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No Development of Doctrine for Us!

† By TH. ENGELDER †

I

The popular theology of today stands for the development of doctrine. C. S. Macfarland declares: "Christian revelation is not confined to a closed canon, to a stereotyped letter, or a strictly defined confession." (*Christian Unity in Practice and Prophecy*, p. 27.) *The Living Church*, of Jan. 14, 1933, declares: "There has always been, and under God there always will be, a continual development of experience and doctrine as the Spirit guides the Church into more and more of the truth about Christ. . . . Liberal Catholics believe that it is possible to develop a doctrine of Christ in line with the best modern thought." And John J. B. Morgan declares: "All great thinkers have had to admit over and over again that they were wrong. It is this willingness to change beliefs which marks off the versatile man from the old fogy. Look back, and if you cannot see where you have changed, you can rest assured that you have already stagnated." (*Keeping a Sound Mind*, p. 207.)

The progressive theologians deplore that the Lutheran Church refuses to join with them in the development of doctrine. After John A. Makay had called upon the churches to re-examine their theology and expunge therefrom "what is false and has served its day" (*Christendom*, 1937, II, p. 537), John M. Moore notes on page 575: "Lutheranism still thinks in the dialectic of the Reformation." *The Christian Century*, Feb. 10, 1937, after stating that "in the New Testament there is no unalterable doctrine which embraces the whole scheme of Christian thought," calls upon the Lutherans to fall in line: "The Lutherans should be paged and told about it." Edwin E. Aubrey is pleased to note in his book *Living the Christian Faith* on page 84: "American Christianity gives promise of making significant contributions to the development of Christian theology," and on page 97 he castigates the Missouri Synod and like bodies for their backward stand in theology: "These churches became sects in America. . . . This often meant that

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they became fixated in loyalty to an old faith which was being modified and modernized in the old country. The Missouri Synod Lutherans came to be more conservative than the Lutheran Church in Germany and even sent missionaries back to the old country to overcome 'defections' there. In this way the stress of maintaining racial solidarity led to theological reaction."

Now, there are many Lutherans in America — and in "the old country" — who are heart and soul for the development of doctrine. In the past generation the voice of E. H. Delk was loud in the land: "To deny that modern thought has any new truths to offer is to deny the presence and leadership of God. It is a kind of atheism." (*The Lutheran Church Quarterly*, 1912, p. 554.) In the present generation we hear the voice of Abdel Ross Wentz: "The theology of Lutheranism is in no sense fixed or static. When, therefore, a Lutheran of today accepts these Lutheran Confessions, he does not feel that they are a fetter binding him to antiquated ways of thinking." (*What Is Lutheranism?* p. 89.) *Folkebladet*, Jan. 20, 1937: "Christianity must progress to clear knowledge of truth by reason, step by step, according as it finds the truth revealed in the course of history." *The Lutheran Church Quarterly*, 1944, p. 44 f.: "The old, popular, static Biblical theology has no place among American Lutherans. . . . If our apprehension of God's revelation is a constantly growing, self-enlarging body of knowledge, this should be reflected in our systematic theology." The writer of the pamphlet *A Living Lutheran Theology* (1946) is disgusted with the old-style Lutheranism and its insistence on "changeless doctrines," on "eternal, unchanging doctrines," and its claim that "these doctrines are derived from the Bible and set forth in the Confessions of the Church" and that "they must be accepted as true in their minutest points." (Pp. 8, 9, 17.)

