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The Gospel and the Theological Task

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“I’m no theologian, but . . .”

You have heard the statement many times. After a learned presentation by a theological professor at a pastoral conference a parish pastor rises to add his wisdom to the discussion and begins with those words, most often to take exception to something the professor has said. A delegate to a church convention utters them to convince his fellow delegates of the practical, down-to-earth advice he is about to offer, usually stated in very specific theological terms in spite of his introduction.

“But you are a preacher!”

Every pastor and teacher of the church is a proclaimer of the gospel. That makes him a theologian, whether or not he realizes it. As gospel proclaimers the church’s pastors and teachers are required to be theologians. A seminary is a school of theology *because* it prepares gospel proclaimers. A pastor or teacher *is* a theologian; his only choice is whether he does the work of a theologian poorly or well.

The point is that gospel and theology go together.

We have a theological task because our job is to proclaim the gospel. In fact, the theological task is *for* the proclaiming of the gospel. Whether the task is well or poorly done depends on its relation to its goal: gospel proclamation. What is the interrelationship between gospel and theology? How does a preacher of the Gospel carry out his theological task?

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CONFUSION OVER TERMS

It will be helpful to clarify terms before we suggest answers. What do we mean by theology? doctrine? confession? dogma? gospel? Some people use the terms interchangeably and assume that they should do so. For example, a man will refer to “the theology of the Lutheran Church” when he means that church’s confessional position—its “confession,” its “dogma” (a term with which Lutherans are not too comfortable). Someone else will criticize another man’s “doctrine” when he is really unhappy with his “theology.”

The confusion can be illustrated another way. Has there been a change in the theology of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod? Has its doctrine changed? To both questions some answer yes and are vehemently critical. Others vigorously deny the assertions, claiming there has been no change. Both, of course, are right. If “theology” and “doctrine” mean the Missouri Synod’s confessional position as stated in its constitution, of course there has been no change. If the terms refer to ways of expressing or formulating the gospel, there has indeed been change. A root problem is whether “theology” and “doctrine” can change. Some say no because they equate the terms with the gospel. Others allow for the possibility—indeed, the desirability—of change because they do not make the same equation.

“What is a doctrine?” The repeated efforts of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to answer the question demonstrate how much confusion over terms ex-

ists in that church body. The question was first raised at the Synod's 1944 convention; it was raised again at the 1953 convention; it was raised once more in 1962; and further clarification was requested in 1965.

The Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) addressed itself to the question in a document¹ that it presented to the Synod's 1967 convention and that the convention in question referred to the 1969 convention for action. The CTCR compared the meaning of doctrine as it appears in present dictionaries, the New Testament, the Lutheran Confessions, the Lutheran dogmaticians, and the writings of C. F. W. Walther and stated in summary:

In the New Testament and the Lutheran Confessions "the doctrine" generally denotes the entire Christian doctrine viewed as a whole. As used in the question "What Is a Doctrine?" the terms "a doctrine" or "doctrines" reflect the atomistic usage current since the 17th century. Used in this way, "a doctrine" denotes a part of the whole Biblical teaching on Christian faith and life which is distinguished from the whole for purposes of teaching or discussion.²

Briefly, the CTCR concluded that there is only *one* Christian doctrine, God-given as an organic whole, and that instead of speaking of "doctrines" it would be better to speak of "articles of faith" which comprise the one doctrine.

But it is hard to change common usage. "Doctrine" can mean teaching as a whole and it can mean a particular teaching with-

in a larger system. So the confusion will persist unless the meaning of the word is first clearly defined each time it is used.

Though the CTCR document helps to clarify the meaning of the term "doctrine," it does not dispel all the confusion. What is the one doctrine—the gospel—which God has given us as an organic whole? What are its component articles of faith, and how do you determine them and their number? The CTCR document states:

A pure understanding of the Gospel, and therefore correct preaching of the Gospel, calls for a correct understanding of the articles of faith treated in the Augsburg Confession, defended in its Apology, and explained in the remaining Confessions, particularly the Formula of Concord.³

Does that mean we should equate the Lutheran Church's "confession" with "the *one* doctrine God gave us . . . as an organic whole"? This writer for one would not want to do so. He is more than willing to reaffirm his ordination commitment to the Lutheran confessional writings (which include the Ecumenical Creeds, it should be noted) as a correct exposition of "the one doctrine" of the Scriptures. But it would be a mistake to equate "the one doctrine" (that is, the gospel) with "confession" or "dogma."

