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God as Secondary Fundamental Doctrine in Missouri Synod Theology

David P. Scaer

In our circles, the five-hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Calvin passed unnoticed, but it aroused attention elsewhere. *Christianity Today's* September 2009 issue featured his picture on its cover with the words "John Calvin: Comeback Kid." In a letter to the editor, William Inne summarized matters nicely: "[Calvin] had an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible, the church fathers, and the classical writers, and created a systematic theology that harmonized them into a consistent work. At that, he has never been bested."¹ Agreed! His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* puts everything in its proper place, but consistency has its drawbacks. To answer the question why some are saved and others not, Calvin taught double predestination. His dogmatics is divided into four volumes, which are in turn divided into chapters, which are in turn divided into sections. "2.4.19" translates into book two, chapter four, paragraph nineteen—easy to maneuver, but such precise arrangement hauntingly resembles a code of law. For some, a well-crafted outline provides relief from implied biblical confusion. Orderliness may be a virtue, but consistency is less so.

I. Lutheran Dogmatics and the *Sedes Doctrinae*

Lutherans have their own rich heritage of dogmatics,² but unlike Calvin, Missouri Synod dogmatician Francis Pieper did not resolve why some are saved and not others.³ Other Lutherans did resolve the issue, however, by holding that God chose those he knew would believe, *intuitu fidei* (in view of faith). So ended any hope for Lutheran unity in America.⁴ The Augsburg Confession lists one doctrine after another, as did the

¹ "Calvin's Resurrection," *Christianity Today* 53 no. 11 (November 2009): 58.

² Robert D. Preus showed this first in his *The Inspiration of Scripture* (Mankato, MN: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1955) and later in his *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970–1973).

³ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950–1957), 2:3–52; 3:473–501.

⁴ On the Predestinarian Controversy of the nineteenth century, see Kurt E. Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion: Missouri in Lutheran Perspective* (Fort Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1977), 25–28.

creeds. The Apology (1530/31) followed, providing extended discussions responding to Roman Catholic agreements and disagreements. In laying out what Lutherans believed and how they differed from others and among themselves, the Formula of Concord (1577) could qualify as a dogmatics. Luther laid out the articles of faith one by one, as he did in his catechisms and the Smalcald Articles, but he was a polemicist, not a dogmatician in the classical sense. In engaging current issues, dogmatics should be the most contemporary of all the theological disciplines, but by referencing classical dogmatic works to resolve current issues, all traditions easily lapse into historicism. In the strictest sense, an earlier dogmatics cannot be updated. Robert D. Preus set out to do this with his Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, and in spite of often authoritarian editorial supervision, each contributor went his own way.

By advancing certain doctrines and refuting others, dogmatics favors some passages, *sedes doctrinae* (seats of doctrine), also called the *loci classici* (standard passages), over others. These are presumed to possess a clarity that others do not, and each tradition has its favored set of indisputable *sedes doctrinae*. Attention to the contexts in which they were first spoken, preserved, and written down is not crucial to the dogmatic task. Exegetics does not necessarily interact with or inform dogmatics, which is satisfactorily fueled by the *loci classici* functioning as a normative canon for how other passages are interpreted. Passages not making the *sedes doctrinae* cut are given a subsidiary role. Though well-intentioned, this approach to dogmatics challenges the perspicuity of Scripture and renders plenary inspiration non-functional. Unspoken is the axiom that the Spirit speaks more clearly in one place than in another, and the dogmaticians have already separated the chaff from the wheat. This biblical favoritism is evident when certain passages appear repeatedly and without analysis in lectures and sermons. Sectioning the Bible into numbered verses may give the idea that the Holy Spirit inspired detached passages strung out like pearls on a string, but he did not. Like Jesus, the Spirit preached discourses. A dogmatics based on the *sedes doctrinae* raises the question of how many passages are necessary to support a doctrine. This uncovers an inherent weakness of a theology derived from isolated passages and shows a lack of awareness of the fact that if Christ is found in one place, he is in all the others. In this sense, the Scriptures have no surprises.

II. A Side Issue: Unsustainable Principles

There are other unexamined principles that are taken as gospel truth. For example, it is often said that passages from the *antilegomena*, the contested books of the New Testament, can only be used to support a

doctrine if they are corroborated by passages from the *homologoumena*, books that have near-universal attestation in the early church. This can be devastating to a dogmatics based on inspiration, since 2 Peter 1:20–21 is foundational for this doctrine. If the *antilegomena* only play a subsidiary role, their functional authority would be no more than such post-apostolic writings as *The Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Didache*. Some critical scholars reverse the argument and hold that since the Gospels cannot be associated with the apostles, they are no more useful in locating the apostles' persons and teachings than are the apocryphal writings.⁵ For Lutherans, which books constitute an operative canon is a historical and not a theological matter, but this is not a *carte blanche* to dismiss or add biblical books which do not fit into an *a priori* conceived theological system. With his doctrine of justification, Luther did just this, assigning Hebrews, James, and Revelation to the shelf. Had he used historical criteria, he might have hesitated and refined his theological expressions. In this environment the distinction between *homologoumena* and *antilegomena* is moot.

Another principle waiting to be thrown under the bus is that the one intended meaning of any passage is the literal one (*sensus literalis unus est*). Another is that for each parable there is only one point of comparison (*tertium comparationis unum est*). Still another is that any given prophecy has only one fulfillment. Though this is widely assumed, the biblical writers were not bound to these principles, but had a varied hermeneutic.⁶ Assumed principles for exegesis, historical theology, homiletics, and pastoral practice, the *prolegomena*, are subject to evaluation and present a modicum of modesty through the recognition that they could be wrong. Method easily becomes an end in itself and substitutes for content.

