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First Faith, Then Reason

JOHN PHILIPP KOEHLER

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One can have a right or wrong conception of dogmatics. If the conception is wrong it may be expected that its application also will be wrong. If the conception is right, however, one may hardly forthwith expect the application to be right; for there exist between perception and practice a number of very important intermediate steps which must be taken into consideration if we are to arrive at the proper practical judgment of the significance of dogmatics in the study of theology and in church life.

The question of the significance of dogmatics for the study of theology and for church life leads us to a consideration of the most basic elements of intellectual life. When I speak of elements I hardly have in mind trifling Sunday school truths as the word has often been bandied about; I mean rather the very greatest of fundamental truths which one actually comes to discern only when one has achieved a decided perspective of the entire life of the world. From such a perspective we will see that for the purely intellectual life of mankind an historical view must remain the basis and result, and for the religious life here on earth faith remains the basis, means, and end; that knowledge, which remains fragmentary, and its medium, logical definition, have only ancillary significance for faith, and for life in general.

These are the important factors in the most important concerns on earth, not only for the preachment of the Gospel but for all educational work.

In order to satisfy all requirements it is best to find out from history how dogmatics came into existence. Here one can tell what interests it serves and what influence it has exercised. Here, from the context of life, one can render a critique of its aims or method or both and from this get some pointers in the direction where the corrective may be found.

Dogmatics in theology treats of the doctrines of Holy Scripture. These have been transmitted to us through the preachment of prophecy and fulfillment in the Old and New Testaments. The characteristic feature of this preachment lies in its heraldic style, a proclamation. The extraordinary mark in the form of this kerygmatic is that it does not bother with definitions, but aspires to poetry in exalted language in order to win hearts.

God placed people in Paradise so that they might live in bliss in the fellowship of faith and love with Christ, the image of God in which they were created. Sin tantalized them with the knowledge of good and evil in order to attain to equality with God. Here we have the antithesis of faith and knowledge. Now we wish to penetrate both in their innermost essence.

What is the object of knowledge? Facts, not theories. Facts *exist*. They are truths. Theories are attempts to penetrate to the facts. The medium of theory has already been given through the antithesis to faith. By minimizing confidence and love which are rooted in the feelings, the faculty of the intellect for definition, that is, the logical penetration of things, is supposed to attain to the facts. The history of the world demonstrates that this method never achieves the goal.

What is the object of faith? Facts, not theories. This is self-evident. God does not bother with mere attempts, nor with rules of thumb. These expressions are the constructions of human thought with which, again, we try to explain and understand God's doings, and for all that still fail.

God has redeemed the world, this is a fact. This, for God, is a fact already before the foundation of the world. He proclaims this fact to mankind. The medium whereby one intellectually appropriates this fact is faith. Again, this inheres in the nature of the matter. Thus it remains, even here on earth where people imagine that they can accomplish something by means of their knowledge. One comprehends facts only by faith, even before one has understood them. Understanding follows only later, but alters nothing in the fact itself in the first place, and, in the second place, also nothing in the fact that a person first encountered the fact with faith.

In the case of the great fact of the Gospel the matter becomes even clearer and stronger. The fact of the Gospel is a marvelous one, not evident to the eye; for it was hidden in God. God can communicate it to people only in the form of a proof

of love which expresses itself first of all in a promise. For the communication of knowledge both a presuppositionless disposition as well as the conceptual intermediate links are wanting here. Man is too far removed from God through sin and stupidity. The closeness necessary for understanding can be achieved only through love. How is one to accept love? The question is intended to draw attention to the fact that we are here concerned not with purely intellectual matters, but rather that at the first word of the Gospel a love affair outshines all else. Love is something one can grasp only with faith, with trust.

People, however, lack this emotion. Immediately coupled with their sinful mind that wanted to know what is good and evil is a legalistic mind that expresses itself in an evil conscience. Man by nature senses that he is damned. This is a feeling, not a knowing. Because it is a feeling it is much stronger than knowing, and never lets knowing get as far as that it could arrive at a clear understanding of what it means to be damned but proceeds ever farther in fruitless pursuit of grasping matters, the facts, with the intellect. Hence the whole basic organization of sinful man, including his pretended logical thinking, is diametrically opposed to faith.

What is the remedy? The preachment of the fact of God's grace. What creates faith is not conceptuality of speech, which would address itself to the intellect, but the factuality of the proof of love which issues right from the sermon and thus addresses itself to the heart. This is the way God governs in the history of men anyway. He preaches the marvelous fact of His grace in the redemption, and thereby creates the equally marvelous fact of faith

in the heart of man. Even this purely human activity which we call faith or trust, and which plays such a significant role in the history of mankind, we cannot fully fathom with the intellect. Nor would we ever by ourselves approach this spiritual reality, which exists in our own heart, were we not first to make it ours by faith. When this has taken place, then conceptual thinking about it can begin, and we can talk about it. Yet even this speaking can be done only in the form of example or comparison. I can speak to no person about faith so that he can understand me unless he himself has experienced faith in his heart.

