

Chapter 1

The Position of Dogmatics

The intellectual enterprise which bears the traditional title of “dogmatics”¹ takes place within the Christian Church. It is this that distinguishes it from similar intellectual undertakings, especially within the sphere of philosophy, as that is usually understood. Our immediate concern is not to ask whether this particular undertaking is legitimate, useful, or necessary. The first thing we have to say about it is that it is closely connected with the existence of the Christian Church, and that it arises only within this sphere. We study dogmatics as members of the Church, with the consciousness that we have a commission from the Church, and a service to render to the Church, due to a compulsion which can only arise within the Church. Historically and actually, the Church exists before dogmatics. The fact that the Christian Faith and the Christian Church exist, precedes the existence, the possibility, and the necessity for dogmatics. Thus if dogmatics is anything at all, it is a *function of the Church*.

It cannot, however, be taken for granted that there is, or should be, a science of dogmatics within the Christian Church; but if we reverse the question, from the standpoint of dogmatics it is obvious that we would never dream of asking whether there ought to be a Church, or a Christian Faith, or whether the Christian Faith and the Christian Church have any right to exist at all, or whether they are either true or necessary? Where this question does arise—and in days like ours it must be raised—it is not the duty of dogmatics to give the answer. This is a question for apologetics or “eristics”. But dogmatics presupposes the Christian Faith and the Christian Church not only as a fact but as the possibility of its own existence. From the standpoint of the Church, however, it is right to put the question of the possibility of, and the necessity for, dogmatics.

But when all this has been said, the “place” of dogmatics has still only been defined in a very provisional sense. Further, this definition of its “place” is obliged to start from the fact that the Christian Church is a Teaching Church. But even as a Teaching Body the Church precedes dogmatics, both historically

1. See below, pp. 89 ff.

and actually. From its earliest days the Church, the Christian Community, has been pre-eminently a teaching body; one of her outstanding characteristics has been “teaching” or “doctrine”.² As the Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ was Himself a Teacher, so also His disciples carry on a teaching ministry. We cannot think of the Christian Church without teaching, any more than we can think of a circle without a centre; teaching and “doctrine” belong to its very nature.

But this does not mean that teaching is the beginning and the end of the Church; rather, teaching is *one* of its functions, and *one* of the basic elements of its life. Like the Lord of the Church Himself, His Apostles did not only teach: they did other things as well. “And they continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers.”³ This is the earliest description of the Primitive Church. Whether the “teaching” is put first intentionally, or by accident, we will not as yet enquire; we may, however, guess that the order is not accidental. For there can be no doubt that from the very earliest days, and all down the centuries, teaching has been an outstanding function and expression of the life of the Church.

Dogmatics is related to this teaching function of the Church; its living basis, its possibility, and—as will be shown later on—its content, all depend upon it; but this teaching of the Church is not “dogmatics”. The Apostles are not systematic theologians, and what they teach is not dogmatics. It was two hundred years before the Christian Church produced the first “dogmatics”. Thus it is not because there is a science of Christian dogmatics that we have Christian teaching, but, conversely, Christian teaching is the cause of dogmatics. Dogmatics—to put it so for the moment—is the Science of Christian teaching or doctrine. But the subject always exists before the “science” of the subject can be studied. The teaching Church, and the teaching of the Church, is the “place” at which dogmatics arises. Dogmatics is a function of the teaching Church; speaking generally, it is a service which is rendered for the sake of the doctrine of the Church.

But the doctrine of the Church, and the teaching Church, do not merely constitute the presupposition of dogmatics in the sense that a subject presupposes the science of that subject. There may be, it is true, a science of Christian faith and of

2. The German word *Lehre* = both “teaching” and “doctrine”. (Tr.)

3. Acts 2: 42.

Christian doctrine, for which that general relation between the subject and its science exists, which we might describe as a branch of general religious knowledge, namely, as the science of the Christian religion. It was thus conceived by Schleiermacher in his Short Exposition⁴ of the relation between the doctrine of the Church and dogmatics, although he did not adhere to this definition in his own work on the Christian Faith. When we said that the Church is the “place” of dogmatics, we meant that this kind of academic or intellectual knowledge or research was only possible within the community of believers. Dogmatics are only possible or thinkable, not only *because* the Church and Christian teaching exist, but also only *where* they exist. Dogmatics is itself a function of the Church. Only one who is a genuine “believer” and, as such, believes in the Church and its teaching, can render to the Church the service which is implied in the idea of dogmatics. The presupposition of dogmatics is not only the existence of the Church and its doctrine, but life *within* the Church, and *in* its doctrine. Dogmatic thinking is not only thinking *about* the Faith, it is *believing* thinking. There may be various ways of solving the problem of the Theory of Knowledge which this raises:⁵ this, in any case, is the claim which dogmatics makes, without which its effort ceases to be dogmatics, and it becomes the neutral science of religion. It is the believing Church itself which, in dogmatics, makes its own teaching the object of reflection; essentially, dogmatics claims to be an academic study controlled by the Church.

4. Schleiermacher's *Werke*, I, 1, para. 97: “The connected presentation of doctrine, as it is accepted ... at a given time, is what we mean by the expression ‘dogmatics’ or ‘dogmatic theology’.”

5. Cf. E. Burnier: “*La restauration de la théologie biblique et sa signification épistémologique*”, in *Bible et théologie*, Lausanne, 1943.

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 understand

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 austere 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, 11 : 25.

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

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

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 Church³ 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

3. Cf. below, pp. 93 ff.