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# A Review Article

DOGMATIK DES CHRISTLICHEN GLAUBENS. By Gerhard Ebeling. J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tuebingen, 1982. Three Volumes. 1508 plus lxiv pages.

Lowell C. Green

The appearance of a new system of dogmatics is exciting news, especially when it comes from the hand of Gerhard Ebeling, one of the most talented Lutheran scholars of our time. The theological biography of Ebeling seems to fall into three periods: his early period, when he won the reputation of a brilliant Luther scholar with his standard work on Luther's theology, *Luthers evangelische Evangelienauslegung*; a middle period, when his writings seemed to have a liberal outlook; and this, his mature period, in which he returns to a more traditional position. This work grew out of lectures delivered at the University of Zurich between 1976 and 1978, with the first published edition appearing in 1979; the reviewer received the second edition, of 1982. Ebeling does not claim to be writing a confessional Lutheran dogmatics; nevertheless, throughout, when he speaks of the "evangelical" position, he seems generally to take a position basically in accord with the Lutheran *Book of Concord*. However, the specifically Lutheran focus that I would like to see is sometimes missing; this might be due to the fact that the original lectures were delivered in a Reformed institution.

The scope of this new "Dogmatics of the Christian Faith" can best be shown by giving a table of contents. Volume I begins with an introduction (pp. 1-7) and discussion of prolegomena (pp. 11-76). The remainder of this volume is devoted to "Faith in God, the Creator of the World" (pp. 79-414). Volume II treats "Faith in God, the Reconciler of the World" (pp. 3-547). After a discussion of the relationship of pneumatology and eschatology, and its consequences for the disposition of things (III, 3-60), Ebeling treats soteriology (pp. 61-384) and then takes up "Last Things" (pp. 385-528). He concludes with the doctrine of the Trinity (pp. 529-546). The work ends with an index of Scripture references and an index of topics. It would be impossible to write a comprehensive review of these three volumes. Instead, the reviewer will present some aspects which particularly interested him.

One of the admirable things about Ebeling's work is that he, like no previous writer, has presented the genetic Lutheran concepts of

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God hidden and revealed (*Deus absconditus seu revelatus*) and the distinction of Law and Gospel throughout, and not merely in the prolegomena. He is very much on the mark when he gives a thorough discussion of Law and Gospel immediately after justification and, again, when he includes the tension between the hiddenness and the revelation of God in his discussion of judgment and of the conflict in history between the dominion of God and those opposed to His reign (III, 477ff., and especially pp. 488-491). In this respect, he very much follows Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio* and *Lectures on Genesis*.

Prolegomena are often regarded as the most important part of a dogmatics; after the principles have been laid down, the rest is thought to be a matter of drawing the specific from the general. Carl Stange devoted a whole volume to prolegomena and then was content to leave the remainder of his dogmatics unwritten. Not so Ebeling. He remarks: "I shall absolve the prolegomena in the shortest way possible in favor of the subject matter of dogmatics itself" (I,7). Thus he restricts his prolegomena to 65 pages.

Ebeling is not a scissors-and-paste theologian, nor does he engage in the common vice of the modern scholastics who merely react to previous writers with nothing significantly new. In fact, he announces from the start that he will minimize such discussions. Instead, Ebeling writes a "Systematic Theology" that is creative, not in the sense that he is forcing the various doctrines into a pre-conceived mold, but in the sense that he proceeds to present the *loci* from an inner unity. In the reviewer's opinion, this is the nature of a true dogmatics. Ebeling writes in a crystal-clear German; his frequent use of English derivatives will likely make him more readable for Americans than other writers. However, he is not without the clichés ("Christ event," etc.) which sometimes make continental theologians seem tedious.

In Part One he develops "Faith in God, the Creator of the World" (I, 79-414), where he presents, in turn, faith, God, the world, and man. Everything that is discussed in dogmatics has to do with expressions of faith (I,79). Without specific reference to the scholastic splintering of faith or to Schleiermacher's generalization of *faith* as a feeling of dependence, Ebeling shows how the word has been robbed of its specifically Christian content and made a religiously neutral word (I,84f.), while he goes back to Paul and Luther for content. He builds upon Luther's characterization of faith in the interpretation of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism, faith as clinging to God (I,87).

