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The Principium Cognoscendi in Theology

The First of Three Public Lectures delivered at Concordia Seminary,
St. Louis, Mo., April 13, 1942

The subject submitted for our consideration this morning presents a somewhat forbidding aspect. "*The Principium Cognoscendi in Theology*"—that sounds like a rather abstruse, metaphysical proposition. I hasten, therefore to assure you that this subject has a definite practical bearing on every part of the work which we are doing and preparing to do as preachers, ministers, pastors, missionaries in the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is to enable us to determine, in regard to ourselves and others, when a person is really a theologian in the estimation of Lutherans and when he is turning out genuinely theological work of abiding value. When my class, in 1883, moved into the then new seminary on Jefferson Avenue, the *principium cognoscendi* in theology was among the first subjects of study which we took up under Doctor Walther.

What is meant by a *principium cognoscendi*? Roughly translated, it signifies that which starts a person on the way of perceiving and knowing something. It is what the Germans call *Erkenntnisquelle*, source of knowledge.

Every human, or secular, science has its accumulated collection of known and proved facts, gathered from close observation and tested by laws of correct thinking and reasoning, innate in the human mind. The beginning of this knowledge has always been quite simple and crude. Out of the simple proposition that one plus one yields two the whole science of arithmetic with its rules for addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and common and decimal fractions has been built up. The science of plane and solid geometry grew out of the study of the point, the straight and the curved line, the triangle, the square, the circle, the cube, the sphere, and so on. In a similar manner the observation of the stars has yielded the science of astronomy; that of the qualities of plants the science of botany; that of animals the science of zoology; that of right and wrong the science of jurisprudence. Medicine, physics, philology, logic, philosophy, etc., have had a like origin. They have all started with certain self-evident truths, which are accepted as true and reliable without argument, simple facts that require no proof. These are called the "data of science," facts that are taken for granted and are conceded as incontestable by every person of ordinary intelligence. By studying these accepted facts and observing their congruities, similarities, and disparities, men have been led to ever greater knowledge, both of our material universe and of the human mind, as they understood the relation of one fact

to another. As these perceptions grew and the proved facts of human knowledge were gathered into a whole, arranged in some system of order, and classified, a body of knowledge for this or that particular science was built up which serves as the basis and guide to further discoveries and increased knowledge. So sure are scientists of this body of accumulated knowledge that they stake the success of their further inquiries on the knowledge already acquired and swear by it as men swear by their Bible. They claim they could not deviate from it and retain a good scientific conscience.

Let me illustrate. The knowledge which men have acquired regarding the medicinal qualities of certain substances has been gathered, for our country, into a volume called the United States Pharmacopoeia. This volume is revised every ten years by a representative body of physicians and pharmacists, and new, or better, knowledge concerning drugs gathered during the decade is entered into the new edition. Every prescription clerk in a drug store will follow its directions in compounding a recipe. Again, engineers constructing huge projects like the Mount Shasta Dam have prepared blueprints with exact measurements according to the rules of trigonometry and the calculations for sine, cosine, tangent and cotangent from the tables of logarithms. The contractors on the project are held to these blueprints and must carry them out to the smallest detail, asking no reason why, because the whole enterprise is built upon known and tested facts which are unalterable. Again, no one is admitted to the bar in our states without having passed an examination that proves his competency to apply the laws of the commonwealth. Nor can any judge decide a litigation brought into his court except by the existing laws.

The same process is in operation in all the professions: they all start from universally admitted facts and advance to wider knowledge that grows out of the initial knowledge of first principles. Even in the common crafts and trades this process is observable: they pass their trained workmen through years of apprenticeship on to the degree of a journeyman craftsman, who travels to gather wider experience by observing different methods of workmanship in his craft, until he produces his "masterpiece" — a suit of clothes, a saddle, a brick wall, or such — which is submitted to the inspection of the masters of his brotherhood of craftsmen and judged according to the accepted rules of the craft.

Now, does anything like this take place in the study of theology, and can the theologian learn anything from it? The theologian, too, starts from indisputable facts that must be granted at the outset. He must study his fundamental principle with minutest care,

learn its scope, ramifications, and goal, and arrange the results of his study in some orderly system, so as to have a complete oversight over the whole.

Yet there is a world of difference between how a theologian and how a professional scientist or ordinary craftsman works. These latter—all of them—build up their science or artisanship exclusively by the use of their reason or common sense. The visible, audible, tangible materials that are spread out in plain view in the material universe or are hidden in it and can be reached with powerful instruments, together with the palpable forces behind them, and the silent domain of the human mind with its workings—these are the subject-matter for purely human study, and the sole instrument for such study is the ordinary human intellect. Scientists do not require—they will not even admit—any outside, supernatural force that is beyond the control of their natural powers, to influence their reasoning, determine its processes, or fix their conclusions. They regard all such extraneous influences as disturbing elements that must be eliminated.

