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A New Christian Dogmatics: Why and How?

My colleague Kees van der Kooi will say something about the "what" of our book, the substance matter, whereas I will try to explain its "why" and "how": why did we write this book, and how did we do it?

1. Why?

I am not sure about the Hungarian word, but both in English and in Dutch the word "dogmatics" has a negative connotation. It sounds dull and dry. If someone is "dogmatic", he is narrow-minded and suffers from a tunnel view. So it is quite understandable that many people don't want to be dogmatic and, if they are believers, they want to believe in a non-dogmatic way (even in politics, such as during the provincial elections in my country last week, politicians try to gain voters by stating that they are "not dogmatic" about some issue).

In spite of all this, as a matter of fact, in Christian theology *dogmatics* is one of the most exciting and challenging endeavors for everyone who is the least bit interested in the Christian faith. Personally, I still remember browsing a Dutch survey of dogmatics as a freshman when I was eighteen years old or so. I did not yet understand much of it at the time, but I still remember how impressed I was by the author's attempt to grasp the overall contours of the Christian faith and to explore even its finest details. At almost every turn of the page I came across something that I did not know and which caused me to exclaim: "Wow, is that so? I never realized that—but now I see!" In this way, surveys of Christian dogmatics, like our book, aim at providing *orientation* in an often confusing and even bewildering field that raises so many questions. In such a situation, providing orientation is not only important to keep the faith tradition going, it may even offer consolation and support to people who struggle with the faith. Therefore, even though we continued to hesitate until the last weeks before we had to make a final decision, eventually we decided to use the word "dogmatics" as the key term in the title of our book. Many marketing people had tried to dissuade us from doing so, suggesting that we should call the book *An Introduction to Theology*, or something like that. But we found that title too bleak, and considered that we should call the book what it is: a new specimen of the age old habit of writing a scholarly survey of the contents of the faith—that is, dogmatics.

If we look at our students, some of them enroll in the study of theology because they are convinced they have a vocation, a divine calling, and they want to start their ministry as soon as they can. They don't have many questions, since they already know the answers, if I may say so. But today this is clearly a minority of our students. Most of them, and especially the younger ones, don't have a clear idea of what they want to do or become with their degree, but they start studying theology because they are looking for existential *orientation*. For example, they have gone through experiences of suffering and evil, and now they want to know how they can relate such experiences to their personal faith, or to the Christian faith. Or they want to know how, in our science-imbued times, belief in God can be rationally accounted for, if at all. Or they just have a clear interest in the big questions of life: why are we here, where do we come from, and where are we heading? Quite often, they are dissatisfied by certain answers they received from the minister of their own local church, and now they want to find out whether these answers were sound or whether they should look for other ones.

It is for these students (both the seeking majority and the knowing minority) that we wrote our book in the first place. Previously we used to assign them the book *Christian Faith* by Dutch theologian Hendrikus Berkhof as required reading. But this book stemmed from the seventies of the last century, and not only contained a lot of Latin, but also was situated in a cultural setting which was no longer that of our students, who live in a much more postmodern, multi-religious, secularized and digitalized environment. Many expressions that were used in Berkhof's book were reminiscent of previous decades and were no longer in common usage. And, to be honest, even though we owe a lot to him, some of Berkhof's dogmatic decisions were infelicitous in our view, for example, the major decisions he made in Christology and with regard to the doctrine of the Trinity. So here is the main reason for our book: it occurred to us that, from the point of view of our students, most of the existing handbooks for Christian dogmatics had become more or less obsolete. And we wanted to show our students that Christian dogmatics is far from obsolete, but actually a vibrant and fascinating field of academic studies. Indeed, since the seventies and the eighties of the former century, the discipline of Christian dogmatics had developed into specific directions, and we wanted to inform our students about these (Kees will tell a bit more of what these directions are).

So this is *why* we wrote the book. One might think that since the Word of God and the truth of the gospel doesn't change but ever remains the same, a new dogmatic handbook is not needed since we can just continue with the old ones.

But that would be a bit short-sighted. Dogmatics is not only about truth, but it is just as much about meaning and significance. It is about why the gospel matters to us and our lives. If we have no understanding of this, the gospel will never "stick"; it won't do its work but remain external to our hearts and lives. So that is why we will need new words and thought categories to relate the Christian faith to the questions and challenges of our own times and, in doing so, to show its relevance in ever-changing cultural conditions. We don't know whether we succeeded in doing so—no doubt we did to a lesser extent than we would have hoped. But we do know that this is the task of the dogmatician, the systematic theologian: not just to verbally repeat what has been said by great names in the past, but to speak on our own account for our own times, while taking seriously what has been said by so many godly men and women who preceded us. So here, perhaps, we stumble upon the underlying reason for writing this book: not just to make our students familiar with the substance matter of the Christian faith, the so-called *fides quae*, but also to show the relevance of Christian faith and theology to our late-modern culture, even though there will never be an easy bridge between the two. Yet, if it is true that faith is always seeking understanding, as the old saying goes (*fides quaerens intellectum*), we also want to understand our own times in light of faith, trying to discern the ways of the Spirit today.