It is equally a mistake to equate "gospel" with "theology." People do—Lutherans, too. They identify the gospel with a particular theological system. Some set up a Lutherized version of evangelical Protestantism's fundamentals as a criterion of orthodoxy. Some assume that the dogmatic systems of the period of Lutheran orthodoxy are normative for theology today. Some make the same assumptions

¹ Published separately as a Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations with the title, "A Review of the Question, 'What Is a Doctrine?'" and available on request from the commission.

² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³ *Ibid.*

about the theology of the Lutheran Reformation with its central theme of justification by faith and its law-gospel polarity. Common to all is the presupposition that there is only one correct way to formulate the gospel.

NATURE OF THEOLOGY

This writer began by asking about the nature of the theological task and its relation to the gospel. To arrive at an answer, it is essential to cut through the fog of confusion that envelops the terms we need to use. What is the relation between gospel, doctrine, confession, and theology? The basic assumption of this writer is that the terms must be distinguished, but can neither be separated from one another nor equated with one another.

Look first at the relation between theology and gospel. What is the gospel? How do you define it or formulate it? Note this essential fact: You cannot present the gospel except by means of a specific theological formulation of it. That is true of every explication of the gospel, including those in the Holy Scriptures.

Take John 3:16 as an example. There is no more succinct or simple or profound statement of the gospel. Yet it is an expression of the gospel within the framework of the theology that is peculiar to the Gospel According to St. John. It contains the words that are crucial to the particular gospel formulation (that is, theology) in the Fourth Gospel: love, world, Son, belief, life. Of course the words are used in other books in the New Testament, but not in quite the same constellation.

The New Testament has other ways of defining or formulating the gospel. To the Romans St. Paul describes it as "the power

of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek, for in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith" (Rom. 1:16-17). Power, righteousness, revelation, faith — these are some of the key words in Saint Paul's articulation of the gospel. St. Mark tells us that when Jesus came "preaching the gospel of God," He said, "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mark 1:14-15). Mark's summary statement holds the key to his particular formulation of the gospel. We dare not forget the Old Testament formulations of the gospel, articulated within a theological framework that varies from author to author.

Though their presentations of the gospel vary, all Scripture writers point to the same reality. Their presentations differ because they issue from varying overall formulations of the gospel. In other words, there are different "theologies" in the Scriptures — different ways of organizing and presenting the Good News. Any attempt to spell out a common "biblical theology" really results in fashioning another theology, one which includes the many Scripture motifs and seeks to relate and harmonize them.

So then the gospel requires theology for its articulation or expression, but no specific theology can be equated with the gospel.

The relation between gospel and theology becomes more clear when seen in relation to doctrine. As we already noted, "doctrine" can refer to the Christian message, the church's teaching as an organic whole — the gospel. The Augsburg Confession invests the word doctrine with such a meaning. The signers of the Augsburg

Confession presented it as a witness to the doctrine taught and believed in their churches.⁴ Its first 21 articles comprise the doctrine of the churches — in fact, the doctrine of the gospel on which it is enough to agree for the unity of the church. (Article VII)

Yet the Augsburg Confession is not without a theological framework. Once again the church's message — that is, her doctrine, or the Christian gospel — is presented by means of a particular theology. For the Lutheran reformers justification by grace was the key to theology and its organizing principle. The gospel was formulated in terms of justification by grace. Article IV is the key to the Augsburg Confession.

The Augsburg Confession illustrates what is true of any attempt to articulate the church's doctrine viewed as an organic whole. It is not possible to present "the doctrine" apart from a specific theology.

Nor can individual doctrines be articulated except in terms of a specific theology. The word "doctrine" can refer to specific facets of the church's gospel, for example, the doctrine of creation, the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. Especially when doctrine is used in this sense, it is essential to recognize that it is a part of an organic whole and that it is one facet of a theological system.

Again the point is that doctrine, whether viewed as the gospel message itself or as an individual component of the message, requires theology for its articulation or expression, and that no specific theology ex-

hausts the possibilities for presenting the doctrine of the gospel.