But there are plenty of Lutherans — and plenty of Protestants in other denominations — who will have nothing to do with the development of doctrine. These old-fashioned Lutherans believe, in the first place, that the doctrine presented in the Bible is unchangeable. Believing in the absolute authority of Scripture, they consider it a crime to attempt to modify, change, amend, revise, improve, develop, the doctrine "which was once delivered unto the saints." They subscribe

to Dr. Pieper's statement: "There can be no development of the Christian doctrine, because the Christian doctrine given to the Church by the Apostles is a finished product, complete and perfect, fixed for all times. It is not in need of improvement and allows no alteration." (*Christliche Dogmatik*, I, p. 148.) What God, the eternal Truth, set down in Scripture, remains true to all eternity; it cannot be modified, much less supplanted, by some new "truth"; for truth never changes. The old-fashioned Lutherans are content with the doctrines revealed in the Bible just as they are revealed in the Bible. They subscribe to the statement of F. Bente: "We occupy the very same doctrinal position as the Christians of the first century. What, for example, the congregation in Rome or Corinth knew in the year of our Lord 97, or should have known, just that and not one whit more Trinity Church in St. Louis in 1897 knows. . . . Holy Scripture sufficed for the Church in the past and will suffice for the Church in the future." (*Proceedings, Western District*, 1897, pp. 31, 32.) "One who accepts Holy Scripture as God's infallible Word will not dare to add here and subtract there, but will at hearing this Word fall on his knees and say: 'Speak, for Thy servant heareth'" (l. c., p. 44). The old-school Lutherans subscribe wholeheartedly to Luther's statement: "We are not out to invent new things, but hold, and remain with the old Word of God, as the Ancient Church held it." (XVII:1659.) They are not out to reconstruct the doctrine. They know that after Luther and his co-laborers had "reconstructed" the doctrine on the basis of God's Word, no further reconstruction is possible,¹ as Luther declared after the Augsburg Confession had been transmitted: "We must confess that the doctrine preached and confessed at Augsburg is the true and pure Word of God, and that all who hold this doctrine are God's children and will be saved—whether they believe it now or will come to the understanding of it later. This confession will abide to the end of days, to the Last Day." (XVI:1538.) Luther again: "All articles of faith

¹ See Pieper, *Proc., Atlantic District*, 1919, p. 10 f. *CONC. THEOL. MONTHLY*, 1949, p. 383: "Is it really necessary for theology, if it is to be live and active, to produce new systems? Luther did not produce anything new in the line of doctrine. His theology was in its fundamental tenets that of the early church councils. . . . This doctrine had become obscured and almost lost in the bewildering mazes of scholastic speculations. Luther rediscovered it through his study of the Scriptures."

are revealed in Holy Scripture, making it unnecessary for man to add some supplements." (XIX:958.)²

Every Bible theologian takes this position. There is not a single passage in the Bible, not a single indication, that the doctrine preached by Paul and the other Apostles will in the course of time be changed. The Bible teaches the changelessness of the saving doctrine. There is Jude 3: "Contend earnestly for the faith which was *once for all* delivered unto the saints" (R. V.). And 2 Thess. 2:15: "Brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught." And Col. 2:7: "Stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught." And 2 Tim. 3:14: "Continue thou in the things which thou hast learned." And 1 Tim. 6:14: "Keep this commandment without spot, unrebukable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ." And 1 Tim. 1:3: "Teach no other doctrine." And 2 John 10: "If there come any unto you and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house." And Acts 2:42: "They continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine."³ One who takes the Bible for his guide cannot but say that the doctrine given to the Church by the Apostles is a finished product, complete and perfect, fixed for all times.

The doctrine changeless? The great majority of present-day theologians indignantly protest that idea and declare: Let the Bible say what it will, the doctrine of the Church is, like everything else in this world, subject to change. *The Christian Century*, Feb. 10, 1937: "There is no unalterable doctrine . . . no system of doctrine which shall be valid to all eternity."

² Be sure to read the series of articles by Walther: "Was ist es um den Fortschritt der modernen lutherischen Theologie in der Lehre?", in *Lehre und Wehre*, 1875, 1876, 1878, also: "Die falschen Stuetzen der modernen Theorie von den offenen Fragen" in *Lehre und Wehre*, 1868, p. 97 ff. ("The False Arguments for the Modern Theory of Open Questions," *CONC. THEOL. MONTHLY*, 1939, p. 254 ff.)