III. Biblical Unity Is Christological

Biblical unity is supplied by the Spirit's inspiration but is recognized by its christological content. We do not first conclude that the Spirit inspired the Scriptures and then look for Christ, but in hearing the

⁵ *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings: A Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Bart D. Ehrman (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.) See in particular the table of contents (v).

⁶ *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 4th ed., ed. G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009). This mammoth 1239-page double-columned volume shows how New Testament writers may have made use of the Old Testament. Another volume is needed to show how the New Testament writers made use of one another's writings. Its usefulness is not diminished from its having been written by Evangelicals, who cannot do justice to the sacramental perspectives.

Scriptures we hear Christ speaking and then believe in him who sent the Spirit to inspire the Scriptures. From our perspective, Christology precedes inspiration, and hence a biblically derived theology is inherently christological. This is as true for the Old Testament doctrine of God as it is for the New, where the name Jesus is explicit. What is biblical is christological and what is christological is biblical. This might be reasoning in a circle, almost an axiom, a self-standing and commonly accepted principle not requiring proof, similar to the *autopistia* argument that the Scriptures are God's word because they claim to be.⁷ All systems of thought are based on unproven axioms—or so it seems—but axioms are subject to challenge. This, however, is not a pure axiom because Jesus of Nazareth, a figure in history, is included in what is christological. Christology is anchored in ordinary history by the *crucifixus sub Pontio Pilato*. Theology begins in encountering Jesus, from which point we jump on the theological circle, and in him we encounter God. What the church believes, the *fides quae*, begins with the person of Jesus.⁸ Inspiration can only be a factor in theology if the Spirit who inspires is recognized as the Spirit of both the Father and the Son, the *Filioque*. The crucified and resurrected Jesus sends the Spirit upon his apostles, who provide the ministry, the church, and the Scriptures, all of which are apostolic. What Jesus spoke became the content of the Spirit's inspiration, and so is fulfilled Jesus' promise that the Spirit would take what the Father had given him and give it to the apostles (John 16:13–15). Thus at the end of the reading of Paul's epistles, the lector says, "This is the word of the Lord," not "This is the word of the apostle."

Confined to Saxony, Luther could not engage in the burgeoning politico-theological discussions with Roman Catholics and the Reformed, so he devoted his last ten years to the *Genesis Lectures*. This was not a topically laid-out dogmatics but a theological commentary in which the Reformer saw everything in christological and sacramental terms. Since Christ and the sacraments were his presuppositions, he found them under every bush and tree and in some cases in the trees themselves, but Paul had already found Christ in the rock (1 Cor 10:4). Luther was not imposing

⁷ "Since Scripture is infallible and authoritative, it goes without saying that its testimony must be accepted *a priori*. In other words, Scripture is *αὐτόπιστος*. Its authority is absolute." Preus, *Inspiration of Scripture*, 89. "Every word is *ἀξιόπιστος* and *αὐτόπιστος* and must be believed *per se* simply because it is the Word of God, because God has declared it and said it, even though our reason may not understand or grasp it." Preus, *Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 296–297.

⁸ Preus shows that the Lutheran dogmatists saw the unity of the Scriptures in Christ. *Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 331–332, and *Inspiration of Scripture*, 21.

an alien element onto Genesis, because for him Christ spoke in the Scriptures that spoke in turn about him.⁹ A biblical book's christologically inspired character inheres in itself, but is also possessed in relation to writings that come before and after. This is as true for such seemingly christologically unpromising books as Esther and Proverbs as it is for the New Testament. Like the persons of the Trinity, in their christological content and inspired quality "none is before or after another," though we might see one as subordinate to another, which is another trinitarian idea. Moses projects his authority to future prophets (Deut 18:18-22), who in turn see their authority as a continuation of what Moses said (Josh 1:17; 23:6; Ps 103:7). This pattern of one prophet grasping the hand of another finds its culmination in Jesus, who appears as the new Moses (Matt 5:1-2) and then replaces Moses (John 1:17; cf. Heb 1:1; 3:4-5).¹⁰ If the dependency of one book upon another is a defensible hypothesis, it follows that no Gospel arose independently, but the later ones saw themselves as supplementing an earlier one. Matthew wrote to complement the Old Testament and bring it to the smashing conclusion that Jesus had fulfilled it. Luke readjusted Matthew's data by adding two claims that Jesus had fulfilled all of the Old Testament (Luke 24:27, 44). So the pattern is that one biblical event is understood in the light of a previous one and anticipates a future one to form a continuous narrative. If we agree that there is rhyme and reason to the Scriptures and that the Gospels are not collections of random events or sayings, there is reason enough to question the existence of Q, a hypothetical document of random sayings attributed to Jesus and later supposed to be incorporated into Matthew and Luke.¹¹ Random events, like random sayings, are without one agreed-upon meaning.

IV. Critical Methods and Their Assumptions

A critical method may be objective in that it applies its principles consistently to the biblical texts, but the principles may contain unproven

⁹ Following the Lutheran dogmaticians, Preus held biblical inspiration and justification as central to theology and also saw Christ as the Scriptures' author and content, but this was undeveloped in his theology. "The personal Word of God is not merely the author of the prophetic Word, He is not merely the logos through which God speaks to man; He is more than all this: He is the heart and content and meaning of the prophetic Word, He is the message and purpose of all the Scriptures." Preus, *Inspiration of Scripture*, 21.

