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No Development of Doctrine for Us!

† By TH. ENGELDER †

(Concluded)

There is a third reason why we cannot engage in the development of doctrine. Our time and energies are so completely occupied with the study of the Word of God and the old doctrine of the Church that we have not a moment's time to expend on the business of further developing the doctrine. We read in the *Proceedings of the Michigan District, 1897*, page 36: "We all need to deepen our understanding of the doctrine. Let no man think that he has fully understood the whole doctrine. In this life we shall never reach that point. We know the doctrine only in part. We have in this life only a piecemeal knowledge of the works of God in creation; much less are we able to gain the full picture of the deep thoughts and wonderful counsels of God displayed in His work of salvation. The doctrine would not be divine if our finite understanding could fully grasp it. . . . The Christian will sacrifice everything in order to win this great pearl. And it so fully satisfies his thirst for knowledge that no desire for developing the doctrine arises within him."

We need to grow in the knowledge of the saving doctrine. "Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," 2 Pet. 3: 18. "The God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints," Eph. 1: 17 f. "Increasing in the knowl-

edge of God," Col. 1:10. Therefore "give attendance to reading," 1 Tim. 4:13, for "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine," 2 Tim. 3:16. This growth in the knowledge of the saving doctrine and the consequent increase in our willingness and ability to do God's will is what God expects of us. The true development of doctrine takes place when Scripture sheds its light on every part of it and it shines before us in ever increasing splendor.¹

And this old doctrine is replete with deep thoughts. The words of Scripture which present it are words of inexhaustible significance. "Give attendance to reading," for the most learned theologian will not be able to exhaust Holy Scripture, let him live ever so long, let him employ all his zeal." (*Proc., Western District*, 1897, p. 32.) We never tire of searching Scripture; the old doctrine never palls on us. "Who of us has, as Luther puts it, 'completely mastered the article of justification'?" (F. Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, II, p. 609.) Luther says in the passage to which Dr. Pieper refers: "I have not yet completely mastered this art, but am ever studying it." (XIII: 2498.) Luther again: "Those are words — John 3:16 — which no one can exhaust or fathom." (XI:1103.) Again: "And all who know and understand this art well are well aware that they do not understand all of it, but only feel something of it, as a lovely taste and sweet odor; they chase after it in wonderment, they cannot grasp it all and fully probe its depth as they so earnestly desire, they hunger and thirst after it, their desire for it steadily increases, they never tire of hearing it and handling it; as St. Paul himself confesses, Phil. 3:12, that he had not yet attained it, and Christ calls them blessed who hunger and thirst after righteousness, Matt. 5:6. Therefore, dear brother, do not think in your pride and self-security that you know all about Christ. I have just confessed to you what the devil did to Luther, who certainly should be a doctor of this art; he has preached, composed, written, said, sung, and read so much about this matter and yet can be only a pupil —

¹ *The Lutheran Witness*, July 27, 1948: "While the doctrine, given by God's own revelation, is perfect, our practice, calling for performance on our part to do God's will, is imperfect. But such imperfection is not due to the failure of knowing God's will (for that has been revealed to us in Scripture), but rather due to our sinful nature. And here we might speak of a change that should take place: a greater and more sincere loyalty to the Word of God and a larger degree of sanctification."

sometimes neither a pupil nor a master of this art. Therefore be advised and do not say pooh-pooh. Thou standest, take heed lest you fall. You know it all, take care lest you fail in this art. Be afraid, remain humble, and pray that you may grow in this art and be preserved from the devil, the wiseacre, who knows it all and has learned it all in a jiffy." (V:1171 f.) You will never outlearn Scripture, which alone tells of these things. You need to study Scripture day after day. "You should meditate . . . again and again read and reread, noting carefully and reflecting upon what the Holy Ghost means by these words. And have a care that you do not tire of it or think it enough if you have read, heard, said it once or twice, and now profoundly understand it all. . . . Therefore you see in this Psalm how David over and over glories in the fact that he will speak, compose, declare, sing, hear, read day and night and evermore; however, nothing but the Word and precepts of God alone." (Luther, XIV:435.) You must follow Luther's example: "Ich zwar hab' nun etliche Jahre her die Bibel jaehrlich zweimal ausgelesen; und wenn sie ein grosser maechtiger Baum waere, und alle Worte waeren Aestlein und Zweige, so hab' ich doch an allen Aestlein und Reislein angeklopft, und gerne wissen wollen, was daran waere, und was sie vermoechten, und allezeit noch ein paar Aepfel oder Birnlein herunter geklopft." (XXII:40.) Our entire time is taken up in digging in this rich mine and uncovering ever richer views. "There are never Sundays enough in the year for the Bible truths that clamor for utterance — no, not in a lifetime. . . . It is like discovering a new lode in a rich mine." (See CONC. THEOL. MTHLY., 1948, p. 629.) And so the Christians progress in their knowledge of the saving truth, digging deeper and deeper, raised to higher and higher understanding of the wonderful truths presented in the Bible. As W. M. Robertson has said: "I believe in progress. There should be a great and growing apprehension and appreciation of divine truth and the great doctrines of the Word of God. But that is different from saying that Christianity has no moveless foundation, but is always in a state of flux. Let there be progress. Let us grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. If we are Christian people at all tonight, we ought to be further on than when we were converted. Of course there should be progress, but it should be

the growing up into the full stature of manhood in Christ." (*Crucial Questions*, p. 68.)²

