

Chapter 1

Introduction

§ 1. DOGMA AND DOGMATICS

1.1. *The role of dogmas*

1.2. *The nature of dogmatics*

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There are times when dogmatics is in demand, and there are periods when this discipline is not highly regarded. Within a faculty of theology, biblical and practical courses are sometimes much more popular.

Yet as the discipline that studies dogmas, systematic theology is indispensable. This is why we first call attention to the significance of dogma. We define “dogma” as *doctrine that the church, under appeal to the Word of God, holds to be normative*.

The Greek word from which we get “dogma” turns up in the New Testament. It may signify a decree of an emperor (Luke 2:1) or the commandments of the Law of Moses (Eph. 2:15; Col. 2:14). Among the Greeks a philosophical concept could also be called a dogma, although we do not encounter it in that sense in the New Testament. In Acts 16:4 the word “dogma” signifies decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. This went far beyond mere human judgment, because the council was convinced that it was led by the

Holy Spirit whom Christ had promised to his church. When they announced those decisions, therefore, they could say, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). A decree of the emperor of Rome reflected imperial authority, but ecclesiastical decisions reflect a different and higher authority.

From the third century in the East and later also in the West the word “dogma” signified the doctrine of the church, although it was not yet an established concept. The *Ecclesiastical Institutes* is the title of an influential work by Gennadius (ca. 500) in which the term is used in the sense of an ecclesiastically adopted or authoritative teaching.¹

The Reformers knew the word in this sense, but did not make it their term of choice. Like Luther, Calvin often spoke of doctrine (*doctrina*), a term he preferred to dogma. For him dogma was often the “new dogma” of Rome, over against which he placed the doctrine of Scripture, which is sound, pure, and spiritual.²

As for the councils of Nicea (325) through Chalcedon (451), Calvin said that he regarded them as holy insofar as they concerned the doctrines (*dogmata*) of the faith. When someone brings the church into confusion with his teaching and it looks as though serious discord will ensue, the churches must convene and make a pronouncement that is derived from Scripture (*definitio ex Scriptura sumpta*). Thus the Council of Nicea upheld the eternal divinity of Christ over against Arius (*Institutes*, 4.9.8, 13).

According to Rome, when the church makes a definitive pronouncement, there can be no appeal to a higher authority. For us, however, doctrine accepted by the church does not constitute the highest authority because the church does not have the final say. As Luther put it, “God’s Word shall establish the articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel” (Gottes Wort soll Artikel des Glaubens stellen und sonst niemand, auch kein Engel, *BSLK*, 421).

What the church has pronounced on the basis of God’s Word, and has not retracted, constitutes dogma from a formal point of view. As far as substance is concerned, however, dogma is completely contingent on revelation. The fact that dogma has derivative authority does not detract from the fact that the church accepts it as normative. In its dogmatic pronouncements, the church of Christ does not so much say what *is* being believed within its community as what *should* be believed on the basis of the Word of God.

1. Cf. G. Söll, *Dogma und Dogmenentwicklung* (dogmas and their development), 1971 (Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte = handbook of the history of dogmas. 1/5); *TRE* 9:26–41; E. A. de Boer, “Geloof onder woorden (faith expressed in words),” *Radix* 10 (1984): 68–76.

2. Cf. W. van ’t Spijker, “Doctrina naar reformatorische opvatting (Reformational doctrines),” *Th. Ref.* 20 (1977): 263–80; 21 (1978): 7–25.

There are various forms of authority. The authority of the government must be recognized. Scientific theses have authority for us when they are convincing. But what the church teaches in accordance with the Word of God demands acceptance. It is a matter of the heart.

Among those who are of an entirely different view in this regard is Kuitert, who does not consider “acceptance” to be a felicitous term when it comes to truth. According to him, many view believing as being equivalent to accepting a number of clearly delineated doctrinal truths about God, Jesus, man, and the future. He advocates a radically different approach, one that requires neither “swallowing nor choking.” A radical revision is required for the way in which churches tie themselves to the past. Actually, the notion of “being tied to” is not appropriate in connection with faith. Christian symbols provide food for thought, but do not prescribe what should be thought.³

To Kuitert, the content of the Christian faith (*fides quae creditur*) is an orientation scheme or heuristic model, a concept of God and his salvation that did not arise apart from human experience and which cannot endure without affirmation based on human experience. The Christian heuristic model soon takes on the form of ecclesiastical dogma, which brings with it the risk that it will end up as church discipline and coercion in doctrinal matters. The truth of a heuristic model is, however, not confirmed by preserving it inalterably, but only by an appeal to human experience. Is this not how it is with scientific hypotheses also? The heuristic model can and must be adjusted continually. So it is with theological research, whereby admittedly the Bible plays the key role, but not as a simple criterion. Without the first witnesses of Jesus with whom the Bible confronts us, we would not exist as the Christian church. But the church, which enters into dialogue with the first witnesses, can and may distance itself from their testimony if it believes that there are valid reasons for doing so. The Christian church is an independent entity, which *also* possesses the Spirit.