As mentioned, when we wrote this book, we first of all had our students in mind, especially those who had started their bachelor's program at the university level. That is why we began each chapter by making connections between (their) daily life and the dogmatic theme to be discussed in that particular chapter. In this way, the various chapters open with references to music, a novel, a movie, a famous speech, or some other lowbrow or highbrow cultural phenomenon. We were astonished to see, however, that once our book was out (in Dutch), all sorts of others started to buy and read it. In many congregations, study circles and reading clubs spontaneously emerged, often chaired by a local pastor or minister, where people from different confessional backgrounds met and discussed the contents of the book. To their own surprise, the systematic study of the Christian faith was much more their business than they had ever thought. Undoubtedly, to a large extent this was due to the fact that, as we attempt to show in this book, Christian dogmatics is inextricably linked up with concrete practices of faith such as prayer (e.g., the Lord's Prayer is a recurrent theme in the book) and communal Bible reading.

Now this brings us quite naturally to the second part of my talk, about the 'how' of this book.

2. How?

As with all surveys of Christian dogmatics, this books attempts to cover the entire scope of Christian beliefs and practices. Thus, starting with the so-called prolegomena—the things that should be said in advance, or said first—we discuss the question of whether there is a God and how we can know, what external and internal grounds or reasons we can discern for the faith. Next, we explore the nature and identity of God according to the Christian tradition, giving pride of place to the doctrine of the Trinity. And then we just walk, as it were, walk all the way through the biblical narrative, from creation to eschatology. All in all, we have 16 chapters, each discussing a different locus. But of course, far from being isolated from each other, these different doctrinal topics hang together in often intricate ways. They compose a complex "network of beliefs", which are in turn closely connected to practices, such as prayer and worship, but also to the search for justice and peace. To mention one example, the practice of the Lord's Supper—or the Eucharist, as others call it—and the way it is celebrated in a specific church tells us a lot about how central or peripheral the role of Jesus Christ is, what salvation is supposed to consist of, how the church is valued, what role the ministry and other offices has, etc. It is fascinating to unearth such inner connections and expose the network of the Christian faith, while also shedding light on the various trajectories it has taken in different ecclesial traditions.

Of course, we were helped here by the fact that we wrote the book together. Fortunately, we need not cover the entire scheme of doctrinal theology on our own, but we could make use of the various themes each of us had been working on this past. Somehow these turned out to fit in with each other in a wonderful way. For example, some topics on which I had not studied that much, such as Christology and ecclesiology, had been a clear focus of Kees' research in the past. So we could incorporate the results of our previous explorations that were devoted to one particular topic in this overall survey.

Speaking of the 'how', let me now point out some characteristics of this particular introduction to Christian doctrine. First, we learn a great number of things from the tradition(s) of Christian thinking. We always approach the *tradition* with great respect—but, being Protestants, never uncritically. For we know that traditions can also stifle and harden the faith, turning it into an empty vessel, so that we need renewal and reformation and great awakenings all the time. Reformed Christians especially know that they are reformed in order to again and again be reformed (*reformata quia semper reformanda*) in the renewal of

their thinking, as Paul says (Rom. 12). Far from being static, the Christian faith is a thoroughly dynamic way of life. Having said that, however, we will always stay in touch with the tradition in great respect, knowing that by definition we stand on the shoulders of those who went ahead of us in the faith, and who now belong to the Church triumphant. This is much more the case in theology than in most other disciplines. Whereas we often smile about the theories of physicists and other natural scientists of previous eras, we can still take the spirituality and theology of premodern writers—let's say an Augustine, or a John Calvin—with utmost seriousness. Even though we won't always agree with them, we owe them a tremendous debt and continue to learn so much from them. That is why we give ample attention to many Christian thinkers from previous centuries – most of them men, to be honest. They lived in foregone times, but still speak to us even though they have passed away.

Second, the *Bible* is never far away in our dogmatics. Of course, ever since the rise of historical-biblical criticism, the role of the Bible in dogmatics is deeply contested. So, we devote one chapter to the Bible as 'the book of God and humans' in which we navigate our way between biblicism on the one hand and skepticism and criticism on the other. In particular, we adopt the hermeneutical perspective of what has come to be called the "theological interpretation of Scripture", which means that the Bible is first of all a book that tells us about God and God's relationship to us, and secondly a book that has its natural habitat in the community of the Church. So, its natural habitat is not the dissection table of source criticism, or what other forms of criticism we have, but the community that receives the Bible as canon, i.e., a series of very diverse and heterogeneous books which God has bequeathed to us. It is not the one and only source of revelation, since revelation includes much more, as God can reveal himself to us in a myriad of ways. The concept of revelation is fundamental to faith and theology, which we therefore treat early on in our book; the Bible, on the other hand, is a special gift of the Spirit (as the Creed has it), as a precious guide through the times, pointing and teaching us the way to eternal life.