No, we have not the time and inclination to discover new "truths," we are too busy with unfolding the old doctrine. "Mine eyes prevent the night watches that I might meditate in Thy word," and "I hate vain thoughts," Ps. 119:148; 113. And the meditation in God's Word will occupy us throughout the ages of eternity. "Turning our backs to the lying 'development' of modern theology, we eagerly hasten towards the true and blessed development in eternity, when we shall reach a higher degree and obtain a greater measure of the divine revelation" (*Proc., Western District*, 1897, p. 321).³

There is but one reason why men devote their time and energy to augmenting the old doctrine. They have grown tired of studying the wonderful truths revealed in the Bible. "Men will engage in the business of developing the doctrine only so long and in so far as they do not know the Christian doctrine. As soon as, and in so far as, we have by God's grace learned to know it by faith in God's Word, we bow our heads and knees in adoration, admiring its unchangeable divine grandeur." (Pieper, *op. cit.*, I, p. 153.) Luther: "Oh, how many preachers of the faith are there now who imagine they know everything and have never conceived the least of these things! Oh, how soon do they become masters who never yet have

² For instance: "Prof. A. Craemer throughout his long life penetrated deeper and deeper into this central doctrine of Christianity (reconciliation and justification), gradually attained greater insight, and testified and battled for this doctrine." (L. Fuerbringer, *Persons and Events*, p. 8.)

³ By various methods God provides a deeper insight into the revealed doctrine. First, of course, through a deeper study of Scripture He grants a better understanding, but also through the labor of the Church in combating error. The Church has been compelled by the errorists to set up new terms unmasking these errors, but those new terms, far from establishing new doctrines, rather confirm the old doctrine. Walther: "Through this activity the dogmas are merely safeguarded ever more carefully against the danger of becoming perverted. . . . Through this course that which was already known receives new confirmation, or the Church becomes aware of certain inferences and corollaries of its dogmas which it had not noticed before. . . . 'After these perversions of Scripture had begun to invade the Church, the teachers of the Church began to explain the truth of faith more distinctly and to guard the true sense of the Scriptures against the fictitious interpretations of the human mind!'" (See *CONC. THEOL. MONTHLY*, 1939, pp. 510 to 513.) "The old truth, once gained, must be regained and rewon anew against opposition from within and without." (Pieper, *op. cit.*, II, p. 354.)

become disciples! They have not tasted it, therefore they cannot impart it; they remain unprofitable babblers." (XII:476.) The 1897 *Proceedings* of the Western District, on page 84 f., quote an old Lutheran teacher to the effect that the chief reason why the doctrine of the Church is falsified is that the teachers want to teach new things and the people, being sick of the old doctrine, want to hear new things. (Compare Luther, VI:34.) They call the atonement and justification by faith "dead subjects." A writer in the *Living Church*, of Aug. 8, 1936, relates that the dean of one of their seminaries said: "I think we spend too much time on dead subjects. . . . I have heard of a seminary where a whole term — or was it a whole year? — was given to a course of the atonement." Men of this sort begrudge the time given to a subject which "the angels desire to look into" (1 Pet. 1:12) and which will occupy us in all eternity! Luther: "The satiated saints consider it a waste of time to enlarge on this thing (for they imagine that they know it full well and have finished with it long ago); but I know their self-conceit; they do not know in the least how much this thing means. . . . Whenever you hear a green and callow saint who prides himself on knowing full well that we are saved without works by God's grace and pretends that it is a simple matter for him, have no manner of doubt that he does not know what he professes and may perhaps never experience and taste it. For it is a science that is never mastered. It is a science that would remain master and would keep us pupils." (V:1170 f.) Men who feel the itch to improve the doctrine of the Catechism and augment it should take to heart what Luther tells them in the Preface to the Large Catechism: "Many regard the Catechism as a poor, mean teaching, which they can read through at one time — and then immediately know it, throw the book into a corner, and be ashamed, as it were, to read in it again. . . . Therefore I beg such lazy paunches or presumptuous saints to be persuaded and believe for God's sake that they are verily, verily, not so learned or such great doctors as they imagine; and never to presume that they have finished learning this [the parts of the Catechism] or know it well enough in all points, even though they think that they know it ever so well. For though they should know and understand it perfectly (which however, is impossible in this life), yet there are manifold benefits and fruits still to be

obtained, if it be daily read and practiced in thought and speech; namely, that the Holy Ghost is present in such reading and repetition and meditation, and bestows ever new and more light and devoutness, so that it is daily relished and appreciated better." (*Trigl.*, p. 567 f. — See also Luther, VIII: 1216 f.) The surfeit of the old doctrine begets the quest after new doctrines; clinging to the old doctrine, we are rewarded and fully satisfied with beholding its light shine before us in ever-increasing splendor.

