

CHAPTER 2

THE NECESSITY FOR DOGMATICS

THE urgent question for a humanity which despairs of all truth: "Is there any Truth which one can believe at all? And, if so, does Christian doctrine, as such, claim to be truth of this kind?" lies, as we have already seen, outside the sphere of dogmatics. The Christian Church deals with this question by means of an intellectual discipline which is closely related to dogmatics, yet which must always be strictly distinguished from it; this study is called "Apologetics", a name which is as traditional as the term "Dogmatics". Apologetics is the discussion of questions raised by people outside of, and addressed to, the Christian Church; therefore at all times it has proved to be as urgent, and as inevitable, as the Christian study of doctrine proper, or dogmatics.

The question of the justification for, and the necessity of, dogmatics, differs from the former question because it arises within the Church. And yet it is a genuine and not a rhetorical question; nor is it even merely academic. The fact is, this question is justified from the standpoint of the "scientific" theologian. Serious objections have been raised to the whole undertaking, objections which must be recognized; to ignore them would simply mean that we had already fallen a prey to that dogmatic "rigidity", and that over-emphasis on the intellectual aspect of doctrine which is so deplorable.

The first objection concerns the loss of directness, and even of simplicity of faith, which is necessarily connected with the process of dogmatic reflection. A person who has hitherto only encountered the Biblical Gospel in its simplest form, and has been gripped by it in a direct, personal way, must necessarily feel appalled, chilled, or repelled by the sight of massive volumes of dogmatics, and his first acquaintance with the whole apparatus of ideas and of reflection connected with this study of theology as a science. Instinctively the simple Christian murmurs: "But why this immense apparatus of learning? What is the use of these subtle distinctions and these arid intellectual definitions? What is the use of this process of 'vivisection' of our living faith?" When, further, this "simple believer" becomes aware of the theological controversies and passionate dogmatic conflicts which seem inevitable, it is easy to under-

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stand that the simple Christian man or woman turns away from all this with horror, exclaiming: "I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and understanding, and didst reveal them unto babes!"¹ He sees the contradiction between the simple Gospel of the New Testament and this world of extremely abstract conceptions, between the living concreteness of the speech of Jesus and His Apostles, which speaks straight to the hearts of all who listen aright, and this ruthless analysis, this massive labour of systematic theology, in which only people of high intellectual gifts can share, which seems to be possible only at the cost of losing the freshness and directness of a living experience. Like a certain French theologian, he says, rightly: "A Gospel which cannot be put on a postcard cannot be the Gospel which was preached to the fishermen of the Lake of Galilee!" From this point of view dogmatics seems to be a perversion of the Gospel.

The second objection is closely connected with the first. It is raised by people who feel that the Biblical Gospel calls them to *action*. Their faith has awakened them to see and feel the sufferings of humanity, the terrible need and the burning questions of their own day, and they feel that "love constrains them" to give the world all the help they possibly can, both inwardly and outwardly. This being so, they feel: "Who would waste time trying to answer such difficult intellectual problems? Dogmatics is theory, but faith is obedience and fellowship. How can we waste time in speculations about the mysteries of the Trinity while there are human beings in trouble—both of body and soul!"

This direct and non-reflective rejection of dogmatics by the practical Christian layman is austerely expressed² by the philosopher in intellectual terms. Dogmatics, he says, like all theory, belongs to the "sphere of recollection", of reflection, of thought which is concerned with ideas; faith arises in the "reality" of encounter. Between these two there is an impassable gulf. The truth which is given to faith is only understood by one who meets the "Other" in action and in suffering, but it is not understood by the man who seeks truth in the sphere of solitary thought. Therefore the introduction of the truth of faith into that intellectual process of reflection, which

¹ Matt. II: 25.

² Cf. E. Grisebach: *Gegenwart; Freiheit und Zucht; Die Schicksalsfrage des Abendlandes*.

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is so remote from reality, can do faith no good, indeed, it can only do harm, because it diverts the Christian believer from his real duty of active love to God and his neighbour.

There is another equally important objection. It runs rather like this: "Dogmatics comes from 'dogma'. However you may define it, still by your precious 'dogma' you want to force us to accept an objective authority, an impersonal doctrinal authority, inserted between us and the Source of faith, Jesus Christ Himself; you want to set up a system of doctrinal coercion, which is in opposition to the freedom of faith. You want to establish an ecclesiastical heteronomy which restricts the liberty of the children of God! You want to repeat the ancient error, and to perpetuate it, that doctrine is the object of faith—a doctrine preserved by the Church, on which she bases her clerical authority. Inevitably, dogmatics leads to ecclesiastical tyranny, which, more than anything else, obstructs our view of the Gospel of the New Testament."

