nontheological and even non-Christian thought that he belongs not only to the communion of saints but also to the communion of the created.

Then, and only then, can the Christian theology of our time pick up the shreds of the apologetic task left to it by the philosophy of the 19th century and the

science of the 20th and begin to engage once more in the task of faith seeking understanding. There is an apologetic that is, in Kierkegaard's unforgettable image, the effort of a juggler to prove by his juggling, in the presence of the king, that the king actually exists; I, for one, cannot mourn the passing of such an apologetic. But there can be another apologetic or, if you will, eristic task. Its essential function is not to prove that God is, but to exhibit that man can still exist as man only under God; and then to ask those who are standing apart whether the time has not come for all who have a vision of man's destiny to band together under the only emblem that simultaneously plumbs the depths of man's degradation and charts the paths of man's possibilities — the cross of our blessed Lord. Many of you have perhaps surmised that I am thinking here of a man like Albert Camus, who seemed to possess every Christian virtue except faith and whose diagnosis of the human situation contained more both of man's pathos and of his grandeur than a lot of the Christian books I read and Christian sermons I hear. Anyone who sees the human situation with such honesty and such dignity belongs inside the circle of grace, and one of these days Christian theology may begin to take the Biblical doctrine of creation seriously enough to address him. Meanwhile, however, the theological library had better contain enough copies of *The Plague, The Rebel,* and especially of *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death.*

I would urge, in addition, that theology needs the distant relatives of nontheological thought also for its own distinctive assignment of interpreting Scripture. If theology must be grammatical, then Luther was right in insisting that the library contain works of grammar, rhetoric, and history that will help theology to be truly grammatical in the fullest possible sense; for the ultimate context of any grammar, and therefore of any passage, is the history of an entire culture. Grammar is, we must remember, a matter not of revelation but of research. Earlier centuries were justified by their research in assuming that the New Testament was written in a special Greek dialect invented for the purpose, but today's scholarship is obliged to set the language of the New Testament into the history of spoken Greek. And although it has been fashionable in recent years to emphasize the distinctiveness of the language of the Bible, it seems that the contemporary study of grammar is leading to a recovery of the principle for which Luther stood: that ancient writers, *nicht angesehen ob sie Heiden oder Christen wären,* are one of our principal assets in our study of Scripture. In his angry but sobering book on *The Semantics of Biblical Language,* Professor James Barr, formerly of Edinburgh and now of Princeton, is urging that theology cannot dispense with (if you please) pagan grammar if it is truly to be Christian theology — that is to say, Biblical theology. This raises some fundamental questions about the value of the pedagogical short-cut to which pretheological students are introduced to the Greek of the New Testament without a careful preparation in nontheological Greek. But it also suggests that theological scholarship needs to have at its disposal, and to consult, the literature and history of the ancient Near East and of classical antiquity if it is to be responsible to its divine charter.

We who claim to be heirs of the Lutheran Reformation have received from it the awesome burden of restating for each generation what the meaning and message of the Gospel is. Goethe's familiar epigram,

Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast,
Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen,

applies nowhere more poignantly than it does in the task of theology. A theology that is uncompromisingly Biblical in its grounds will be more Biblical still if it hearkens to the voice of the fathers of the church. A theology that has the courage to be orthodox in its confession of the Gospel will be more authentically orthodox if it opens itself to the criticism and correction of many kinds of brethren. A theology that pledges its allegiance to the mighty deeds of God in the luminous yesterdays of the Exodus and the Resurrection will manifest an even deeper allegiance as it ponders the mystery of God's presence and His hiddenness in the life and thought of today. The theological library and its books can help theology to move, with footsteps that are faltering and yet faithful, toward obedience to this call. It is required of stewards that they be found faithful, not that they be found successful. May we, the unworthy heirs of so bountiful a legacy, be found faithful to the Word and will of God in our theological study and scholarship and service. *Veni, Creator Spiritus!*

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