With the theologian, however, all that he is to know theologically is laid before him in a supernatural revelation, which transcends human apprehension, which he cannot reason out, but must take into his mind simply by an act of faith in Him who has revealed it.

Theology, as its name indicates, is an account of God and divine matters. These lie altogether beyond the ken of man's natural intellect. There is in man, indeed, an inborn sense and conviction of the existence of a Supreme Being, but no man possesses by nature a clear and adequate conception of God in His essence and of all things outside Himself, especially man, nor of the character of His activities, intentions, purposes, plans. Nor can any person by his reasonable deductions and conclusions build up a correct knowledge of God and of matters pertaining to Him. Job is asked: "Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know? The measure thereof is longer than the earth and broader than the sea," chap. 11:7-9. Paul exclaims: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the Lord? or who has been His counselor? Or who has first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto him?" Rom. 11:33-35. Answer: Nobody. The theologian Paul declares that he had been sent to preach things "that eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered the heart of man," 1 Cor. 2:9. Of the love of Christ, which his theology had taught him, he says, that it "passeth

knowledge," Eph. 3:19, and of the peace which it brings to human hearts, that it "passeth all understanding," Phil. 4:7, namely, all that men can grasp by the natural powers of their intellect. Theologians are lifted by their study above this world of finite matter and force into a world of infinite power, where the Spirit of God alone works; out of this temporal existence, where events follow events as the clock strikes, into the sphere of timeless eternity, and find the true value of persons and things fixed by new, unheard-of standards.

Therefore, theology is not a science alongside of other sciences. Aristotle has defined science as the faculty of demonstrating conclusions from necessary premises of reason. This definition is true in human philosophy, but it does not fit theology, because theology never operates with facts supplied by the mind of man, but with facts furnished by God Himself through revelation. Moreover, these facts the theologian apprehends, not by an act of reasoning, but by implicit trust in God, who is speaking to him in His revelation. Lastly, this faith the theologian does not elicit out of himself by some powerful mental effort, but it is, even against his reason, implanted in him by the Holy Spirit of God through the revelation which he is studying. All this is supernatural. The theologian lives and moves and has his being in a world entirely his own, and theology is in a class by itself. It has been called a science, because it is also concerned with what men should know, but that is done by a loose use of the term, not in a strict definition.

The *principium cognoscendi* in theology, then, is the revelation which God has made at sundry times and in divers manners, lastly by the sending of His incarnate Son, and which He has had recorded in human language by holy men, filled with His Holy Spirit, who composed the various writings which make up God's Word, the Bible. All genuine theological knowledge must be drawn from these sacred documents, entirely from them, not partly from them, partly from other sources. The whole business of a theologian is to study intently these writings in all their parts and details, to grasp the intended meaning of every word and clause, and to set them forth clearly in speech and writing for the benefit of others. He must be alert, while reading what God has spoken through the prophets, through His Son, and through His Son's apostles and evangelists, to note carefully every point of doctrine, great or small; every admonition, correction, and warning; every suggestion for righteous living and conduct; every encouraging word of cheer and comfort. Last, not least, he must pray without ceasing for the illumination and guidance of the Holy Spirit. In this way he becomes, like the young pastor Timothy, a "man of God, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." 2 Tim. 3:16, 17.

The theologian's source of knowledge presents him with ac-

counts of miraculous happenings, inexplicable by the so-called laws of nature. It also calls his attention to matters which it designates as "mysteries"; for instance, the union of the two distinct natures in the one person of Christ, the spiritual union of believers with Christ, and the indwelling of the entire Trinity in their hearts, the so-called "mystical union"; and others. What is the theologian to do with these matters? He is to present the miracles simply as what they are, without any attempt at giving a reasonable explanation of them, for which there is no warrant in Scripture. The mysteries he is to proclaim as what God says they are, mysteries, matters that cannot be explained. For, if he could explain them, they would no longer be mysteries. That means, they would be something outside of and foreign to Scripture.

And so, throughout his activity the theologian is restricted to the Word of God. His rule is the old axiom: *Quod non est biblicum, non est theologicum*, that is: "Whatever is not Biblical, is none of the theologian's business." In all his studies, in all his utterances, the red light of warning is again and again flashed against him: *Nil nisi Scriptura!* "Nothing without the warrant of Scripture!" *Nihil ultra Scripturam!* It is a notice of danger ahead: there is no thoroughfare for him where Scripture has charted no road on which he is to travel. Where God in His sacred writings stops, he has to stop his theological efforts and simply confess his ignorance. Such a confession may expose him to men's ridicule, but it is a badge of honor that makes the angels smile over him.