¹⁰ Dale Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993).

¹¹ John S. Kloppenborg has attempted a reconstruction with an interpretation of the Q document. *The Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

assumptions that often are first recognized by others. A method's value consists in the promise of unearthing previously undiscovered items in the biblical texts. A method productive with one biblical document may be less so or even sterile with another. No method has a permanent claim on center stage. Consider that in the middle of the last century Rudolf Bultmann's demythologizing of the gospel appeared as an immovable fixture in biblical studies. The Hellenistic elements which he wanted to rid from the Gospels as foreign to Jesus' preaching had been present in Palestine already for over two centuries.¹² Greek was the lingua franca of Galilee, and so was its literature. While our church was struggling with Bultmann's methods, his disciples were dethroning him. When the demythologizing method that allowed for the denial of the miraculous surfaced at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in the 1960s and 70s, it was labeled "the" historical-critical method, but there was no one method.¹³ One assumption long used and considered by some to be basic in some forms of biblical criticism is that events reported in the Bible as miraculous belong to the realm of faith and hence are not open to historical investigation.¹⁴ Gotthold Lessing, for example, held that reports of events are open to examination, but not the events themselves.¹⁵ Rationalism held that events reported as miraculous did in fact happen, but natural causes for them could be found (e.g., the healing of Peter's mother-in-law). F.F. Bruce, an Evangelical scholar, said that attitudes and techniques that dogmatically rule out the supernatural before the texts are examined are in

¹² See, e.g., Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974).

¹³ "The Historical Critical Method: A Short Historical Appraisal," *Springfielder* 36 (1973): 294-309.

¹⁴ Espousing this view is Bart D. Ehrman's *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Used widely in colleges, many of our parishioners may know of it. Ehrman's separation of fact from faith permeates the entire book. See "Excursus: Some Additional Reflections: The Historian and the Believer" (10-11). See also chapters 10, "The Historical Jesus," (158-184) and 11, "From Jesus to the Gospels" (185-194). See also Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 2nd ed (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 210-212. "As events that do not happen all the time, as events that defy all probability, miracles created an inescapable dilemma for historians. Since historians can only establish what probably happened in the past, and the chances of a miracle happening, by definition, are infinitesimally remote, they can never demonstrate that a miracle *probably* happened" (210-211) (emphasis original).

¹⁵ See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, "On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power," in *Lessing's Theological Writings: Selections in Translation*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1956), 51-56.

themselves uncritical.¹⁶ More recently, C. Stephen Evans notes "that scholarly disciplines are subject to fads and tendencies in much the same way as other groups of humans."¹⁷ Any method that finds no room for the supernatural really is, as N.T. Wright puts it, "a philosophy of historiography and historical method," a "'projection of an undiscussed metaphysics.'"¹⁸ Narrative, literary, structural, canon, and redaction criticism go under the banner of historical criticism and in looking for themes can be productive for dogmatic theology. Since they do not go behind the biblical texts back to the events, they are not strictly speaking historical methods. In taking the texts as they stand, as these methods do, they can have either a certain "Fundamentalist" tinge, and ironically, since they are historically agnostic, they have an appeal to skeptics. For both, the history is left unexamined. The past can never be recovered the way it once was. Those who participated in it would see it in different ways, but a Word-made-flesh theology requires getting down to the nitty-gritty of what happened. Some methods are simply off the board and come with dogmatic chips on their shoulders, as, for example, postcolonialism, which applies egalitarianism to the biblical texts. It affirms the texts for their hierarchical, patriarchal, and ethnocentric models of community, but censures them for not going far enough in recognizing the value of women, democracy, or other religions.¹⁹ When translated, this means that the ideal religion has women clergy or no clergy at all, and Christ can be replaced by various gods.

Another widely held critical principle is that simplicity precedes and tends towards complexity. This is used to support the nearly universally held scholarly view that the short Gospel of Mark was first and was used by Matthew and Luke.²⁰ Brevity is seen as nearly synonymous with simplicity. This idea appeared in the Enlightenment and held that the religion of Jesus was a simple unitarianism that through accretions

¹⁶ F.F. Bruce, *In Retrospect: Remembrance of Things Past* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 207.

¹⁷ C. Stephen Evans, "The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel," in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 95.

¹⁸ Beilby and Eddy, "The Quest for the Historical Jesus: An Introduction," in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 37.

¹⁹ *Review of Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and R.S. Sugirtharajah, in *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19 (2009): 608–609.

²⁰ See again Ehrman, *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament*, 64–115.

developed into a dogmatic and organized Catholicism. As abhorrent as this may be to sincere Christians, it is foundational for a general Protestant disdain for creeds and liturgical worship. Lay-led prayer groups are seen as closer to the simple religion of Jesus than are the Sunday services. Baruch Spinoza initiated the common critical view that the synoptic Gospels saw Jesus differently than did Paul.²¹ The charge that Paul encumbered the Jesus religion with unnecessary theological baggage is now being challenged.²² Dissimilarity and similarity, principles that oppose each other in method and results, are regularly used by biblical critics. Looking for the simple religion of Jesus uses dissimilarity: take Paul out of the equation to find the true Jesus. James D.G. Dunn, on the other hand, turns the tables and holds that Paul's theology was dependent on Jesus, the principle of similarity.²³ Some hold that Jesus differed from Judaism, the principle of dissimilarity, and others that he did not, the principle of similarity.²⁴ This is at the heart of the New Perspective on Paul, which claims that Pauline Christianity and Judaism were both religions of grace.²⁵ Similarity locates Jesus in his environment, but does not explain why the Jewish authorities wanted to put him out of the way. Dissimilarity answers that question, but has no explanation of how Paul contrived a religion so different from that of Jesus.