³ There are hundreds of passages of like import. Dr. H. E. Fosdick preached on the text 2 Tim. 4:7, "I have kept the faith," and expounded the theory that the great Apostle's proudly cherished fidelity consisted in an ability to look forward and not chain himself to what was past. *The Lutheran*, Jan. 15, 1931, commented: "If there is anything in the whole letter (2 Timothy) that is outstanding, it is the aged Apostle's reference to and insistence upon the integrity and unchangeableness of the truths received by him from God by revelation. . . . In other epistles he declares his fidelity to 'the gospel', than which there is no other, 'even though an angel might preach it'. . . . He has contended for it bravely. He has kept it faithfully. He has transmitted it just as it was received. Thus 'he has kept the faith.'"

G. A. Buttrick: "How could God, so radiant and vital in His own right, be imprisoned in the past? And what is this doctrine of an inerrant Book but the assertion that God spoke then and cannot speak now, the avowal that the Everlasting is the captive of antiquity?" (*The Christian Fact and Modern Doubt*; see CONC. THEOL. MONTHLY, 1941, p. 223.) Edwin Lewis: "Faith may never be expected to assume a final form. . . . The Christian minister must remember that his age is the twentieth century and not the thirteenth or the fifth. . . . The Gospel must be set free from certain archaic wrappings" (*The Faith We Declare*, pp. 150, 180, 182). H. E. Fosdick: "Of course there are outgrown elements in Scripture—a man must be able to recognize the abiding messages of the Book in a transient setting. . . . This Gospel of God revealed in Christ, released from literal bondage to old categories and set free to do its work in modern terms of thought and speech, ought to be the central affirmation of our preaching" (*The Modern Use of the Bible*, pp. 94 f., 261.) Again: "Multitudes of reverent Christians, for the sake of intellectual and spiritual integrity, have been trying to see this new knowledge in terms of the Christian faith and to see the Christian faith in terms of this new knowledge." (*The New Knowledge and the Christian Faith*, p. 4.) Karl Barth: "Von der Antwort, die das Wort Gottes gibt, koennen wir niemals als von einer fertigen Grosse reden. . . . Es ist unmoeglich, dass das Wort eine ein fuer allemal geltende Erkenntnis bietet." (See Luthardt-Jelke, *Kompendium der Dogmatik*, p. 53.) The Bible never claimed to be a finished product. Robert F. Horton: "The idea of a Revelation confined to the Sacred Writings cannot be said to be the idea of those Sacred Writings themselves. . . . From this mental activity working in the plastic material of St. Paul's own rich spiritual growth was produced what might be called a tentative theology . . . tentative, not final or complete, for nothing which St. Paul says gives an idea that theology was to close with him, or that the same spirit that worked mightily in him would cease to work in the Church or in other Christian men after he had gone." (*Revelation and the Bible*, pp. 16, 297.) Christ Himself did not speak the final word in theology. R. W. Sockmann: "Can we say that the Christ of Nazareth has given us the final wisdom? May not the future outgrow Him? . . . He was the child of His time." (*Recoveries in*

Religion, p. 70.) Henry J. Golding, a leader of the New York Ethical Society, declares: "Yet even Jesus does not represent all the best we know. No one personality, however radiant and moving, can embody all the excellences," just as Fosdick declared "When one appeals across the centuries to the religion of Jesus, one does not mean to ascribe finality even to that, as though God had not spoken since, as though no new light had broken on the world." (See *THEOL. MONTHLY*, 1927, p. 179.) And so *ad infinitum*. The radical wing of the popular theology of today as well as the "conservative" wing, here and in the old country, disavows the idea that the saving doctrine has been set down in Scripture in a fixed form.