It is striking that Kuitert, who does not think that he can view Scripture as a norm or criterion, introduces another norm. Not all that the Bible authors say about God meets this norm for the truth concerning God, his salvation, and his will, namely, “that it gives people freedom and opens up the future” (1977, 173ff.).

Aside from the difficulty that this kind of norm presents as far as its content is concerned, its vagueness makes it a choice that is very subjectively determined and can never rise above subjectivism.

Theology always has a starting point. For us, this is the position that the churches subscribing to the Reformed confession in the Netherlands have traditionally held, jointly with the other churches of the Reformation. This means that the canonical books of the Scriptures constitute the sole rule of faith (Belgic Confession of Faith, Articles 5 and 7). As far as the foundation of and norm for the Christian faith

3. H. M. Kuitert, *Wat heet geloven?* (what is believing?), 1977, 185, 27; idem, *Zonder geloof vaart niemand wel* (without faith no one fares well), 1974, 54.

are concerned, nothing may be put on a par with Holy Scripture. Only the Bible has inherent credibility in itself (for the necessary substantiation, see especially chapter 3).

Kuitert's clearly articulated striving for freedom in matters of faith enjoys widespread support. Doctrinal pronouncements by the church are depicted by his followers as a law to which the faithful must submit themselves. Furthermore, they are of the opinion that such submission is tantamount to being shackled to the past, or at least to being obligated to abide by the insights of previous generations.

We point out that the form in which the dogmas of the church are transmitted to us is the confessional form. This is not the case with most of the dogmatic pronouncements of Rome, but is true of the churches of the Reformation, for their dogmas are embedded in the confessions. In this way their unequivocal character as reflection of the truth and defense against error is preserved. As decisive pronouncements that the church was constrained to make in the past, they are of lasting significance. They have been incorporated into the confessional documents in texts that not only call for consent but also can be used for believing reflection.

The ancient church dogma of the Trinity of God comes to us in the Nicea-Constantinople Creed. The words of this dogma are part of a creed that is doxological in tone.

The doctrine of justification does not merely say what is and what is not the biblical message. In Article 23 of the Belgic Confession and in Lord's Day 23 of the Heidelberg Catechism, it functions in a context in which personal faith is confessed.

The Canons of Dort give some the impression that they constitute a massive exposition of Calvinistic doctrine. But how movingly this confessional document speaks of election, the atonement, conversion, and perseverance (see 1.13, 14; 2.9; 3/4.17; 5.8–15).

Is not the main objection to continuing to attribute normative authority to the ecclesiastical doctrines and confessional statements, that they tie us to the past? Yes indeed, if we were to view these dogmas and confessional formulations in isolation. However, in a church of the Reformation, dogmas and confessions function only in conjunction with the authority of the Word of God. Every human document and every ecclesiastical decision may be appealed to Holy Scripture, which is the final arbiter in cases of disagreement.

Today a great deal of fuss is made about being bound to dated ecclesiastical pronouncements that were in part determined by their historical

context. But actually this is not the most fundamental issue. A parting of ways occurs at the questions as to how we interpret the authority of the Bible and how we deal with the teaching of Scripture.

It is the task of the church and theology to understand dogmas in the light of the Scriptures and to test their validity against the Scriptures. Although this is not exclusively the domain of dogmatics, it does constitute its special concern.

1.2. *The nature of dogmatics*

“Dogmatics” is an abbreviation of “dogmatic theology.” This term occurs in the title of a work by L. F. Reinhart, *Synopsis theologiae dogmaticae* (1659), and conveys more than older titles such as *Sententiae* (Pronouncements), *Summa* (Summation), *Loci, Loci communes* (Essentials), or *Synopsis* (Survey). See also H. Berkhof, 1982, 11.

In the nineteenth century, preference was given to such names as “Doctrine of Faith,” or “Christian Doctrine,” but especially under the influence of Karl Barth the term “dogmatics” has come to the fore again (*Church Dogmatics*). “Dogmatics” has regained its rightful place in the theological encyclopedia (Runia, 1957, 3).