Ebeling is critical of the “proofs for the existence of God” (“a God who was proved would be a self-contradiction,” I,215). He takes a moderate position in dealing with the traditional “attributes of God.” As we know, these stem from natural theology and the three “ways” of Pseudo-Dionysius (*via causalis seu eminentiae seu negativa*). In the reviewer’s thinking, this natural theology does not deserve the respect it has customarily received, and the value of these rationally constructed “attributes of God” is not very great. Already in 1924 Pieper had noted the fatal weakness of dwelling on the attributes when he wrote that all the attributes belonged to the Law and “could only fill our hearts with terror” if God had not also revealed His “free grace toward all sinful mankind for the sake of Christ’s vicarious atonement” (*Christian Dogmatics*, I,437), a brilliant observation which leads one to wonder why dogmaticians who are concerned with the Law-Gospel distinction continue to devote so much attention to the “attributes of God.” Ebeling senses the weaknesses of assigning such attributes to God and, somewhat in the manner of Schleiermacher, attempts to find meaning through a practical application. He does this by relating the attributes to prayer. Here, like Pieper (above), he comes close to a Law-Gospel dialectic. He presents this outline:

1. The appropriate address to God of *holiness*.
  - a. The hiddenness of God.
  - b. The nearness of God.
2. The appropriate praise of God of *doxa*.
  - a. The eternity of God.
  - b. The creative power of God.
3. The appropriate trust in God of *love*.
  - a. The grace of God.
  - b. The truth of God.

The piety of Ebeling comes out in this beautiful elaboration, which I shall give in his own words: “Wer betet, glaubt an die Macht der Liebe Gottes. Das wird gerade dann um so deutlicher, wenn sich das Gebet als ein Schreien aus der Tiefe oder als ein Stammeln dessen vernehmen laesst, der nicht weiss, wie er beten soll, sondern sich darauf verlaesst, dass der Geist ihn mit unaussprechlichem Seufzen vertritt, das Gott besser vesteht als der Beter [Romans 8:26f.]” (I, 244).

It would seem that a genuinely Lutheran doctrine of God should avoid natural theology; instead, it should go out from the premise that God remains unknown and impenetrable aside from his self-

revelation in Jesus Christ. Thereby, Luther's distinction of God hidden and revealed, or of Law and Gospel, might become central rather than peripheral to the entire system. (See the reviewer's sketch, "Toward a New Lutheran Dogmatics," CTQ 50:2 [April 1986]: 109-117.) Ebeling's dogmatics seems to come closer to this goal than any previous. His Christology is a key part of the total endeavor.

He begins Christology by discussing the relation of the Second Article of the Creed to the First. "In a certain way, in the Christ event, the truth of the creative working of God becomes also an event. And in this way the creation occurrence becomes a revelation occurrence, in the strict sense, for the first time. Out of this emerges that which is unique in the Second Article, over against the First, in regard to what is common to both. The togetherness of God, world, and man, which in the first part of the dogmatics was only taken up in outline form, first comes to its full truth in the appearance of Jesus Christ and is experienced as an event in faith. What previously could only be said rather unclearly about God, the world, and man, now receives its first precise definition in the concentration upon Jesus Christ" (II, 7).

Luther's well-known position rejected a "theology from above" (based upon Neo-Platonic speculation) in favor of a "theology from below," God revealed in the Child of Bethlehem and the Man of Calvary. This establishes the centrality of Christology. However, this does not necessarily mean that Christology itself must start "from below." Ebeling discusses very clearly the question of Christology from above or from below, points out and warns against problems in either position, and incorporates both approaches into his own discussion (II, 36-39). Proceeding from Luther's hymn, "Nun Freut Euch, Lieben Christen Gemein," which has God's Son descending to earth and then returning after completing the work of salvation, he comments: "The real wonder reported here is not the divine nature of Christ but His human nature. That He is God's Son is the point of departure. That He has become man is what goes beyond our understanding" (p. 36).

It has been lamented that, at the time when Neo-Pentecostalism was becoming a problem, the esteemed Dr. Pieper left the Missouri Synod a dogmatics lacking a *locus* concerning the Holy Ghost. There is no such oversight in Ebeling, who devotes over 100 pages to the person and work of the Spirit (III, 61-170). He vigorously distances pneumatology from enthusiasm (Neo-Pentecostalism!) by attaching it to the confession of Christ as Lord (1 Corinthians 12:1-3) and

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to the *theologia crucis* (III,102-103). He emphasizes Luther's exposition of the Third Article (III,191) and finds a direct line to the doctrine of justification. He speaks of "reference to the Spirit for the sake of faith" and "reference to faith for the sake of the Spirit" (III,192f.). "The righteousness of faith is the source of the Spirit. The fellowship of faith is the form of history in which the Holy Ghost continues to work. Through these clarifications those enthusiastic flights and spiritualistic evaporations which think to separate the Holy Ghost from the material things of earth and the historical ties of life on earth are warded off" (III,192).