They cannot do otherwise. They have discarded the principle of the sole authority of Scripture and have substituted for it the authority of man — call it the authority of reason or of experience or what you will. They are walking in the footsteps of Schleiermacher. Dr. Patton, in *Fundamental Christianity*, thus characterizes Schleiermacher's position: The New Testament is the record of the Christian consciousness of the apostolic age; but the Christian consciousness of the apostolic age may be different, and, in so far as it may differ, it has a right to supersede the record of the Christian consciousness of the early Church. The outcome of this principle would be that, the Christian consciousness being in a state of constant flux, no one can predict what the consciousness of the next age will affirm, and therefore no one can put much confidence in what the Christian consciousness of the present age affirms." (See *THEOL. MONTHLY*, 1926, p. 373.) J. H. Leckie puts it this way: "This common consciousness, this generalized experience of the religious mind . . . is an active force which develops, tests, enriches, and applies the word of Revelation. . . . The corporate consciousness makes a liberal use indeed of its function as interpreter of the Gospel; for it silently drops and rejects such things in the Record of Faith as it cannot use or apply. . . . It is influenced from age to age by social and political surroundings, by the changing needs of practical life, by the scientific and philosophical teaching that from time to time prevails, and by the judgments of experts and scholars." (*Authority in Religion*, p. 131.) And E. H. Delk, of course, subscribes to the principle of the authority of man: "The final appeal is made to the Christian consciousness. . . . These have always stood

clear-eyed and honest champions of the necessity and right of Christian experience to interpret and enforce the truths of our holy faith. . . . Personal experience must be supplemented and balanced by other personal experiences in order to group the whole human spiritual experience. It is this fact which makes theology a progressive science and religion a life." (See *Lehre und Wehre*, 59, p. 157.) It is by sharing each other's consciousness and experience that the reconstructionists get their new theology. Dr. Douglas Horton told us: "The Amsterdam assembly will meet with the same seriousness and the same purpose that it would have if a messenger from on high had summoned it together. The men and women gathered in the Dutch city from 148 denominations of Christians will first of all pray, and then they will seek God's will by sharing their insight with each other in discussion." (See the *Christian Beacon*, Aug. 5, 1948.) Is it any wonder that the reconstructionists are kept very busy? The Christian consciousness of one generation, they say, differs from the preceding one, and before they have finished emending the doctrine to suit one generation, the consciousness of the next generation is calling for a revision. It is an endless task; but they are convinced that they are serving God.

The Bible theologian will have nothing to do with this work. He will not compete with God in setting up the saving doctrine. He says with Dr. Patton: "To the modernist the *ego* is the real norm of religious truth. Modernism has abandoned the objective basis of Christianity. . . . We believe that that is the norm on which the experience of the inner life must be based — the truth revealed and recorded. . . . The religious 'experience' is based on an inflated feverish emotion, with its dangerous delusions and imaginations, unless it is founded on the rock of truth, stable as the eternal hills." He says with W. M. Robertson: "Experience, it is held, is to determine what is true; doctrine is but the reflexion of the varying words of Christian experience; fixity or finality in doctrine is impossible; what may be right for us today may be wrong for those who follow tomorrow. . . . But if doctrine is simply the garment in which a varying experience clothes itself from time to time, we may have religious experimenting, but doctrine as distinctive truth can never exist. Some of us are old-fashioned enough to believe that the great value of Christianity lies in its truth-

fulness, in divine actualities on which we can lay our hands and stay our hearts." (*Crucial Questions*, p. 63 ff.) He says with J. G. Machen: The reconstructionists hold that "there is truth for this generation and truth for that generation but no truth for all generations. . . . Every generation has its own thought-forms and cannot by any chance use the thought-forms of any other generation. . . . I think we may safely resist the skepticism which holds that the convictions of one generation can never by any chance be the convictions of another. . . . If it were true, then books produced in past generations ought to be pure gibberish to us." (*The Christian Faith in the Modern World*, pp. 90—95.)⁴ The Bible theologian says with Luther: "Es ist nie keine Predigt oder Lehre in der Welt gewesen, das so viele Meister haette gehabt als eben das Wort Gottes. Es ist niemand, der sich nicht duenken laesst, er koenne Gottes Wort meistern" (VIII:9), but: "I have no right to assume authority over the Word of God" (VIII:35), and: "The doctrine is not ours, but God's" (IX:644).