The situation is quite similar when we consider the relation between theology, the gospel, and creeds. For Lutherans the creeds — both the Ecumenical Creeds and the specifically Lutheran confessional writings — are normative for theology along with the Holy Scriptures. The Scriptures are the primary norm. They are "the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged."⁵ Creeds are "witnesses and expositions of the faith, setting forth how at various times the Holy Scriptures were understood in the church of God by contemporaries with reference to controverted articles, and how contrary teachings were rejected and condemned."⁶ But creeds are nonetheless normative. "All doctrines should conform to [them]. Whatever is contrary to them should be rejected and condemned as opposed to the unanimous declaration of our faith."⁷

Thus the creeds consist of dogmas. The term is not commonly used by Lutherans though it has important ecumenical significance. A dogma is a teaching which the church has pronounced essential for the integrity of the Christian message. In its creeds the church has affirmed what must be said and what may not be said for teaching to be Christian. The creeds set the boundaries for all Christian teaching and for theology. Along with the Scriptures as rule and norm the Lutheran Church wants the creeds to serve as standard. So she requires subscription to both.

⁵ Ibid., Epitome, Formula of Concord, p. 767.

⁶ Ibid., p. 769.

⁷ Ibid.

⁴ *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956), p. 134.

The creeds are therefore critical for the theological task, as we shall see later. Their importance for theology should not obscure the fact that they are themselves forms of theology. The creeds, too, are expressions of specific theologies. They are the products of particular theological systems, formulated in the language and thought forms of a particular age and therefore conditioned by time and subject to human limitations. I have already made the point that the Augsburg Confession presents the basic Christian message in terms of the particular theology dominant among the Lutheran reformers. The creedal formulations at Nicaea and Constantinople were also the products of specific theological frames of reference. And so for all creeds. Therefore their formulation of the gospel is not absolutely final. Articulating the gospel is an ongoing theological task.

Once more the point: The church's creeds, critical as they are for theology, are themselves the product of theology and therefore not to be equated with the gospel message to which they point.

This is a good time to pull things together before proceeding to a detailed analysis of the theological task. No theology can be equated with the gospel even though the Scriptural expressions of the gospel are by means of specific theologies. Neither can theology be equated with doctrine, viewed either as *the* doctrine (the gospel) or as individual facets of the church's message; yet every doctrine (the organic whole or an individual part) is conditioned by the theological framework from which it comes. Though the church's creeds are theologically conditioned, they are normative for all theology, which must seek to articulate the

teachings they affirm as essential for the Christian gospel.

Theology is therefore the articulation of the gospel based on the witness of the Scriptures, articulated in conformity with the creeds of the church, and stated in terms that comprise an organic whole and that are relevant to the time and place for which they are intended.

BEGINNING THE THEOLOGICAL TASK

So then, theology is for the gospel. In fact it is an articulation of the gospel in a relevant, self-consistent system. How does one go about creating or composing a theology?

Some theological system-makers begin with the gospel. They choose a major biblical thematic expression of the gospel, such as justification, love, life, kingdom of God, and then develop the theme into an overall system by spelling out its implications for the traditional areas of Christian teaching in terms that are designed to be relevant and meaningful.

Because the Lutheran Symbols call justification by grace the chief article of Christian doctrine⁸ and because many Lutherans have come to label it "the article by which the church stands or falls," some people have assumed that for Lutherans justification must be the organizing principle of theology — the hub from which all specific teachings radiate. Such theology was indeed valid at the time of the Reformation. But does it provide the most effective and relevant means for proclaiming the gospel today? Certainly we cannot simply transfer Reformation theology from the 16th to the 20th century without accommodating it

⁸ *Ibid.*, Apology of the Augsburg Confession, p. 159.

or applying it to 20th-century conditions. But must we begin with justification at all? In fact, do we begin the theological task with some basic thematic expression of the gospel?

No! Not if we want to assure a relevant proclamation of the gospel! For theology to be relevant, the theological task has to begin not with the gospel but with the situation to which it is to be addressed. The first step in theology formulation is to analyze the conditions of the world for whose sake the gospel is to be proclaimed. "The world writes the agenda," we are being told these days. True as that may be in other areas, it is true also for theology. The situation in our world should help shape our theology.⁹

Why? Because there is no "gospel in a vacuum." The gospel cannot be dealt with by itself apart from the situation to which it is addressed. It is ever so much more than a set of religious propositions, spiritual truths, or divine principles. If it were only that, it could be passed on unchanged from generation to generation. The gospel must always be addressed to particular conditions and circumstances. Therefore, it cannot be formulated in terms enduringly valid for every age and condition. Each formulation of the gospel is conditioned by the situation to which it is addressed. What the situation is determines how the gospel is said.