Finally, there is a fourth objection, which represents the views of those who admit the necessity for thinking about the Gospel, but who regard dogmatics as a perverted form of such thinking. Those who take this position claim that what the Church of our day needs is not a continuance of the dogmatic labours of previous centuries, which, as we know by experience, divides the Church by its definitions, but an intellectual effort which, recognizing the peculiar need of our own times, and the widespread lack of faith at the present day, tries to seek to win the outsider by answering his questions, and by entering into a real discussion with him. A dogmatic analysis of ideas does not make the Gospel more intelligible to the unbeliever, but less; it does not help him to understand why he ought to accept the Christian Faith. The true task of the Christian thinker, however, should be the very opposite—a task which hitherto has only been undertaken by great men who are exceptions in the realm of theology, men like Hamann, Pascal, or Kierkegaard. So long as the Church still uses her intellectual powers on the old traditional lines, she is neglecting the one and only important and fruitful intellectual task, which is her real duty.

Faced by these objections, are we to regard the enterprise of dogmatics, in spite of the weighty tradition behind it, as unnecessary? Or even if not actually dangerous, as at least a bypath for the teaching Church?

In the following pages the effort will be made to allow the

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History of the Church itself to give the answer to this question. We must, however, begin at this point: namely, that the Bible itself knows nothing of that process which from time immemorial the Church has known as "dogmatics". For more than a thousand years Israel existed as a religious community without anything like a system of dogma, in the sense, for instance, in which Calvin uses it in his *Institutes*—indeed, the Jewish Church did not even possess a Catechism, and even the Early Christian Church—that is, the Christian Church at the time of its highest vitality and purity, did not produce anything of the kind. This fact does make us think. *One* thing it does prove, beyond a doubt, namely, that dogmatics does not belong to the "esse", but at the most to the "bene esse" of the Church. For the "esse" of the Church consists only in that without which she could not possibly exist. But the Church existed for two hundred years without dogmatics. Thus if dogmatics is under no circumstances an *absolute* necessity, is it perhaps a *relative* necessity? That is, something which, under certain circumstances, is necessary. The History of the Church¹ gives a clear affirmative answer to this question—a threefold answer. Dogmatics springs from a threefold source: there are three urgent necessities for dogmatics which spring from the life of the Church itself, and cannot be ignored. (a) The first root of dogmatics is the *struggle against false doctrine*. The sinful self-will of man takes the Gospel—at first imperceptibly, and indeed perhaps unconsciously—and alters the content and the meaning of the message of Jesus Christ and His Mighty Act of Redemption, of the Kingdom of God and the destiny of Man. This process produces "substitute" Gospels; introduces "foreign bodies" into Christian truth, and distorts the Christian message: the very words of the Bible are twisted, and given an alien meaning, and indeed, one which is directly opposed to its purpose. The Christian Church is in danger of exchanging its divine treasury of truth for mere human inventions. This being so, ought not those who know the original Truth feel called to make a clear distinction between truth and illusion—between "gold" and "cat-gold" (Yellow mica)? This necessity of distinguishing between truth and error, and of warning the members of the Church against false teaching, makes it quite impossible to adopt the naïve attitude which can ignore these things. Comparison and reflection become necessary, and the more subtle and refined are the errors, the more urgent does

¹ Cf. below, pp. 93 ff.

this become. Where the very words of the Bible have been twisted to mean something different, it is not sufficient to appeal to the "words" of Scripture; where whole systems of alien thought have been "smuggled" into the message of the Church, it becomes necessary to set the whole on the one side over against the whole on the other, and to show clearly how each is built up into a system. It is the perversion of doctrine which leads to the formation of the ideas and systems of dogma. It was out of the fight against heresy that the dogmatics of the Early Church arose; the dogmatics of the Reformation period arose out of the struggles to purify the message of the Bible from Roman Catholic errors.

(b) The second source from which dogmatics is derived is that of catechetical instruction, or preparation for Baptism. Even the simplest Christian faith contains a doctrinal element. We have already pointed out that the Church never can, and never will be, without doctrine. Even the simple, non-theological teaching of Jesus is full of "theological" content. A person cannot become a Christian without *knowing* something about the Father in Heaven, the forgiveness of sins, Atonement through the Son of God, and the Work of the Holy Spirit; and when he "knows" these Biblical phrases he must go further and grasp their inner meaning. The teaching Church has to become the Church which instructs catechumens. But the thoughtful person cannot receive these doctrines without finding that they raise questions in his mind. The more alert and vigorous is his thinking, the more urgent and penetrating do his questions become. The Christian message must mould and penetrate not only the heart of man, but also his mind, and his processes of thought. But this can only take place if the Christian Message is thought out afresh and re-formulated in intellectual terms. The thoughtful believer is constantly perceiving new depths and heights in the truth of the Gospel. Thus the Christian catechetical instruction which was given through the rich intellectual medium of the Greek world of culture became a method of theological and dogmatic teaching. The instruction of educated catechumens developed into Dogmatics.