Some forms of criticism, such as feminist and postcolonial criticism, come with such an upfront bias that their value is questionable from the start. Literary and redaction criticisms are useful in seeing a Gospel in its totality, but often what is identified as the storyline or themes seems questionable or even artificial. For all its negatives, Bultmann's form criticism opened to research the time between the events and their being inscribed, a period which traditional dogmatics and classical liberal

²¹ David L. Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition, and Interpretation of the Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 172-173.

²² Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008) and James D.G. Dunn, "Remembering Jesus: How The Quest of the Historical Jesus Lost Its Way," in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 199-225.

²³ James D.G. Dunn, "Jesus-tradition in Paul," in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans (New York: Brill, 1994), 155-178.

²⁴ Beilby and Eddy, "The Quest for the Historical Jesus," 40-41. See also Dunn, "Remembering Jesus," 216-219.

²⁵ See further Charles A. Gieschen, "Paul and the Law: Was Luther Right?" in *The Law in Holy Scripture*, ed. Charles A. Gieschen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 113-147.

theology generally ignored. His demythologizing of the Gospels forced us to see that Hellenization was a factor in Jesus' preaching, and that perhaps a writer like Luke retold events in the life of Jesus in a way that would recall to his audience accounts they knew from Greek literature.

No one principle is embraced by all scholars, and any principle has a dogmatic and often unproven component later open to challenge. In classical dogmatics, certainty of the biblical events is supplied by the Holy Spirit, but inspiration, like faith, is an ahistorical phenomenon and is not open to critical examination to determine authenticity. We can agree with a standard premise of critical studies that we can come no closer to Jesus than the written records of the early church. This is hardly unsettling, since all our knowledge of the events at which we were not present depends upon others' observations, some of which are eventually written down, now electronically. Even eyewitness accounts are never pure eyewitness accounts because over time they are enhanced, shaped, and interpreted by other observers and those who heard other accounts. The *loci* method offers an easy-to-grasp handle in resolving theological issues, since the *sedes doctrinae* match up the answers to the theological questions. Its use of the so-called historical-grammatical method assumes but does not examine the historical character of the events behind the biblical texts. Left unaddressed is how the report developed from the event to its being recorded and later used.²⁶ Like form criticism, it dismantles the biblical texts by identifying the grammatical forms, but also like form criticism, the result is not necessarily usable theology. Within a Lutheran context the deficiencies of these methods are compensated for by the *sedes doctrinae* and the Lutheran Confessions, an approach used by the St. Louis faculty in 1970 in its defense of its use of form criticism.²⁷

²⁶ Take, for example, Matthew's use in 1:23 of Isa 7:14 for presenting the virgin birth. For dogmatics, this is simple prediction and fulfillment. Dogmatics does not consider how Isaiah understood his prophecy when he first delivered it, how it worked itself out in his ministry, how he mused on it before he wrote it down, and, finally, how Matthew saw it as fulfillment. A clue that this is more than a case of simple prediction and fulfillment is left by the evangelist: instead of the child's mother calling him Immanuel, Matthew says that "they" shall call his name Jesus. This comes to a climax in 28:20, where the name in the prophecy comes to further conclusion in the promise that Jesus will remain with his church. Matters here are more complex, but this is just for starters.

²⁷ Paul A. Zimmerman, *A Seminary in Crisis: The Inside Story of the Preus Fact Finding Committee* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 179. At first glance it would seem that any church statement of faith would have no place in the practice of a critical

The *loci* method begins with a doctrine and proceeds to the *sedes doctrinae*. Historical-critical studies take into account the complete texts of the four Gospels plus those that appeared in the subsequent centuries to determine which passages, if any, can most likely be traced to Jesus as authentic. Those chosen as most likely to be authentic form a kind of *sedes doctrinae*, though the phrase would hardly be used, in determining what Jesus probably taught and who he was. Ironically, the Jesus Seminar put this method in democratic perspective by giving each participant an equal voice in determining what was most likely to be authentic and unauthentic. Passages most likely traceable to Jesus serve in this system as the *sedes doctrinae*.

V. Christology as Unifying Principle

Shortly after my coming to the faculty at Springfield, then seminary president J.A.O. ("Jack") Preus, Jr., suggested that Christology swap with prolegomena and Scriptures as the first course in the dogmatics curriculum. He may have wanted to circumvent the impending synodical crisis on the nature of the Bible by beginning with a common understanding of Christ as a basis for unity. Before 1966, a course on the person of Jesus came before a course on his work, following Francis Pieper's outline in *Christian Dogmatics*.²⁸ Beginning dogmatics with Christ's deity corresponds to John's Gospel, which begins with the Word in the presence of God, in whose being he shares and who creates through him. Historical criticism begins the other way round, first introducing Jesus, in whom God is found. This "coming from below" typifies the synoptic Gospels. Since biblical authority was being challenged in the 1960s, favored was the traditional sequence beginning with prolegomena, biblical inspiration and authority, God and Trinity, creation, sin, and then Christology, though it was a bit puzzling how Christ's person could be defined without examining what he had done. John the Baptist's doubts were assuaged by Jesus saying what he did and not who he was (Matt 11:4-5). A church not troubled with challenges to the historical character of Jesus could follow the order of the fourth Gospel by beginning theology with Jesus' divine pre-existence; the "from above" approach, however, requires answering the question how a divine transcendence becomes immanent. For Lutherans, Reformed answers were proof of a defective doctrine of the incarnation. Divine and human lie side-by-side in Jesus, but not in, with, and under him. There is no real perichoresis. Lutherans

method, but in the faculty's defense every method had its own *a priori*. Uncertain is whether the faculty at that time thought in those terms.