The gospel is not gospel unless it is addressed to a situation or condition. Good news! That's what the gospel is. The term has many implications. It implies that

communication is intended, that there is something to say, that the situation of those to be addressed is "bad news," and that what there is to say will be good news to those who hear it. If the gospel is indeed to be good news, it must be addressed to a particular situation and the theological task must begin with an analysis of the situation of those to whom the gospel is to be spoken.

Some features of the human situation are so basic that they are common to every period of history. Man is man, no matter what the age in which he lives. Many of his needs remain unchanged. He looks for life in place of death. He longs for fellowship in the midst of lonely isolation. He cannot figure out how to insure consistent justice and prevent exploitation. Because the human condition is so much the same from age to age, theology today will be similar to the theologies of other eras in many of its basic emphases.

Yet each age has its own characteristics and its distinct condition. Our age does not share the same concerns as the 2d, 12th, 16th, or 19th centuries—not even those of the early 20th century. For Luther's time a chief problem was to find a *merciful* God; in our age people ask whether there *is* a God. The situation in our day is enormously different from preceding periods of history. And so it is not possible merely to reproduce a theology of the past. It does not speak the gospel to our situation.

Therefore the first requirement in the theological task is to analyze the condition of our present age to determine what the situation is to which the gospel is to be addressed. What is our condition? Secularism is a dominant characteristic; we

⁹ Cf. the treatment by Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 3 ff., and his method of correlation, 59 ff.

have learned to do quite well without God. The outlook is materialistic; we hunger for things and never fill up. We are for the first time inextricably bound together as one world, living under the shadow of "The Bomb" in an environment in which any war flirts with global suicide. World hunger and poverty are serious problems, confronting the world with catastrophe. Our life together is torn apart by serious racial antagonisms. Technology is undercutting our basic human values. My list is far from exhaustive, but it contains enough to show how special the condition of our age is.

When the analysis is done, the theological task can move on to formulate the gospel in terms that will speak relevantly and meaningfully to our present situation. In fact the analysis itself will help to elicit meaningful articulations of the gospel.

That is not to say that the content of the gospel issues from the world's needs. The basic content of the gospel issues from God's revelation and His saving action in Israel and in Jesus Christ. But the world's needs should determine the form and shape in which the gospel is expressed. The human situation should be a major determining factor in theology. That's because theology is for the gospel and because the gospel is good news.

GOSPEL AND SCRIPTURE

If the human situation determines the shape of theology, where does theology get its content? It gets its content from the Scriptures. For Lutherans the Scriptures are "rule and norm" of faith. They are our source for the gospel as originally proclaimed.

The Scriptures are the written witnesses

to God's self-revelation and to His saving action in history presented by those who shared in the experience by faith. The Old Testament writings proclaim the gospel by witnessing to God's relation to the Israelite nation. The New Testament writings proclaim the gospel by witnessing to God's saving action in Jesus Christ.

The gospel enunciated in the Scriptures is rooted in certain events, and its proclamation is based on them: an exodus, the establishment of a kingdom, an exile and a return, a man's birth, his death and resurrection, a Pentecost experience. But the gospel as proclaimed in the Scriptures not only reported the events; it affirmed that they were revelatory and saving acts of God. (In Exodus *God* brings the Israelites out of Egypt; in Luke Mary's son is the Son of *God*.) In addition, the gospel proclamation in the Scriptures specified the significance of God's actions for the situation and condition of the people to which the proclamation was addressed. (Jesus Christ "was put to death *for our trespasses* and raised *for our justification*." [Rom. 4:25])

We today know there is a gospel to proclaim only because the Scriptures proclaim it. (There is no point in speculating whether we might know it if there had been only an oral and not also a written form of transmission.) We have a gospel to proclaim only because of the self-revelation and saving action of God in history to which the Scriptures attest. The Scriptures are therefore indispensable to our efforts to articulate the gospel for our own age. In carrying out the theological task we must look to the Scriptures to determine what the content of our theology should be.

A Christian theologian is always a biblical theologian. To formulate the gospel for our own age we need to examine how the writers of the Scriptures formulated it for theirs. There are, of course, no systematic theologies among the books of the Bible, though St. Paul's Letter to the Romans is a systematic presentation of "his" gospel. Nevertheless, there is a theology implicit in each of the sacred writings. To carry out our theological task we need to analyze how each of the Scripture writers describes the events which form the basis for his affirmations, what meaning he invests in them, what significance he finds in them for his readers. We need to lay out for ourselves the various ways in which Scripture writers bear witness to God's action in history, recognizing similarities and variations between Isaiah and Jeremiah, Luke and John, Peter and Paul.