In any discussion of a matter of his religion a theologian can have a legitimate interest only when both sides to the discussion accept at the start the authority of the Scriptures and the question under debate is: Which side has the correct understanding of God's Word. Were Scripture eliminated in the premises from the discussion, the theologian would consider it a foolhardy and futile venture to become a party to it; for he would go into the discussion without proper credentials and tools for his workmanship. Luther's advice on an attempt of this kind is excellent. In his second series of comments on First Peter, in 1539, Luther takes up these words in chap. 3:15: "Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you," and remarks, amongst other things: "When you meet with people so utterly blinded and hardened as to deny what Christ and the apostles have spoken and written is God's Word, or who doubt it, just keep quiet, do not exchange a word with them, let them go, and only say: 'I will give you proof enough from Scripture: if you will believe it, well and good; if not, go your way.' But I hear you say: 'Ah, in that case God's Word will make a poor showing!' Answer: 'Just leave that to God.'" 9:1238 f.

What is it that bears the theologian up under his tasks of maintaining the authority of his *principium cognoscendi* against all odds? Is it the approval of his own intellect? Is it the applause of other men? Is it worldly gain? Nay; only his unquestioning faith in the truth of his *principium* upholds him and bears him along. He declares: "By faith I know. I move in the world of the unseen and the intangible; but my faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. I hold already as a present possession what shall be handed over to me in the future; and invisible things are set before me in plain outline as evident." Such confident trust in the oracles of God, the Holy Scriptures, is the indispensable requisite for any genuine theological effort and the mark by which a true theologian is recognized. Without that faith theological work becomes a hideous drudgery, and the theologian a melancholy object to contemplate. For preaching God's Word for others to believe in, while he himself repudiates it in his heart, he becomes the grossest kind of a hypocrite and a walking self-contradiction. One should prefer crushing stone by the roadside to studying theology without believing in the *principium cognoscendi*.

Scientists have been lauded for their passionate devotion to their science. Pushing aside resolutely every distracting influence, their mind riveted to their research, they have launched their theories and hypotheses, and have advanced step by step to greater knowledge, often, admittedly, by guesswork and the trial and error method. Only the undiscerning masses take their probabilities for realities and their scientific dreams and poetry for verities of established facts.

If these men can cling with such tenacity, yea, with such stubbornness to their *principia*, with how much greater joy and fidelity should a theologian cling to his? In theology the faithful workman finds something greater than all the sciences can offer. Here he is face to face with the Great Unknown, and voices out of the boundlessness of eternity direct him in the way he must go. Instinctively he puts off his shoes, for he is aware that he is standing on holy ground. As he opens the Holy Book for study, he whispers reverently with young Samuel at the sanctuary: "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth," 1 Sam. 3:10.

In the age of rationalism the authority of the Scriptures was openly rejected. A believing churchman of Germany in those days poured out his grief to God in these lines:

Wenn dein Wort nicht mehr soll gelten,
Worauf soll der Glaube ruhn?
Mir ist's nicht um tausend Welten,
Sondern um dein Wort zu tun!

(Here is an opportunity for Concordia's poets to try their ingenuity in reproducing old Woltersdorf's sentiments.) What he said amounts to this:

If Thy Word, Lord, is deemed worthless,
The support of faith is gone.
Thousand worlds I'd gladly forfeit
To hold fast Thy Word alone.

That expresses the devout conviction of every sincere theologian. When the Word of God is abrogated, all truly theological functions come to a stop, and we close this seminary as a school of theology, for our *principium cognoscendi* is gone.

I conclude with a few heartfelt utterances of Luther. He says: "A theologian's first concern must be, to be thoroughly conversant with the text of Scripture and to maintain this principle that sacred matters are not subject to debate." V:456. Again: "The theologian who does not make his beginning by hearing God's Word and believing it, is going to be a failure; he will not accomplish anything as it should be and will not preach correctly, even though he had all the wisdom of the world." VIII:37. Again: "Theologians must not consider it a trifling matter, when the sublime Majesty forbids whatsoever does not proceed from the mouth of the Lord." XIX:821. Again: "A theologian and preacher must not say: 'Lord, forgive me if I have taught what is wrong'; but of everything that he teaches in public, and writes, he must be sure that it is God's Word." XXII:1507. Lastly: "All that one has to do in theology is, to hear, and believe, and firmly hold in the heart this fact: God is truthful, no matter how silly it seems what God says in His Word." V:457.

Berkeley, Calif.

W. H. T. DAU

Outlines on the Wuerttemberg Epistle Selections

Ninth Sunday after Trinity

Acts 17:24-31

Oh, that someone had the gift of looking ten years into the future! What will be the condition of our world in 1952? Will it be ruled by dictators, by highly concentrated money power, by some superpowerful league of nations, or will it bow under the yoke of a few ruthless, lawless nations? Will the forces of evil gain in strength, or shall some more righteous form of world administration materialize?

Whatever the eventual answer to these questions may be, the Christian, enlightened by the Holy Scriptures, knows that whatever man-made powers will arise, God will still rule the world.