The charge is made that if the preacher is simply to reproduce the old doctrine he becomes a mere phonograph. Edwin Lewis raises that charge. "Nobody expects the Christian minister to be a phonograph repeating ancient shibboleths. . . . What has been said above about a creed does not commit you to the mere repetition of ancient phrases. It does not mean that the first charge upon you is the rehabilitation of traditional formulations." (*The Faith We Declare*, pp. 180, 223.) It is an old charge. Luther heard "the mob say: What, can this man preach nothing but Baptism, the ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and faith; why the children learned that already; why does he keep filling our ears with the same old preachment? Anybody can do that. One should not always say the same thing; one should progress and advance, etc." (VIII: 1098.) In reply we say two things. First, the Christian minister has no right to advance beyond what the Apostles and Prophets have said. "His doctrine should be simply a reproduction of the doctrine of the Prophets and Apostles. All true teachers of the Church are so constituted that, in the words of Luther (III: 1890), 'they preach nothing original or new but teach only what they get from the Prophets.'" (Pieper, *op. cit.*, I, 62 f.) Call us "phonographs," "rehabilitators of traditional formulations," and whatever else you please, we say with Luther: "Die Christen bleiben stets Schueler, und *kæuen* das Wort wieder, auf dass das Herz fuer und fuer durch eine neue Flamme erweckt, und nicht traeege werde, oder einen Ekel vor dem Wort bekomme." (VI: 34.) Second, it is a slander to designate the work of the Christian teachers as a mere "phonographic" reproduction of the words of the holy writers and the creeds of Christendom. Their work represents hard labor and much study — guided by the Holy Spirit. And — as everybody knows — the old-school theologians are fully abreast with the

times. They know just as much about the developments in science and in Biblical criticism, etc., as the "moderns."⁴

We thank God that He has given us teachers who, unheedful of the "scornful smile" of the world (Hymn 396, stanza 4), cling to the doctrine once delivered unto the saints and say with A. L. Graebner: We emphatically refuse "to apologize for having nowhere, from the first point in Bibliology to the last in Eschatology, progressed beyond the theology of our orthodox fathers," and we fervently pray that "God would graciously keep him and his brethren in the faith from any such progress." (*Outlines of Doctrinal Theology*, Preface, V.)⁵ What the Church and the world need to hear today is the same old doctrine which has been proclaimed from the beginning. "And so," said Dr. Walther, addressing the convention of 1866, "we were sure that 'the teaching of the sixteenth century would also in our nineteenth century edify the souls unto salvation; that the tree of our old Lutheran Church which for centuries bore such blessed fruit for the salvation of millions would today blossom and burst forth in fruit with the same fecundity as of yore—and, behold, our hope has not been confounded' (*Brosamen*, p. 540). We thank God that Walther did not attempt to adjust, modify, make over, change the old doctrine" (*Walther and the Church*, p. 19 f.).

St. Louis, Mo.

⁴ "To proclaim the saving truth of the Gospel to poor sinners will, of course, not bring anybody fame as a profound original thinker, but it will do something far better; it will lead thirsty souls to the fountains where spring the waters of everlasting life, and it will extend the gracious rule of God's kingdom." (*CONC. THEOL. MONTHLY*, 1949, p. 383.) The "catechumens and pupils of the prophets" deal with certain, firm, divine truths. What have these self-styled "profound, original thinkers" to offer? They tell us themselves that they are engaged in a "long, hard quest for truth" and meanwhile cannot clothe their theories in plain, intelligible language. Leander S. Keyser has presented the situation correctly: "If a 'restatement' of doctrine means to substitute vagueness for the definite and comparatively simple statements of orthodox theology, we do not see that anything is to be gained." (*Contending for the Faith*, p. 258.)—This vagueness is, as a rule, due to the attempt of the reconstructionists to hide their teaching of salvation by the Law behind Christian phrases.

⁵ "It is said that Charles H. Spurgeon counted as the highest compliment ever paid him the words of an open enemy who said: 'Here is a man who has not moved an inch forward in all his ministry, and at the close of the nineteenth century is teaching the theology of the first century, and is proclaiming the doctrine of Nazareth and Jerusalem current eighteen hundred years ago.'" (*The Watchman-Examiner*, Oct. 12, 1944.) Spurgeon erred in important points, but he was right in upholding the principle that the doctrine does not change.