And then? Move from their formulations to one of our own that speaks to the condition of our time. The Scripture formulations help. They show us what must be said if the gospel is to be gospel (for example, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" [1 Cor. 15:17]). They suggest ways of formulating the gospel that are meaningful today. Perhaps in our secular-materialistic age Luke's formulation of God's Spirit come to be in men may have special significance. Perhaps in a world of strife and broken relationships the gospel should be articulated in terms of reconciliation and community. Perhaps John's message of new life has special significance for a world bent on living and threatened with instant death.

After establishing a basic theme or message for our time, the theological task is

to spell out the implications of the gospel for all of life. The goal is an organic whole, self-consistent yet relevant to the situation to which the message is to be addressed.

CREEDS AND THEOLOGY

After the Scriptures have served as "rule and norm," the theological task must deal next with the church's "standards"—the creeds. Theology must be in accord with the creeds.

The church's creeds serve as a check against individualism in theology. No one in the church has the right to produce a gospel of his own. The gospel is God's good news; it issues from His mighty acts. As proclaimer of the gospel the church down through the ages has acted to guard the gospel's integrity and to resist efforts to distort or change it.

And so there are creeds and there are dogmas. They testify to the way in which the church at a particular time in history understood and affirmed the gospel. They serve to guard the integrity of the church's message, spelling out what must be said and what may not be said. They are signposts marking out the boundaries for Christian teaching.

Theology therefore must be in harmony with the church's creeds—and for Lutherans that includes the specifically Lutheran confessional writings. No valid theological formulation today can contradict the church's creeds. What was essential to the gospel in the past is essential today.

So for example the effort to spell out who God is in terms that speak relevantly to people today must take into account the Trinitarian formulas of the Ecumenical Creeds and say what they say. Descriptions of Jesus Christ cannot ignore

the controversial phrases of the Nicene Creed. A portrayal of God's relation to man must be in harmony with what the Lutheran Symbols say about "the chief article of faith"—the justification of the sinner before God by grace for Christ's sake through faith.

But—please note well—the requirement to be in harmony with the creeds does not mean simply reproducing the creedal statements. The theological task is to find a way of asserting what the creeds say in the language and thought forms of our day and in terms that are relevant to the conditions of our age. The real job—and it is a difficult one—is to make sure that the creedal formulations are "translated" into language that speaks to today's world and in that form are incorporated into the new overall formulation of the gospel.

For example, the phrases of the Nicene Creed, "begotten, not made; being of one substance with the Father," are crucial for understanding the relation between Jesus Christ and God. But they are the language and thought form of another day. Our task is to express the truth which those phrases affirm about God and about Jesus Christ and their significance for us in the language and thought forms of our day. For us "begotten" and "substance" will not do. The same could be said for other creedal formulations, even so crucial a formulation as the one dealing with the Holy Trinity or with justification.

"Translating" the creeds in no way diminishes their importance. Because a creedal formulation does not speak with total meaningfulness to our time does not mean that the formulation is no longer valid. The creeds stand as they are; they

are necessary just as they are. Indeed, we affirm them today as our own because they witness to the truth of the gospel. But that fact does not free us from the task of making our own witness to the truth of the gospel.

The purpose of creeds is not to enforce theological conformity but to serve church unity. Together we accept the creeds as statements of the truth of the gospel. Ours is a confessional unity. Within that unity there is room—lots of it—for theological variety. While we each go about the theological task of articulating the gospel for our time, we are united by our common subscription to the creeds as witnesses to the gospel proclaimed in the Scriptures.

THE ECUMENICAL DIMENSION

One more thing about the theological task is that it should have an ecumenical dimension. Proclaiming the gospel is the responsibility of the whole church. In developing a theology, one has to take the whole church into account. Because theology is for the gospel, there is no room in the theological task for a denominational mentality. Our theology should try to speak the gospel for the whole church.

Ecumenical concern in the theological task means determining what is happening theologically within the denominational families of Christendom. It means ascertaining how other Christians are articulating the gospel. It means taking their theologies into account in going about the theological task.

Every pastor or teacher of the church is a theologian. As such he operates with at least some sort of basic framework for proclaiming the gospel. He may not have thought it through very well. It may be

little more than a "scissors and paste" construction from various sources. He may only have appropriated a theology from a by-gone age and is now attempting to

bend it to be relevant to the needs of the people he serves.

What is your theology? You have one. But have you done the theological task?