The attitude of the Schleiermacherian reconstructionists is marked by proud self-sufficiency. William Temple, Archbishop of York, says: "We shall not suppose that it is the task of the Christian theologian to go on saying in every generation what was said by all his predecessors" (quoted in Macfarland, *Trends of Christian Thinking*, p. 145). The attitude of the Bible theologians is marked by humble submission to Scripture. "We are catechumens and pupils of the Prophets — let us simply repeat and preach what we have heard and learned from the Prophets and Apostles." (Luther, III:1890.) No development of doctrine for us!

One of the chief arguments of the revisionists is that as everything else in this world is subject to change, the Christian doctrine, too, is ever changing. Science is progressive, and so the teaching of the Church must be progressive. It is "influenced by the scientific and philosophical teaching" (Leckie). V. Ferm: "Much water has passed under the bridge since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. . . . We must make readjustments with the findings of the best Biblical scholarship and interpretation, with the best recent scholarship." (*What Is Lutheranism?* p. 279 f.) D. Maurice Allan, in

⁴ The aberrations of these theologians do not invalidate their correct principle.

the *Presbyterian Outlook*: "Why should new truth unfold in the scientific realm and not in the spiritual? . . . God is now speaking to the Church and imparting new truth as genuinely as He did at Pentecost." (See the *Christian Beacon*, Feb. 26, 1948.) But these analogies are fallacious.

Science, for instance, changes from generation to generation,⁵ because all scientists are fallible men, and their findings are not the absolute truth. But the doctrines set down in Holy Scripture were revealed by the infallible God and are not subject to revision. Walther: "We will have nothing to do with a science which would play the lady and mistress over against Scripture which . . . wants to sit in judgment on it and correct it according to science, which instead of remaining in its sphere wants to make general laws of the laws that happen to apply to its domain and force them on Scripture. Such a μεταβάσις εἰς ἄλλο γένος we regard as both idolatrous and unscientific." (*Lehre und Wehre*, 1875, p. 1 f.)

And do the changes and amendments to the United States Constitution in any way affect the stability of the Christian doctrine? The *Globe-Democrat* in its issue of Sept. 13, 1942, states that "Jefferson announced the principle that the constitution of a free people should provide within itself an opportunity for each generation to revise it completely." And the commentator of the *Detroit News* said in the issue of July 19, 1948: "The Constitution does not mean today what it meant in 1789. The system set up by the founding fathers was far more elastic than they imagined. . . . The Constitution, as Chief Justice Hughes remarked, is what the Supreme Court says it is. But the Supreme Court sooner or later becomes what the majority of the people desire it to be; and therefore, sooner or later, the Constitution is interpreted according to the popular desire." But it is a gross fallacy to deduce from the elasticity of the Constitution that the Christian doctrine is likewise elastic. The *Detroit News* commentator remarks: "The elasticity of the Constitution is due to the fact that judges are human. They die, they resign, they change their minds. In the Supreme Court the majority of today is the

⁵ An author quoted by Macfarland (*op. cit.*, p. 70) says of science: "I feel at times a sense of the naive in the unconscious assumption among some of my scientific friends that in their area is incontrovertible truth."

minority of tomorrow." The argument of the reconstructionists reduces Scripture to an instrument devised by fallible men.⁶ The truth of the matter is, as Werner Elert put it: "We, on our part, must regard every word of man . . . as reformable. Only one thing is irreformable for us and that is the revelation of God." (*The Second Lutheran World Convention, 1930, p. 62*).

And the reconstructionists would reduce the Church to a debating society. According to them every generation is discussing the findings of the preceding generation, amending and changing them, and the next generation will do the same to its findings; no generation is able to guarantee the truth of its doctrine. None of that for us! Walther: "The modern theory, which holds that dogmas are formed gradually, makes the Church a philosophical school, whose task it is eternally to be looking for the truth, while according to the Word of God the Church is the mistress to whom the truth has been entrusted as her most precious treasure, as the good thing which has been committed unto her to keep it by the Holy Ghost, 2 Tim. 1:13, 14; 1 Tim. 6:20." (See *CONC. THEOL. MONTHLY, 1939, p. 509 f.*) Pieper: "The Church is not a society for the discovery of the saving truth, but a society for the promulgation of the saving truth." (*Vortraege ueber die Ev.-Lutherische Kirche, p. 146.*) And Luther: "What need would there be for a Church of God in the world, of what use would a Church be, if she wanted to waver and be evasive in her message or offer something new every day, now giving something, now taking away something?" (XVII:1340.) Luther again: "When they say they desire to wait until the Church has uttered her voice, let the devil do the waiting; I shall not tarry that long. For the Christian Church has already decided everything." (VIII:100.)

