

the ceremonies and symbols of the law ceased at the coming of Christ, and all the shadows are accomplished, [nevertheless] in the meantime we still use the testimonies taken out of the law and the prophets to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel, and to regulate our life in all honourableness to the glory of God, according to His will, [because] the truth and substance of them remain with us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have their completion. (*Belgic Confession*, Article XXV)

Anyone who refuses to employ this Christ-centered key to the meaning of Scripture thereby fails to submit to the real authority of Scripture. All such faulty preaching, teaching, theologizing, and living stands under the judgment of Christ himself. For we can claim biblical authority only when we embrace the One to whom Scripture testifies. Otherwise Christ's protest against the Jewish leaders of his day also falls on us: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that bear witness to me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39-40).

The Christ who is central in the work of creation is also central in the work of redemption as recorded in the Bible. Scripture is therefore not a record of isolated and unrelated mighty acts of God, but a sustained and integrally unified narrative. From beginning to end there is a single plan of salvation. From near the dawn of history to the final coming of the kingdom, the drama of salvation moves toward and then moves outward from Jesus Christ onward toward the "New Jerusalem." He is the leading Player in the biblical drama of redemption. His saving work is its central theme. His victory, "already" assured but "not yet" fully accomplished, is our hope.

V. 22. A Confessional Hermeneutic

It is possible now to take a few additional steps along this same path of biblical interpretation. Recent studies make clear that one's hermeneutic finds its place and plays its role within the larger scope of one's worldview. The hermeneutic of the Wellhausenian school, for example, is hardly thinkable apart from a typically modern evolutionary model of history. The neo-Marxist hermeneutic employed in many contemporary liberation theologies is oriented strongly to a typically Hegelian view of societal development. One cannot fault these schools of thought for a lack of internal consistency. The crucial point of confrontation is rather their worldview and philosophical outlook. As an alternative to these and other current hermeneutics, let us consider a method of interpretation

more in line with the biblical worldview, the Reformed confessions, and Christian philosophy. I shall call it a "confessional hermeneutic."

A fundamental starting point is the biblical idea of "heart," out of which, says Scripture (Proverbs 4:23), flow all the issues of life. From this spiritual fountainhead, therefore, spring also the issues of theology in general, more particularly of dogmatics, and specifically now of hermeneutics. Accordingly, theologizing is an activity of the "heart," the miniself, the religious concentration point of our entire selfhood. The "heart" engages the whole man. Thus the Christian scholar is bound to respect his work as an activity rooted in the "heart" which, in response to God's Word, seeks to lead every thought captive in obedience to Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:10). Given this religious orientation, how shall we then give shape to our principles and methods of biblical interpretation? What sort of hermeneutic paradigm shall we adopt? In answer to these questions, consider the confessional model of hermeneutics.

To forestall possible misunderstandings, "confessional" should not here be construed in a subjectivist way, as though Scripture were man's confession about God. Rather, it refers to the faith aspect of created reality, the "confessional" aspect as one way of knowing and communicating truth. In explicating this method of interpreting the Bible let us focus on that genre of biblical literature which stands at the center of discussion in our times — the historical narratives in biblical revelation. How are we to read, understand, and interpret them?

A scripturally directed view of created reality brings with it the recognition that historical events are, first of all, whole events. They come across to us intuitively and frontally in their wholeness — such events, for example, as the exodus, the resurrection, the French Revolution, Hiroshima. On further careful analysis, however, these whole events within our historical horizon can also be examined from a variety of viewpoints. Woven into the unified fabric of every historical episode is a highly diversified cluster of moments of meaning. Take, for example, Hitler's Third Reich. German society of the 1930s can be analyzed theologically in terms of its confessional stance: What was the basic belief system of the "German Christians"? But its psychological, social, economic, and political values are also open to scrutiny. All historical events have built into them these various aspects of meaning.

This created pattern of a diversity of ordered aspects within the unity of whole events holds true for biblical history too. In the mighty redeeming acts of God which constitute the very heart of biblical revelation there are clear indications of this aspectual diversity. Yet in, under, through, and with all the varied aspects which are woven into the fabric of these biblical happenings is a central, leading thread which binds them together — a dominant focus. Scripture speaks confessionally. One could,

for example, analyze the *political* aspects of David's rule or the *economic* aspects of Solomon's administration. Scripture offers some intriguing insights into such things. But they are incidental to its real message. They do not open up the central focus of Scripture. Again, one could reflect on the apostle Peter from the point of view of his *psychic* makeup. Or one could study Paul's mission to Jews, Greeks, and Romans in terms of a *lingual* analysis: What languages did he use in proclaiming the gospel? Something interesting and instructive could be said about these contextual aspects of biblical revelation from what we know about Bible times. The central focus of the biblical message, however, is not political, economic, psychic, or lingual. From what point of view, then, is the history of redemption told? Which aspect stands out? Scripture touches on these and many other things within a *confessional* focus.