The section on justification is substantial (III,194-248) and is followed by "God's Word as Law and Gospel" (pp. 249-295) and the sacraments (pp. 296-330). Unlike several recent writers, who have called the doctrine of justification inconceivable to the modern mind, Ebeling recognizes the unacceptability of this doctrine, but refuses to treat it as something expendable. Instead, justification is only "the tip of the iceberg." It is biblical teaching as a whole that is unacceptable to natural man: "God, sin, salvation—these central points of view, which sharpen biblically the question of the righteous man—are individually and together no less strange to modern man" (III,205). Christ is the righteous man (*der rechte Mensch*). "The announcement of justification out of faith alone is valid for the sake of Him who, as the righteous man, is believed in. Not although, but because, Jesus is believed in as true God, is He believed in as true man, as He who is the new, the righteous man, in contrast to the old, corrupted man. This announcement applies as a promise to him who, as the old man, is called in order that he might become the new, righteous man. Thereby, the announcement of justification is directed exclusively at Jesus Christ, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, at all people without exception" (p. 209). Although Ebeling as a Lutheran clearly upholds the universalism of grace, he does not fall into the recent false universalism which denies the judgment of the wicked at the end of time, but clearly teaches the judgment of the world (III,468). As he proceeds on justification, he develops further the aspects of *solus Christus*, *sola gratia*, *solo verbo*, and *sola fide* (III,219-225).

Finally, let us examine Ebeling's sacramental theology. The sacraments immediately follow a lengthy discussion on the Word and the distinction of Law and Gospel, and he uses this distinction in his presentation on the relationship between the Word and the sacraments (or, better, preaching and sacraments, p. 296). The

sacraments have a verbal essence, but presuppose the priority of the proclaimed Word; nevertheless, preaching has action character (*Handlungscharakter*) as well. Although Ebeling does not grind a confessional ax, he rejects Reformed thinking and stands decisively on the Lutheran side when he denies that the faith of the recipient in any way makes a sacrament; "for a right evangelical understanding of the sacrament, that stands completely outside of consideration" (III,312). He comes out for the Real Presence (III,313, 326, *passim*) and refutes Zwingli (III,306), but the Lutheran position is not handled as thoroughly as the reviewer would like. Nevertheless, Ebeling is thoroughly honest in acknowledging that the differences among the confessions are very real and are actually divisive. "Indifference over against the doctrine of the sacraments is no sign of reverence before the sacraments" (III, 301). In practical matters, he questions whether the recent tendency toward "generous communion fellowship" or the laxity shown in experimentation with novelties (e.g., communion of children) is a sign of strong faith or theological clarity. He opposes self-communion by the pastor and prefers that the pastor abstain or else receive the sacrament from a layman (III, 322).

Ebeling does not share the views of the "Liturgical Movement" of Lietzmann, Casel, Brilioth, Dix, and Reed (pagan roots of the sacraments; emphasis upon sacrifice); he rejects the notion that the Supper is the center of the Divine Service (III, 296) and cites the Word as that center, according to the Confessions (III,310). He makes minimal reference to the "History of Religions School of Theology," which connected Christian sacraments with the pagan mysteries of Greece, a position which passed from Lietzmann into current liturgics (the sacrament as an ordinary meal); Ebeling himself notes that Hellenistic terminology was not applied to the sacraments until the second century, when it was reluctantly taken over (p. 303); without labored attempts to discount a close connection between pagan mysteries and Christian sacraments on historical grounds, he chooses to show the differences by means of the Law-Gospel dialectic (III,298).

There has been a growing tendency in the Missouri Synod to utilize the concept of *typology*, making the Passover a *type* of the Lord's Supper, and even suggesting that a congregation "celebrate" the Supper by preceding it with a Passover. Ebeling's refutation is not based upon the Reformed roots of this approach, but rather upon the distinction of Law and Gospel. He is willing to grant that baptism might have grown out of circumcision or that the Supper might have

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grown out of the Passover. "But such an understanding, in spite of formally common points between the sacraments and religious rites, proves itself a misunderstanding and a misuse, so far as one sees the sacrament explained as Gospel in the relation of Word and faith...That which is handed out is nothing other than that which the Word is and is able to bestow in its highest potency: promise" (III,300). Perhaps there is no debasement of sacrament when he says that preaching has "sacramental character" (p. 297), but he might be misunderstood when he adds to the above: "Thus the sacraments are rites, but not such as establish salvation; but rather in a certain sense they place one in salvation, in that they remind him, and seal it, that the believer has his being in Christ" (p. 300). It seems that he is trying to say that there is only one gift, Christ, whether received through preaching or the sacraments. And the Word as Law and Gospel is that wholly other thing that cannot be grasped aside from the revelation of God in Christ. Otherwise, God remains the Hidden One.

It is unfortunate that insufficient attention has been accorded Ebeling's dogmatics in North America. It should be studied carefully by all who regard themselves as the practitioners of systematic theology.

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