But it is not just in this particular chapter that the Bible plays a role. For Christian doctrine as a whole is profoundly rooted in the biblical Scriptures. I (and I know the same applies to my colleague) cannot understand how colleagues have been able to write a Christian dogmatics while hardly referring to the Bible and biblical scholarship at all. Recently, a publisher wrote me to review a manuscript on theological anthropology written by a European colleague. And I found it a very instructive and useful text, so I advised the publisher positively.

Yet, I said: one thing, please ask the author why he is barely struggling with the Bible in this manuscript, turning theological anthropology almost into a purely philosophical exercise. In our book, you will find engagement with the Bible from beginning to end. Perhaps we have not always done it in the right way, perhaps on closer inspection the exegesis might sometimes reveal other things, but we are convinced that a sound Christian dogmatics should be thoroughly informed by engagement with the Scriptures in all their pluriformity. That is, with the longing for righteousness which is at the heart of the Torah, with the prophetic critique of powerful institutions which is at the heart of the prophetic writings, with the profoundly spiritual resources, including the experience of godforsakenness, which we find in the Psalms, with the wisdom of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, the good news of the gospels, the missionary zeal of Acts, the thorough reflection on the implications of the gospel in Paul's writings, the love letters of John, the hope letters of Peter, and last, but not least, the anti-totalitarian visions of the Apocalypse (perhaps in today's global political situation, no Bible book is so relevant as the Apocalypse, even though it's canonical status has been contested in the past; the Apocalypse tells us that all these totalitarian powers which idolize themselves and enslave the ordinary people will not have the final word, but will all implode in the course of time and will eventually be substituted by the Kingdom of God. So in all sorts of ways, the Bible remains crucial for a contemporary retrieval of dogmatics, its many narratives putting meat on the bones of Christian thought.

Third, as already mentioned, Christian dogmatics can never be a mere repetition of what we knew all along from the fourth, sixteenth, or even twentieth century. Since it is pursued in ever-changing cultural contexts, it should relate to different themes in each epoch. Thus, we interact with the rise of evolutionary theory in science, the rise of post-foundationalism in epistemology, the rise of Pentecostalism in world Christianity, etc. Perhaps I should add to this that Christian dogmatics not only differs a bit from time to time, but also from place to place. In this connection, we would be curious to know to what extent this book also speaks to you here in Transylvania, who have gone through a different historical and cultural trajectory than we in Western-Europe, and who have had to deal with collective experiences and even traumas that are different from ours. Please feel free to let us know if there are things which you miss in this book, or perhaps even disagree with, because we were writing from our own limited West-European and, perhaps, even Dutch perspective.

A fourth and final characteristic of the "how", the specific approach of our book has to do with its ecclesial embedding. On the one hand, from the first pages of the book onwards we are unashamed of our Reformed identity, and this background will be palpable throughout the book, perhaps even more to readers from other traditions than to those who are Reformed themselves. Calvin and Barth, but also Schleiermacher and Berkhof, Kuyper and Bavinck, Moltmann and Webster are among our recurring sparring partners, and classical Reformed themes such as the covenant and predestination are thoroughly discussed, I think. Yet, at the same time we sincerely have been very keen to learn from people of other Christian traditions, in a spirit of humble ecumenism. We try to avoid theological narrow-mindedness, as if God has revealed himself only in our own tradition; instead, we humbly recognize that it is only along with all the saints that we can gradually discover the height and the length and the depth of the love of Christ (Eph. 2). Therefore, we also listen carefully to Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologians past and present, and occasionally even to voices from the Orthodox world. Perhaps we should haven included more female and more non-Western voices, but then we will be the first to acknowledge the limitations of our endeavor.

The motto of our book is taken from second Corinthians 4:7: "What do you have that you did not receive?" Keeping this Pauline saying in mind prevents us from becoming overly polemic. We believe that the body of Christ has been torn apart too often in the past as a result of what has been called the *rabies theologorum*—the fury of theologians. And yes, we do make clear choices from time to time, and we draw some lines as the church has always done—the task of dogmatics is normative as much as it is orientative and innovative—but first of all we have tried to write in an irenic spirit, in a way that unites rather than divides, e.g., by drawing attention to the (often understandable) concerns behind dogmatic points of view in various traditions. It is important to understand theologians from other traditions, to listen carefully to them, before judging their viewpoints—and we learned this attitude in particular from our predecessor at the Vrije Universiteit, Gerrit Berkouwer.

In brief, as my colleague will go on to explain now, this book is a kind of hiking guide. We try to highlight all sorts of pathways and show how they are connected. We point to astonishingly beautiful points of interest, but we also mark swamps and mires where it is dangerous to go. In the end, however, we know for sure that the hiking guide can never replace the hiking adventure, just like theology can never replace the way of faith, but only helps us to keep going. In this sense, our book is most of all intended as a modest contribution that aims to serve the Church and the life of faith on its way through our times.