The various other aspects of historical reality are indeed there. Otherwise the events in the history of redemption would not be real and whole events. They all play their important roles. Now this aspect, then that one comes to the fore, but always subservient to the Scripture's central focus. It is important to recognize these other aspects, for otherwise the confessional focus would come through in an empty and docetic way. David did engage in some dramatic political activities; Solomon did establish certain ill-fated economic policies; Peter was moved by certain psychic impulses; Paul did use the Greek and Aramaic languages in his preaching. But such considerations are not central in Scripture. They are all subservient to its central focus. In its most pregnant sense Scripture is really not "about" David, Solomon, Peter, and Paul; it is all "about" Jesus Christ. What is primary is Scripture's concentration on the confessional meaning of its chain of events in their relatedness to Christ.

Scripture testifies to real historical-redemptive events, but not as "objective" chronicles. It is not ordinary historiography. It is prophetic history, interpreted history, history with a point. It explicates the meaning of the unfolding drama of redemption, one act after another, always within this confessional focus. What binds one historical event after another together into a unified pattern of Christocentric revelation is the Bible's sustained emphasis on the confessional significance of these events.

Look briefly at a few more biblical samples, chosen at random. Archeology is now able to paint a picture of Omri, king of Israel, far more detailed and illustrious than the very sober account given in the Bible. His international fame was apparently so great that foreigners referred to the nation of Israel as "the house of Omri." Yet Scripture passes all this by in silence. It disposes of Omri in seven brief verses (1 Kings 16:21-28). How do we account for that? Such treatment of a royal personage reflects the kind of book the Bible is. It sets Omri's reign in Scripture's own unique perspective. Within the historical context of

buying the hill of Samaria and fortifying it, what we read of him is this: "Omri did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; he did more evil than all who were before him. For he walked in all the ways of Jeroboam, in the sins by which he made Israel to sin, provoking the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger with their idols" (1 Kings 17:25-26). That is the Bible's way of focusing in on the reign of Omri, stating in confessional language what is really of lasting importance about him, his (negative) contributions to the unfolding history of redemption on the way to the coming Christ.

Take another case. In the New Testament King Herod is presented as a despicable character from the point of view of that which is christologically important in biblical revelation. He is an agent of the dragon of Revelation 12 which stands ready to devour the Man-Child. Yet, from what we know about the political history of those times, Herod was a rather effective puppet ruler within the Roman regime. Why this sharp contrast in emphasis? Once again, it is a matter of the Bible's unique focus. Scripture does not deny Herod's military prowess, his architectural accomplishments, his psychic problems. There are, in fact, allusions to these things in the Gospels. But Scripture passes a different kind of judgment on those who play their supporting roles in the drama of redemption. Through it all Christ is the central and leading Player. From the viewpoint of the confessional focus in Scripture what is most crucial about Herod is his embodiment of the spirit of the anti-Christ.

The same holds true for Pontius Pilate and the Pharisees, and more positively for Abraham, Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist, Jesus' mother Mary, and the apostles. In each case the Bible deals with the real lives of real people who as whole persons take part in whole events. Accordingly Scripture hits on one aspect of these events after another. Sometimes it even plays up a certain aspect quite strongly. Take, for example, the psychic disorders in the later life of King Saul. But again this is for the sake of sharpening Scripture's confessional focus on Saul as an anti-theocratic king. Saul's psychic state of mind is not an independent theme. This aspect of his life, together with the political, economic, and cultic aspects, is there as the concrete historical framework for driving home this confessional message: "To obey is better than sacrifice. . . ." Therefore we miss the main point if we seek to derive psychological theories from the Saul passages. This is not the intent and purpose of Scripture. But Scripture does teach confessionally that no man, like Saul, can say "No, no, no" to God's clear "Yes, yes, yes" — over against David — without such defiance taking its heavy toll in one's life ("an evil spirit of the LORD came upon him"). God is not mocked. Such rebellion leads finally to the door of the witch of Endor's house.