Theology, however, is in constant flux, and Barth’s position did not fail to elicit reaction. The new wave is characterized by the demand that dogmatics be linked to human experience and be relevant to it. These are critical, experience-based theologies that are described by a noun (e.g., theology of hope, theology of revolution) or by an adjective (e.g., black theology, feminist theology). This profusion of theologies threatens to crowd out dogmatics in which the dogma of the church has a voice.

Those who are under the spell of hermeneutics are even of the opinion that dogmatics as a theological discipline is impossible, impermissible, irrelevant, and inexpedient (Polman, 1969, 7–10).

Regardless of changes in *Zeitgeist* and mode of thought, an important argument for dogmatics is that the relationship to dogma finds clear expression.

Dogma expresses succinctly what the church views as central and essential in the biblical message. Dogmatics analyzes, presents arguments, and elucidates.

We will now consider what we believe to be the characteristic features of dogmatics.

1. *Its ecclesiastical character.* Without the church there would be no dogma. Actually there could be no dogmatics either, but only strictly personal statements of doctrine.

Dogmatics is a ministry that the church demands or at least should demand. We deliberately speak of ministry, for neither dogmatics nor any other theological discipline should ever seek to rule. It needs indeed to be reminded from time to time that its function is to minister. Only then can it assume a ministry of its own in the church “with exegesis as its foundation and preaching as its goal” (Noordmans, *V.W.*, 2:174ff.). This does not mean that the task of dogmatics should always be viewed in such a narrow ecclesiastical sense that all questions not directly affecting the church should be ignored by it. Such issues might not directly affect the church today, but could in the future. It is precisely dogmatics that is equipped with the necessary antennae.

2. *Its confessional character.* In our view this aspect of dogmatics is directly implied by the preceding one. We are dealing with the church and her confession. Dogmatic works reveal the confessional standpoint of their authors. Thus Bavinck’s standard work is appropriately titled *Reformed Dogmatics*, and the well-known concise dogmatics of Ott is called *Grundriss der katholischen Dogmatik* (Fundamentals of Catholic Dogmatics).

For us, confession means more than tradition. We appreciate the Reformed tradition, but we are in agreement with the Reformed confession. Tradition points us in a particular direction and the confession provides us with a clear vision as to the paths to be followed, but the confession also alerts us to bypaths and ways that would lead us astray. Dogmatics must go beyond the confession. It must go to Scripture itself in order to “bring forth” out of that “treasure things new and old” (Matt. 13:52).

3. *Its systematic character.* Bavinck calls dogmatics the scientific system of the knowledge of God (*R.D.*, 1:83); H. Berkhof calls it the systematic thinking through of the relationship that God in Christ has established with us (1982, 13).

Those who strive to establish a coherent system must be on guard for formulations that are detrimental to faith. There is the danger that we will regard as secondary whatever does not fit into the system or that an a priori principle leads to one-sided conceptions.

Even if the theologian has a desire for ever-increasing knowledge and an ever-deepening grasp of the issues, he must nevertheless make the following words of the psalmist his own: “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it” (Ps. 139:6). Our knowledge is in part (1 Cor. 13:9), our insight limited. Of old, reference was made to a *theologia viatorum* (pilgrim theology), i.e., that we are still on the way. We discover connections and are impressed by the great deeds of God. We speak about these acts in amazement while we realize that we do not see everything and do not have a comprehensive view.

Even if we take a systematic approach, a scientific system of the knowledge of God does not lie within our reach. When we study dogmatics, we do see more and more connections and perspectives. Van Ruler calls it the poignant beauty of theology that it teaches us to speak of God in an orderly fashion (*T.W.*, 1:39).

What the apostle Paul impressed on the church certainly also applies to the theologians in her midst: “every thought” must be brought “into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Dogmatics involves faith that seeks understanding (*fides quaerit intellectum*) as well as scholarly reflection that seeks to serve faith: in short, believing scholarly reflection. However, believing reflection that is not scholarly in nature has its own value, and there is no reason to look down on it. We can also learn from it!

4. *Its critical character.* The critical task of dogmatics flows directly from the nature of dogmas. As Reformed Christians we view it with critical sympathy—as Schilder put it (cf. Kamphuis, 1980, 9ff.). Dogmatics must raise the question whether the teaching of the church is in all respects in harmony with the Word of God. That Word is the sole criterion for a dogmatics that is critical in a responsible way.