The third root of dogmatics is that of Biblical exegesis. Where there is a living Church, a living spiritual life, there men feel the need to penetrate more deeply into the meaning of the Bible, to draw water from the richness of its wells of truth, to enquire into the hidden connections between its main ideas. Such people are not satisfied with an approximate and pro-

visional knowledge—they want something exact and permanent. But this means that when the great “words” of the Bible, such as “Sin” or “Grace”, are studied, it is not enough to study them in the particular passage in question: they must be investigated from the standpoint of Biblical doctrine as a whole, and *this*, they feel, they must grasp as a whole. It is not sufficient, for instance, to know what the Apostle Paul means by the “righteousness of God” in a particular passage in the Epistle to the Romans: we want to know what he means by this expression as a whole, and also how this specifically Pauline phrase is related to other phrases which, although they sound different, contain a similar meaning in other Biblical writers. Then when the Biblical scholar has done his work—when he has explained the Epistle to the Romans, and has related it to “Pauline theology” as a whole—then the reader of the Bible, who wants to learn not only from Paul but from the whole revelation contained in Scripture, starts a fresh process of questioning, and it is such questions that the systematic theologian tries to answer. It is at this point that the “Dictionary of the Bible”, or the “*loci theologici*”, comes into being.

This threefold root is still visible in the titles of the three standard dogmatic works of the Reformation period. The struggle against heresy is represented by Zwingli’s *Commentarius de vera et falsa religione*; the instruction of catechumens by the *Institutio christianae religionis* of Calvin—which developed out of an expanded Catechism; the need for a “Dictionary of the Bible” for the Bible reader, by the first dogmatic work of Melanchthon, his *Loci theologici*.

For the sake of the Gospel the Church cannot ignore its duty to distinguish false doctrine from true; to this end it must make the effort to express the content of its simple teaching in more exact and thoughtful terms. The Church must help the reader of the Bible by giving him a comprehensive explanation of the chief Biblical terms; Church leaders cannot ignore the fact that it is their duty to give thoughtful members of the Christian community a body of instruction which goes further than the most elementary elements of the Faith, and to answer their questions. Hence the Church cannot fail to develop her doctrine in the sense of giving more exact and precise definitions of ideas; then, she must show the connexion of these ideas with the whole body of Christian truth. This process is “Dogmatics”. This is the answer from Church History.

But this historical answer alone is not sufficient; primarily,

because it starts uncritically from an historical position which is not impregnable; that is, it assumes that the original doctrine of the Church was clear and uniform.

The New Testament is not a book of doctrine, but it is a collection of apostolic confessions of faith and historical records which have been written down in order to awaken and strengthen faith. But in these believing testimonies to God's revelation in Jesus Christ there is already a good deal of intellectual and theological reflection—in some more, and in others less. From this it is possible to construct a "theology of the Apostles"—as we shall see later on—and this New Testament doctrine will become the basis of all dogmatic instruction. Now, however, this process of development—from the relatively non-reflective, immediate character of the doctrine of the New Testament, to the highly developed doctrinal system of the Church, proves to be inevitable, because this "theology of the Apostles" is not an absolute unity, but is presented in a series of different types of doctrine, which differ considerably from one another. In a variety of doctrine the one Christ and the one Gospel bear witness to the Divine Act of Redemption. The fact that this "unity" exists within a partly contradictory multiplicity, evokes critical reflection. It is not the task of the Church to teach what Matthew, Paul, or John teach, but it *is* her duty to proclaim the Word of God; therefore she must teach the one divine truth in these differing Apostolic doctrines. If there were an absolutely uniform, and therefore unmistakably "apostolic doctrine", or "doctrine of the New Testament", then perhaps the work of dogmatics might be superfluous. But since this is not the case, and since the truth of revelation must be sought in and behind the unity of the different testimonies to Christian truth, the work of reflection upon dogma is indispensable.

Hence a simple reproduction of "the" doctrine of the Bible is impossible. Every theology or proclamation of the Church which claims to be able to do this is based upon a fiction; in actual fact it is accomplished by an unconscious, and unacknowledged process of systematization of theology. The teachers or preachers of the Church who claim for themselves and others that "*they* have no dealings with theology, but that they stick quite simply to the teaching of the Bible", deceive themselves and others. Whatever the Church teaches, she teaches on the basis of a normative decision—even though this decision may have taken place unconsciously—concerning the nature of

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“sound doctrine”. Open and honest consideration of “sound doctrine” can never end in appealing to any “standard” doctrine. “Sound doctrine”, when more closely examined, always proves to be a task which is never ended, and it is never something which exists “ready-made”. Even behind the most primitive forms of Christian teaching, behind the teaching of Jesus and of the Apostles, “sound doctrine” is always something which has to be sought. If the New Testament witness to revelation is the basis and the content of all dogmatics (as will be shown in the following pages to be the case), then its necessity has already been proved by the fact that the task of discovering the unity of sound doctrine behind the different doctrines of the New Testament is unavoidable. Thus the truth of revelation and human doctrine do not only diverge in the sphere of dogmatic reflection, but this contradiction exists already, even in the simplest Biblical witness to revelation and faith. Here already it is evident that the divine Truth is a light which cannot be received by the human mind without being refracted. The one truth of Christ is refracted in the manifold doctrines of the Apostles; but it is the task of the Church—which has to proclaim the truth of Christ, and thus also has to teach—to seek continually for the one Light of Truth within these refractions. Dogmatics is the science which enables the Church to accomplish this task.