²⁸ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:55-394.

overcame the hurdle by ascribing the operative divine attributes, like omnipotence, completely to Jesus and asserting that the quiescent attributes, like eternity, only indwell in him.²⁹ Of course, God incarnates his own self, not attributes. A theology "from below" can avoid these problems. Besides, there is something Luther-like in following the "from below" approach of the synoptic Gospels. By first confronting Jesus and his claim to deity, Christology and theology appear as one thing and some dogmatic issues are put to the side, at least for the time being.

While the Old Testament creed, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord," may allow that theology properly begins with God, in Genesis 1:1 God appears as the creator of heaven and earth. The First Commandment provides a commentary on this by prohibiting the polytheistic confusion of the creator with his creation (Exod 20:2-3). Just as God was known through Israel, so he is now known through Jesus, not only in the glory of his exaltation, as demonstrated in the transfiguration, but especially in his humiliation, where faith grasps him. Jesus is what God is and God is what Jesus is. The Scriptures know of no abstract or philosophical discussion about God.³⁰ Job broaches the subject and then backs off. Jesus in his humiliation and not just in his glorification is the image of the Father who gives of himself totally in begetting his Son and extends his self-giving love in the procession of the Spirit.³¹ It is significant that the most explicit reference to God's trinitarian life is placed at the end of Matthew, something to be grasped as a consequence of Jesus' death and resurrection. By placing discussion of God's trinitarian existence at the

²⁹ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:236.

³⁰ "Like the whole apostolic testimony, John knows of no theodicy — the incarnation replaces it." Martin Hengel, "The Prologue of the Gospel of John as the Gateway to Christological Truth," in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 276.

³¹ While some scholars see John 1:14, "We have seen his glory," as a reference to the transfiguration, within the context of this Gospel an appealing option is that it refers to Christ's fleshly existence culminating in the crucifixion, in which the Father's glory is seen. Paul N. Anderson, "On Guessing Points and Naming Stars," in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 330-349, esp. 340. Tard Larson provides a brief historical summary of views of how God is revealed in John. Luther follows Erasmus in seeing the revelation in the cross. D. Moody Smith took the lead in identifying God's glory with Jesus' suffering. "Glory or Persecution: The God of the Gospel of John in the History of Interpretation," in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 82-88.

conclusion of his *The Christian Faith*, Friedrich Schleiermacher followed Matthew and Luke's order.³² Schleiermacher located biblical inspiration in the Spirit's presence in the early Christian community's reaction to Jesus, a view expanded by form criticism's claim that the early Christian faith was passed along orally from one community to another in liturgies and other forms whose content was subsequently preserved in the Scriptures. Problematic is that in classical form criticism, the forms do not go back beyond communities to those who witnessed Jesus' deeds and heard his preaching, which led them to recognize him as the Son of God (Luke 1:14; John 1:18; 1 John 1:1-4). Until recently, most critical methods did not go back to the events, but this issue has been corrected effectively by Richard Bauckham and Larry W. Hurtado, who trace the Gospels to the eyewitnesses.³³ The Gospels were not comparable to depositions recorded by attorneys or diaries, but were based on what the apostles saw. Their witness to Jesus before his crucifixion was interpreted in the light of his resurrection.

A threefold creedal outline for dogmatics is compelling for a creedal church, especially since it has become cliché to speak of first, second, and third articles of theology, as if they ever existed. Strikingly, the Gospels individually and collectively begin with Jesus and not with God (Matt 1:1; Mark 1:1; Luke 1:2; John 1:1). Matthew goes back beyond Jesus in titling his Gospel "the book of Genesis of Jesus Christ" (1:1) and factors into the person of Jesus Israel's history starting with Abraham.³⁴ Only then does he identify Jesus as Immanuel, the "God with us" (1:23), who gave Judah victory over Israel, Syria, and Assyria (Isa 7). Now Jesus will live up to his name of being "God with us" by saving his people from their sins (Matt 1:21-23). Deity is reached not directly but through the humanity of the infant Jesus.³⁵ Jesus introduces God and not the reverse. Only after Jesus is

³² See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. H.R. Mackintosh and James S. Stewart (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2003). This 751-page volume ends with a 14-page conclusion on the Trinity.

³³ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006) and Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003).

³⁴ The Holy Spirit is responsible for Jesus' conception (1:20), but as a distinct person in relation to the Father and Son comes last in the trinitarian formula. Matthew has no place for him in the Johannine thunderbolt (11:27).