With Rome this is different, because there the church’s teachings do not stand under the authority of Scripture. A dogma is considered infallible there, even though one can attempt to make a distinction between the teaching itself, which is fixed forever, and its formulation, which can be adapted to a different time or culture. Some argue that not only should it be stated differently, but also that today something different should be said from before.⁴

Besides, dogmatics must remain critical because in addition to ecumenical dogmas there are also ecclesiastical tenets that differ from each

4. We are thinking of a figure such as H. Küng, especially his book *Infallible?* 1971, in which the dogma of infallibility is in fact rejected.

other and even contradict each other, as is the case for instance with a comparison of Reformed confessional documents with the decisions and canons of the Council of Trent.

Furthermore, there are numerous *theologoumena* or opinions of theologians that also have a certain influence. It goes without saying that we have to severely restrict ourselves in this regard. Two theologians whose views we often pay attention to in this book are K. Barth and H. Berkhof. Those who are familiar with the field of theology know that this is no arbitrary selection. A critical approach to the work of others, however, does not preclude finding elements of truth that must be recognized.

5. *Its timely character.* This too is an important aspect, although it is not the primary demand made of dogmatics, for continuity must take precedence over currency. Before opening our own mouths we must listen to the answers that the church of all ages has given to the great questions of the faith. With a variation of the words of Van Ruler (*T.W.*, 2:41), we can say that studying dogmatics also definitely involves studying the history of dogmas.

However, new questions have arisen, and old answers must be reevaluated in the face of current problems. There are possibilities for restatement that does not constitute mere reiteration. The theses and antitheses that are implicit in a dogma need to be explained in terms of the past, but also confronted with the present. Reservations of various kinds encourage us to engage in a more thorough investigation of the cause that we defend.

Moreover, the ongoing task of exegesis requires that we assimilate all that is found in Scripture, including a dogmatic processing of biblical data. Exegesis repeatedly confronts dogmatics with questions and continually opens up new perspectives. Dogmatics does, however, place certain accents on exegetical material. This is to be expected in light of the current situation and contemporary problems, although the latter should never predominate in discussion.

Sometimes dogmatics must lay the groundwork for the refinement or development of the teaching of the church. Thus at the time of the Synod of Dort (1618–19), a great deal of dogmatic work was done. It is also possible that as a result of new theological reflection, old antitheses are overcome. An illustration of this may be seen in the consensus that was reached in 1956 between the Dutch Reformed

Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Netherlands with respect to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper.⁵

In our dogmatics we try to formulate what Scripture teaches us and the church confesses in such a way that it is intelligible to our contemporaries. It is tempting to add to or subtract from Scripture in order to make things easy for people to understand, but this results in accommodation theology against which we must caution.⁶ Those who go in this direction are often motivated by the conviction that the Christian faith must be acceptable in every cultural context. History teaches that in doing so, new philosophical concepts are often used that give the resultant theological presentation a modern flavor. Dogmatic theology is always in communication with the thought patterns of its time, but by simply taking over a philosophical way of thinking one runs the great risk that the biblical content loses in significance. Examples abound: from the influence of neo-Platonism, Aristotelianism, Cartesianism, Hegelianism, Neo-Kantianism, and right up to existentialism!

6. *Its practical character.* In answer to the question whether theology is theoretical or practical, the Leiden *Synopsis* (1625) states that it is both theoretical and practical because it concerns the knowledge and service of God. Theory and praxis therefore are not antithetical (1:22–23). We do not apply the term “theory” to the knowledge of God, but we can say that dogmatics has a theoretical aspect because it is a scholarly pursuit. It is also highly practical because its *raison d'être* is to serve the church and the life of faith. It is concerned with the truth, but this truth is also truth for us personally. We may never lose sight of the connection between doctrine and life. The quest for truth and the quest for salvation cannot be separated. Calvin says: “We have given the first place to the doctrine in which our religion is contained, since our salvation begins with it. But it must enter into our heart and pass into our daily conduct, and so transform us into itself so as not to prove unfruitful” (*Institutes*, 3.6.4).

Here we must, however, oppose the notion of *the primacy of praxis* that has a large number of proponents in newer theology. As Molt-

5. Cf. C. W. Monnich and G. C. van Niftrik, *Hervormd-Luthers gesprek over het Avondmaal* (Reformed-Lutheran discussion of the Lord's Supper), 1958 (see the text of the consensus on 5–7).