There are certain things which are as true today as in the days of Moses, certain things which with all the advancement in science never become antiquated. We make use, in the words of F. Bettex, of the modern ocean-steamer and the

⁶ L. S. Keyser: "This author [F. W. Bade] will not tolerate the view that any part of the Old Testament was given by direct divine revelation and inspiration. No, it is a 'growth,' a 'human growth,' a 'development of human thought.' . . . The author is committed to the theory of evolution; to him the idea of a direct divine revelation is intolerable." (*Contending for the Faith, pp. 49, 50.*)

like; they are better than the old things; but we have no use for the modern God and the modern Christ and modern Christianity. They may stigmatize us as being antiquated, backward and behind the times. Be it so—we want to be as old-fashioned as the prayer of Moses and the penitence of David and the Sermon on the Mount and the Epistle to the Romans. We are back of the times not only by a hundred years but by 1900 years.—The teaching of the Moral Law remains the same. It cannot be surpassed. In spite of what H. L. Willett says: “It is inevitable that one who studies the Scriptures should bring every statement and precept to the bar of his own sense of right and judge it by that standard. . . . The Book itself does not claim to be a carefully prepared manual of conduct” (*The Bible Through the Centuries*, pp. 291, 294), in spite of what Robert F. Horton says: “We certainly misunderstand the Apostle when we give to this moral teaching with which his writings abound that note of finality and that suggestion of infallibility which would preclude the free operation of the Spirit in revealing other things to us as the ages roll by” (*op. cit.*, p. 302), the moral teachings of the Bible cannot be improved. A commentator in the *Globe-Democrat*, of May 31, 1948, says: “An editor once complained that I peddled platitudes, for which I thank the Lord. After all, the Ten Commandments are a compilation of ‘platitudes’ which are just as true today as when they were first issued, although many thousands of years have passed since then.” The *Moody Monthly* says: “Science has greatly improved living and working conditions, and it is a long step from the sickle Ruth wielded in Boaz’s field to the modern harvester. ‘But’ someone inquires, ‘have we improved upon Ruth?’” (See *The Presbyterian*, Jan. 9, 1941.)—And as to the old Gospel, the reconstructionists are busy improving it, but the Christians will not have it changed by one sentence, by one word. They say with Luther in his *Confession of Faith*: “I also believe that such Son of God and Mary, our Lord Jesus Christ, has suffered, was crucified, dead and buried for us poor sinners, whereby through His innocent blood He has redeemed us from sin, death and the eternal wrath of God. . . . This is my faith, for thus all true Christians believe and thus the Holy Scriptures teach us. . . . I beg all pious hearts to bear witness to this and to pray for me that I remain steadfast in this faith to the end of my days.” (XX:1096, 1105.)

Let us follow in the footsteps of Walther, who said: "We not only disavow such additions of science to theology as directly contradict the Biblical truth, but, in short, *all* that is meant to *augment* our Biblical theology, for God does not only forbid men to contradict His Word, but just as strictly forbids them to add anything to it, Deut. 12:32." (*Lehre und Wehre*, 1875, Foreword.) At the dedication of the new seminary building in 1883 he declared: "In this building no new doctrines will be developed, but here the old and still eternally young doctrine of Him will be presented who said: 'Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away.'" (See Chr. Hochstetter, *Geschichte der Evangelisch-lutherischen Missouri-Synode*, p. 449.)

There are two more reasons why we cannot engage in the business of developing the doctrine.

(To be continued)

Contributors to This Issue

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