³⁵ Only by implication and not explicitly in 2:15 is the Father introduced in the passage, "Out of Egypt I have called my son," and again at Jesus' baptism, "This is my beloved Son" (4:17). First in the Sermon on the Mount does the Father explicitly enter the Gospel, being introduced by Jesus in 5:48. This fits with the claim in 11:27 that the

recognized as God are there two implied references to that identification in the words "my Son" (Matt 2:15 and 4:17). Theology begins not by asking who God is but by asking who Jesus is (Matt 16:13-16). Though parts of the trinitarian mystery are trolled out throughout Matthew, as, for example, in 11:27, only after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection is it fully revealed (Matt 28:19). The trinitarian conclusion is greater than any one divine person.³⁶ John, known as the theologian among the evangelists, begins not with God but with the hypostatic Word, the λόγος ἄσαρκος, who exists side-by-side and face-to-face with God as his creating agent (John 1:1-2). While Matthew waits to the end to unveil the divine mystery, John goes right back to the prehistory of Genesis to provide what Martin Hengel calls the "history" of the Word who is not known, λόγος ἄσαρκος, but in the flesh, λόγος ἔνσαρκος (John 1:14).³⁷

VI. Fundamental and Non-Fundamental

Pieper notes that Lutherans, and by extension other Christians, are not agreed as to what the fundamental doctrine is, but with support from Luther he settles unsurprisingly on justification. Designating doctrines as either fundamental non-fundamental allowed the Reformed to find a basis for fellowship with Lutherans, but the distinction took on a life of its own.³⁸ Even where the distinction is unknown, it is useful in determining whether marginal church members have met a minimum faith

Son reveals the Father. In the Sermon the Father's name appears so often—ten times to be exact—that it may properly be called Jesus' discourse on the Father.

³⁶ By saying that what he has written he obtained from "the eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word" (1:3), Luke begins with Jesus as Matthew does. Luke's implicit formula is similarly placed at his Gospel's conclusion (24:19). In his Gospel's title, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ" (1:1), Mark presumes that we know who Jesus is, just as we are presumed to know who John the Baptist is (1:4).

³⁷ Hengel, "The Prologue of the Gospel of John," 271-273. It is tempting to see John as already speaking of the λόγος ἔνσαρκος in 1:1-3, because vv. 6-11 speak of John the Baptist and Israel's rejection of Jesus by his own people. In this case, "the Word becoming flesh" would refer to Christ's humiliation by taking on our sinful existence. Thus the Johannine prologue begins with the λόγος ἔνσαρκος and not the λόγος ἄσαρκος. This interpretation parallels Col 1:15-20, where Jesus is described as the firstborn of all creation, through whom all things were made and are held together.

³⁸ Preus, *Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:144-154. Paul E. Kretzmann's expanded list includes "the existence of divine revelation, the resurrection of the dead... the necessity of piety and love toward one's neighbor as a fruit of faith, original sin (Quenstedt)." The only articles consistently making the non-fundamental list are the pope as Antichrist and angels. "Fundamental and Non-fundamental Doctrines and Church Fellowship," n.d., Concordia Theological Seminary archives, Fort Wayne, IN.

requirement so as to expect salvation at death and a clerically led funeral. Without first identifying a common fundamental doctrine, discussions leading to fellowship are compromised. Since the Reformed do not see sacraments as fundamental, they can live with Lutherans who see them as fundamental, but Lutherans cannot, or at least should not, return the favor. Discussions with Roman Catholics on the christological substance can be productive, as in the Augsburg Confession, until it comes to the non-negotiability of papal supremacy. Ideally, justification as the fundamental doctrine would provide a basis for Lutheran unity, but diverse definitions have not been resolved since they surfaced at the Lutheran World Federation in 1963.³⁹ An existentially formed definition of justification that did not include the historical character of Jesus as a necessary component was at the root of difficulties with the Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, faculty in the 1960s and 70s. Justification was accomplished by preaching the gospel, but the historical quality of the virgin birth and the resurrection was a separate issue. The old nineteenth-century classical liberal separation of the Christ of faith (justification) from the Jesus of history came to life and was unrecognized by the examining committee.⁴⁰ For the

³⁹ In spite of disagreements on justification, Lutherans found themselves to be substantively closer to Roman Catholics (and the Eastern Orthodox by extension), especially on the Lord's Supper, than to the Reformed, as pointed out by John R. Stephenson, review of *Usus und Actio: Das Heilige Abendmahl bei Luther und Melancthon* in *Logia* 18 no. 3 (Holy Trinity 2009): 73. Proximate unity on one issue may be compromised by divergence on another, as with the Eastern Church's non-acceptance of the *Filioque*, which reveals a different understanding of the Trinity. Roman Catholics do not see the doctrine of justification informing all other doctrines as Lutherans do. Reformed communions see the creeds only as approximations of the biblical truth. *Quia* subscription is foreign to them. Evangelicals and Lutherans may speak of justification by faith, but they understand faith and its creation so differently that agreement on justification is more apparent than real. Recent events in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America confirm its earlier departure from the Confessions by their entry into fellowship with the Reformed, Episcopalians, Moravians, and Methodists. The Lutheran substance has evaporated, and now even the outer shell is shattering. See Gottfried Martins, "JDDJ After Ten Years," trans. Jacob Corzine, *Logia* 18 no. 3 (Holy Trinity 2009): 11-26.