6. See W. H. Velema, *Aangepaste theologie* (adapted theology), 1971 (concerning the theology of H. M. Kuitert).

mann has observed, this is related to radical changes in the modern world. Kant judged that only that which is acceptable and useful from a practical point of view can be considered to be appropriate for faith in modern times. In our era, the praxis of life itself has acquired a cognitive character and has become both source and criterion for theology. The particular kind of praxis may vary from political decisions to mystical experiences.⁷ Kraus, taking his cue from Moltmann, writes, “The new principle of theology and faith lies in praxis” (*Syst. Th.*, 107).

In the Netherlands, Kuitert, in a study about truth and verification in dogmatics, defends the thesis that “Dogmatic pronouncements must prove their truth-value on the basis of what we—empowered to do so by revelation itself—may call their meaning, i.e., whether they open a future for humanity and the world.”⁸ Here Kuitert is in agreement with Pannenberg who states that what is at stake here is the “Bewahrung an der Wirklichkeitserfahrung der jeweiligen Gegenwart” (confirmation by the experience of reality of every successive present) (Pannenberg, 1971, 178).

Like other scholarly hypotheses, dogmatic pronouncements also need verification as to their truth content. There must be a workable criterion for doing so. As we saw already (§ 1.1), Kuitert is of the opinion that Scripture can no longer serve as a criterion for doctrine. The principium of Scripture (*sola scriptura*), with which the Reformation believed it stood on solid ground, now finds itself in a crisis situation, according to Pannenberg and Kuitert. The truth of Christianity is not served well when couched in authoritarian pronouncements that do not allow any questions to be asked.

Those who like Kuitert want to put theological pronouncements about God and his work to the test of external verification should realize what they are doing. One insurmountable objection to Kuitert’s position is that for him the touchstone of truth is to be found in anthropology and sociology, which raises more problems than it solves. What opens the future for man and the world? Everyone may decide this for himself. In a later publication the criterion becomes how durable such experiences of God will turn out to be in reality.⁹ Here again this theology continues to resemble a circle in which man stands at the center.

Even if in this way truth could be found that is as controllable and verifiable as possible, it still would not be the truth with which the church and theology are concerned. To know truth in the biblical sense of the word, so as to receive assurance of our salvation, we need the revelation of God and the illumination of his Spirit. Then we

7. J. Moltmann, *Wat is theologie?* 1989, 103–5. See also D. Sölle, *Gott denken*, 1990, 15.

8. H. M. Kuitert, *Om en om* (around and around), 1972, 213.

9. H. M. Kuitert, *Filosofie van de theologie*, 1988, 85–95.

are convinced by the truth itself (cf. Bavinck, *R.D.*, 1:573, 593–95). This does not mean, of course, that the experience of faith and the function that faith has in everyday life are of no importance. Statements of faith can be confirmed by such experiences, but cannot be proven by them.

The fact that dogmatics has a practical side does not mean that therefore ethics should be subsumed under dogmatics. Yet this has been done, not only in the *Synopsis* and other older works, but also in Barth who wrote, “Dogmatics itself is ethics; and ethics is dogmatics” (*C.D.*, 1.2.793). There are in principle no objections to an interweaving of dogmatics and ethics. Calvin gave an example of this when he included a few chapters on the Christian life in his exposition of doctrine (*Institutes*, 3.6–10). In practice a good case can be made for covering the *credenda* (what must be believed) in dogmatics and the *agenda* (what needs to be done) in ethics.¹⁰ With this division one should never lose sight of the close connection between these two disciplines. Faith and works do belong together. Both doctrine and dogmatics deal with faith that works through love (cf. Gal. 5:6). There is no such thing as nondogmatic ethics, or ethics without a definite doctrinal content. Neither is there nonethical dogmatics or dogmatics without a certain ethical import.

We conclude this section with a definition. Dogmatics is the theological discipline that speaks in a systematic manner about what God has revealed in his Word, and that must test the teachings of the church against Holy Scripture, basing them on it and interpreting them in its light.

A broader description, which is also useful, is that by Kamphuis: “Dogmatics presents the systematic treatment of Christian teaching that has been formulated by the church in its dogmas in obedience to the faith and that has been made known in Scripture with the authority of the self-revelation of the triune God. Dogmatics must perform this task in solidarity with the faith confessed by the Christian church in subjection to Scripture. It also has to deal with the problems that

10. In his *Orientatie in de christelijke ethiek*, 1990, 17, W. H. Velema defines Christian ethics as “the scientific reflection on God’s commandments which are normative for man’s actions as image bearer of God in his relation to God and his neighbour.”