We give expression to this same "confessional" focus in many of

our birth announcements. We thankfully proclaim in our printed cards: "The Lord has given us a child." By this confessional statement we do not deny that sexual intercourse took place, nor that there was a nine-month waiting period, nor that a doctor attended the delivery, nor that medicines and expenses were involved, nor that the state issued a birth certificate. These varied aspects of that great event are real. Yet after all is said and done, we mean to say that all the various aspects involved in that event are gathered up in the confession, "The Lord has given." That is our way of speaking biblically about childbirth. It takes the deepest meaning of the event and puts it into a true and clear confessional focus. This stands in sharp contrast, for example, to birth announcements which reduce this event to economic categories: "Announcing a new income tax exemption."

Scripture never speaks in such reductionist terms. Sometimes, indeed, Scripture plays heavily on the biotic motif, as, for example, in the untimely, unexpected, even "impossible" birth of Isaac to the aged Abraham and Sarah. Sometimes political affairs loom large, as in the persistent strife between the Judeans and Samaritans in rebuilding the temple. Sometimes the aesthetic gets large attention, as in descriptions of the grandeur of Solomon's temple. Sometimes ethnic and social relations play an important role, as in the conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the early church. Nevertheless, to reduce the biblical message to one or another of these aspects is to miss the mark hermeneutically. All these aspects play a role subservient to the central, leading, dominant confessional focus of Scripture, namely, the consistent witness of all Scripture, in its total extent and in all its parts, to the redeeming work of God in Jesus Christ. As a ray of light passing through a prism gets refracted into a brilliant spectrum of colors, so — in reverse fashion — Scripture takes these diverse rays of light and concentrates them in this confessional focus: "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself."

This confessional hermeneutic also finds strong support in the message of Psalm 127: "Unless the LORD build the house, those who build it labor in vain; unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain." The Psalmist is not spiritualizing this building project. Real lumber and brick and mortar are involved. Nor does the Psalmist deny that it takes a lot of down-to-earth planning, saving, and working to get the job done. All kinds of physical, economic, aesthetic, social, political, and even ethical considerations enter into such an undertaking. Yet, with its own unique focus, like an X-ray exposure, Scripture cuts through all the hard realities of human toil and gets at the heart of the matter by proclaiming: Without the blessing of the Lord all the sweat and tears (of joy and hardship) are in vain, empty, without content and meaning. Without God's blessing the house defeats its real purpose

for existence. The house (its foundations, walls, roof) may still stand, but it no longer stands for obedient service in family living. The same is true for guarding a city. Woe to the watchman who falls asleep at his post! Yet even if the watchmen stand guard day and night, and even if the guard is doubled and tripled, all these extra precautions will not help unless the Lord watches over the city to protect it. This is the confessional focus of the biblical message.

Such a confessional hermeneutic offers real help in seeking to do justice to Scripture both as *history* of redemption and as history of *redemption*. It offers a hermeneutic key to help unlock the centrally and comprehensively Christocentric meaning of biblical revelation. It brings with it some built-in safeguards against reductionist interpretations of the Bible, whether they be the moralist reductionisms of the exemplary method or the historical reductionisms of the historical-critical method — as well as tendencies toward rationalism, pietism, or legalism. It offers promising possibilities for a confessional theology, that is, a theological hermeneutic which is in harmony with the Reformed confessions concerning the nature of biblical authority. It helps overcome the ever present dualist-dialectical tensions between confession and theology. In this hermeneutic method faith and theology can be kept together in an integrally unified and meaningful working relationship which honors and gives free play to the conviction that the Bible is the Word of God in the words of men.

V. 23. Review

Looking back now, what does a prolegomena to Reformed dogmatics come down to? What is its place and role? How does it relate to the theology proper which lies ahead? It serves, of course, as an "Introduction," which is another name for the same thing. By way of summary, a more substantial answer can be offered by relating prolegomena to the following three ideas.

a) *Tradition*. It is apparent from the history of Christian dogmaformation that every dogmatics stands within a certain larger religious-philosophical tradition. To act as if the full meaning of such larger movements is exhausted in their theologies is to overinflate theology. To act, on the other hand, as if these theologies can be adequately understood in isolation from their larger traditions is to deal with theology narrowly and superficially. Prolegomena, accordingly, sketches a theology's "family tree" — its ancestry, lineage, pedigree, and spiritual heritage. This renewal effort in dogmatics therefore acknowledges its indebtedness to the