⁴⁰ Zimmerman, *A Seminary in Crisis*, 61-62. Faculty members accepted the virgin birth and the resurrection, but some would allow others to raise questions about their "reality, actuality, and historicity." In spite of this, the committee found, "It was comforting to find unanimity on the central doctrine of Holy Scriptures." Thus justification is seen operative apart from the historical Jesus. In response to Paul L. Maier's *Lutheran Witness* article "Reservations about the Resurrection?" another committee member asserted "that ultimately we do not accept the Resurrection story on the basis of historical 'proofs.'" Rather we accept the resurrection and Christ's victory over death by faith. Karl L. Barth, "By Faith," *Lutheran Witness* 128 no. 6/7 (June/July

faculty, the chief doctrine had morphed into the only necessary one and the standard for all the others. Some trace current ELCA troubles back to this interpretation. This might be a reason for justification to be restated so as to include Jesus of Nazareth as its first and necessary component.⁴¹ Another problem in the justification-by-faith formula is that for Evangelicals faith is a self-conscious act of the will, a view that crops up among well-intentioned Lutherans. A denial of infant baptism, or a tendency to see it as a tolerable but still aberrant practice, is probably based on a defective doctrine of justification, but this is a side issue.

Since the Enlightenment, Early Church and Reformation concerns about the relationship of Christ's two natures to each other and the value of his atonement have been replaced at the center of theological enterprise by questions about the historical accessibility of Jesus, a multifaceted discipline that comes under the general heading of the quest for the historical Jesus.⁴² A dogmatically formulated christology is not possible

2009): 4. Jesus' resurrection is an article of the faith, that is, what the church believes, but like his crucifixion, his resurrection belongs to history.

⁴¹The claim of our Confessions that justification is the chief article could hardly refer to its articulation, since the church thrived and spread before the Reformation definition. Add to this that infants and children cannot define it. Our late colleague Donald Deffner often expressed amazement that most Lutheran also could not, but this is no surprise, since the people cannot be expected to express themselves in the theologically acquired terms. To set matters straight, only by preaching of Christ's sacrifice and not by articulating the doctrine is a sinner justified. Lutherans settled on justification as the fundamental doctrine because Rome held that works and not faith in Christ determine our standing *coram deo* (before God). At the final judgment *coram mundo* (before the world) works determine this, but the Reformation issue was about the certainty of salvation here and now. For Lutherans, justification was all about God accepting us *propter Christum* (for the sake of Christ). It was not even *propter fidem* (for the sake of faith) but always *per fidem* (through faith). Rome places works alongside Christ, and it is not faith that is thus compromised but Christ. For Lutherans, justification is not a separate article of faith but really a part of Christology, who Jesus was and what he did. Differences Lutherans had with other churches all had to do with Christ. To some it seems we can make common cause on biblical inspiration with Evangelicals, but since they cite the Scriptures without recognizing their christological content, they offer a different religion from ours. Theology is not simply a matter of who can accumulate the most *sedes doctrinae* in the defense of a position but rather how every doctrine is seen as an extension of Christology.

⁴² An updated and easy-to-read overview of this issue is provided in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009). Chosen to represent the wide diversity of views are Robert M. Price, who finds virtually no evidence for Jesus; John Dominic Crossan, a Jesuit scholar who sees Jesus as a wandering peasant philosopher; Luke Timothy Johnson, who argues for

without a prior commitment to the historical character of Jesus of Nazareth. Left unaddressed, Christology collapses, justification disintegrates, and the sacraments become cultic rites. With the often unrecognized fiction of *The Da Vinci Code* and the faux scholarship surrounding the Gospel of Judas and the other apocryphal Gospels, the first issue for clergy and people has shifted from how I am saved to how we come to know Jesus and what we can know about him. By beginning theology with the man Jesus and not with Christ or God, the Lutheran distinctiveness is maintained in that Christology begins with the lowliness of Jesus and not with the majesty of God, as among the Reformed.⁴³

Recognition of the historical figure of Jesus as God is the first theological topic and should penetrate all theology. Without a historically affirmed Jesus, his maleness is no longer a factor in Christology, which degenerates into a Gnosticism with a "relentless purging of masculine images and pronouns for God," a phenomenon Benne sees in the ELCA.⁴⁴

VII. God as Secondary Primary Fundamental Doctrine

After insisting that justification is the chief article, Pieper hedges his bets by giving the same honor to the knowledge of sin, the theanthropic nature of Christ, and the Trinity, but returns to give the honor of the *articulus omnium fundamentalissimus* to justification. He must have known that a superlative can only have one point of reference.⁴⁵ So in effect sin, Christ, and the Trinity amount to "secondary primary fundamental doctrines," though Pieper does not speak this way. Recognizing Christ as the chief doctrine may be implied in that the Lutheran dogmaticians saw Christ as the author and content of all the Scriptures, even though they did not integrate this christological aspect into their doctrine of inspiration.

the historical reality of Jesus, but not much more; James D.G. Dunn, who argues against the distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith; and Darrell L. Bock, who holds that Jesus saw himself at the center of God's plan. Each contribution is followed by a response often in the form of a critique from the other four contributors.

⁴³ Gustaf Wingren notes that for Luther, theology began with Christ's lowliness, in contrast to the Reformed, who began with God's honor. *The Living Word*, trans. Victor G. Pogue (2nd printing; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 205.

⁴⁴ Robert Benne, "The Christ of Culture and the ELCA," *The Cresset* 72 no. 2 (Advent-Christmas 2009): 31-33. Benne speaks of a church's "full accommodation to culture" by citing Richard Niebuhr: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross" (31). He offers this critique: "It [the ELCA] was the first confessional church of any size to succumb to liberal Protestantism's allure. A harsh critic might say that it rendered itself a sect and became schismatic at the same time" (31).

⁴⁵ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:80-91.

The historical Jesus component of the christological aspect in the doctrine of justification was not discussed in the St. Louis faculty interviews prior to the 1974 walkout. One reason for questioning the traditional dogmatic order of the natural knowledge of God, his trinitarian existence, and his attributes before Christology⁴⁶ is that it does not correspond to the Gospels, which begin with Jesus and then identify him with God. Christology and theology in the narrow sense, that is, what is known about God, comprise one topic or *locus*, not two. Bauckham provides an extensive discussion in showing that the whole New Testament "identifies Jesus as intrinsic to who God is."⁴⁷ Hurtado's research, as indicated in the subtitle of his book, *Devotion to Jesus in the Early Church*, shows that from the very beginning Jesus received the same honors due to God. He notes that "in Pauline Christianity we see a remarkable 'overlap' in functions between God and Jesus, and also in the honorific rhetoric used to refer to them both."⁴⁸ These approaches release dogmatics from the restrictive *sedes doctrinae* approach, which assumes that some passages are of more value than others, and frees us to roam throughout the New Testament in hot and always successful christological pursuit. Homiletically a less-than-promising Gospel appointed for that Sunday no longer has to be propped up by *sedes doctrinae* taken from other places in that Gospel or from other books, typically John 3:16.

Bauckham challenges the widely held view that patristic christology far exceeded what the New Testament could deliver. He shows that the New Testament "is already a fully divine Christology, maintaining that Jesus Christ is intrinsic to the unique and eternal identity of God."⁴⁹ There is no need to wait for Nicaea and Chalcedon. New Testament christology has to do with "not only the pre-existent and the exalted Jesus . . . but also the earthly, suffering, humiliated and crucified Jesus [who] belongs to the unique and eternal identity of God."⁵⁰ The crucifixion is not at odds with who God is. No longer does theology have to explain how divine

⁴⁶ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:372-463.

⁴⁷ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 31.

⁴⁸ Hurtado, *Devotion to Jesus in the Early Church*, 142. This massive work of 746 pages is devoted to demonstrating that Jesus was revered as God right after the resurrection. Jesus found a place within Jewish monotheist worship.

⁴⁹ Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 151. Bauckham continues, "These were seen as the principles that governed the development of the Nicene and Chalcedonian dogmas with the faith of the first Christians in God and the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ."

⁵⁰ Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, x.

transcendence became immanent. The *homo factus est* is not alien to God's trinitarian life. There are not three theologies, but one, and that is Christology. Because the Spirit derives his life not only from the Father but also from the Son, *Filioque*, within the Trinity, and because he is sent by the crucified and resurrected Jesus, he is christological in forming the church in Christ's image.

All the ramifications of doing theology by beginning and remaining with the christology of the Gospels in all of the *loci* cannot be expanded upon here. Such thinking, at least on my part, was at the heart of the seminary's new curriculum courses on the Gospels and Theologia I, II, and III. Dogmatics and biblical studies blend into two disciplines returning to the form of the Gospels. Traditionally justification informs all the articles of faith, but this honor more appropriately belongs to Christology, which begins with Jesus, in whom we are justified.

Above the letter section in the issue of *Christianity Today* commemorating Calvin, there appears in bold print: "John Calvin trusted the consequence of all his actions to the triune God. In that, we all can find someone to admire." Belief in the Trinity is indisputable, but Jesus is where the Trinity is encountered. A raw doctrine of the Trinity presents its own problems if it allows us access to God through the Father and Spirit as optional alternatives to Jesus. A false trinitarian egalitarianism exists in Jurgen Moltmann's definition, which sees each divine person living in mutually reciprocal relationship with the others.⁵¹ This is great as far as it goes, but the distinctiveness of each person is lost. Left unexplained is why the Father sent the Son and did not come himself. The answer is provided by Paul N. Anderson:

Because the agent is to be regarded in all ways like the sender, the Son is to be equated with the Father precisely because he does nothing on his own. Therefore, subordinationism and egalitarianism are wrongly seen as opposing christological categories in John; they are flip-sides of the same coin.⁵²

Now for a contemporary application: The *loci* method advances its argument against women clergy by referencing Paul's prohibitions in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. Proponents of the practice have their quiver of passages, especially Galatians 3:28: In Christ male and female are equal.

⁵¹ Jürgen Moltmann, "God in the World – the World in God: Perichoresis in Trinity and Eschatology," in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 374.

⁵² Anderson, "On Guessing Points and Naming Stars," 324.

Voila, women pastors. While we have the *sedes doctrinae* on our side, or so we like to think, the issue should be addressed christologically and then in a trinitarian persepective. In becoming man, Christ was replicating his relationship as the Son to the Father. Within the Trinity, the subordination of the Son and the Spirit to the Father is not an infringement upon or a challenge to their equality. In doing the Father's bidding by coming to our aid, the Son reflected his place within the Godhead. Our salvation was not effected by an arbitrary decision of a sovereign God, but it flowed out of the inner trinitarian recesses. This is reflected in how Christians live together as priests all equally justified by and before God, but each a servant of the other and nevertheless each having his proper place in the body of Christ. This sounds a little like Paul—or maybe Luther. Every Christian is lord of all but servant to all. We also feel at home with the *loci* method, a passage here and a passage there—good, but not good enough. A theology worthy of the name must be primarily and thoroughly christological, a theology in which God is accessible only through Jesus' humility. Dogmatics might take its clue from Matthew 11:25–30:

At that time Jesus declared, "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will. All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Is God a secondary primary fundamental doctrine? Your call.