All of this sounds so paradoxical that even a Lutheran theologian's head may begin to swim at it. Quite properly so, for the naked intellect, "pure reason," cannot advance beyond this point. Faith, nevertheless, remains a fact.

Speaking, whether in prose or poetry, is done by means of concepts. Speaking is audible thinking. Thinking is the development of concepts and the association of concepts. The development of concepts and the association of concepts are natural functions of the human soul which happen automatically as surely as the breathing of the lungs. External phenomena crowd in upon the soul through the senses and produce impressions. These impressions are of various kinds, as for example, apple tree, plum tree, pear tree. The soul distinguishes between essential and nonessential characteristics. The latter are presented for example in the various forms of trunk, branches, leaves, blossoms, and fruits. The essential characteristics are trunk, branches, leaves, blossoms, and fruits. These the mind comprehends under the concept or

word "tree." This constitutes the development of concepts.

The association of concepts has already simultaneously taken place. The concepts "tree" and "trunk" are related to one another, and thus the complete thought takes shape which announces itself in audible speech in the sentence: "The tree has a trunk." Language, grammar, and logic come in conjunction with this. All of this constitutes the development of concepts. But it is hardly the initial and, above all, hardly the most sublime factor in intellectual life.

The initial and paramount factor in intellectual life is the activity of feelings and the poetry resulting from them. When for the first time after his birth a little newborn human being makes himself heard, the midwife lays him at his mother's breast, and it is astonishing to see with what enterprise the little fellow sizes up the situation. And when for the second and third time he finds himself similarly situated, how he presses his nose into his mother's breast, and works his hands and feet to express his innermost contentment!

Here these concepts come into play: physical distress and necessity, relief, complete satisfaction, trust, reliance, contentment. But no one will say that they present themselves in a logical arrangement, but rather, in the form of feelings with which one aligns oneself with or against the exigencies one meets. This constitutes the primary factor, and, by the way, it remains the primary and strongest factor in all forms of great intellectual life. At the same time it appears from this that feelings, in comparison with reason, actually are the loftier and greater. Everything in life depends on this that those impressions which

are at all capable of it are apprehended by the feelings. And what is more, these are the great things in life that encompass everything in heaven and on earth. And when in apprehending these matters intellectual activity later augments the feelings, it soon is clear that this activity is subordinate in importance. It does not create feelings but is itself stimulated and intensified by the feelings and enters their service in order to prepare the way for volition.

But even before conceptual consciousness has matured, the feelings have already begotten in a child the highest form of human expression, poetry. And in fact this happens not just with a fitful start, but with the most intensive use of all the essential elements of what we call poetry. When the little fellow begins to express his feelings, it is an inarticulate scream at first. This is hardly poetry. It isn't music. Physical pain, or, more generally stated, distress and necessity, do not in themselves form the sensory bases of poetry, they rather only beget a jumble in the mind which then declares itself in unbeautiful sounds. Only after an infant has experienced love, and after joy, trust, and reliance have thereby been begotten in him, can the feelings attain to rhythmic cadences which in time issue also in rhythmic sounds. And now, what is the first word an infant utters?

It turns on the easiest letter in the alphabet which takes form through the smacking satisfaction of the suckling and hence, perhaps, forms the first lingual sound in an infant's mouth: the letter *M*. The Semites say *Em*. Among the more advanced Japhetites, the Greeks say *Mae*, the Romans *Ma*; later on Germanic peoples alter it to *Mo* and *Mu*, and then, in all the linguistic branches of Europe which they have influ-

enced, they double the *M* and turn it into *Mam*, the sound in which a child epitomizes the ideas of help, love, goodness, sufficiency, peace, and trust: *Mama* (*Mutter*).

Now, one must not esteem all this a trifle, nor think that the example demonstrates nothing, but rather put aside for a change the preoccupation with logical comprehension and with strong inner vitality grasp what the infant's syllable imports. Subjectively, it represents the highest values to be found on earth: faith and love; and objectively, the highest and grandest value to be found on earth: a mother's love which sacrifices itself for the child. It is the strongest and most intensive force that is operative on earth, for never again on earth does a man apply himself with such exertion of all his mental and physical capacities as does the little fellow who sets in motion every nerve and muscle in his body in order to express the single concept in which his whole life is comprehended. And there is nothing on earth that creates in the hearts of others such a great selfless feeling of joy as this song from an infant's mouth effects in the parents. The entire proceeding amounts to poetry, and the infant's word is the sweetest song.

For the educator as for anyone who wants to understand history a number of conclusions follow from what has been said, which one should not convert into rule and regulation right away as is usually done, but one should rather assimilate them as an inner possession and adopt them into one's total perspective and thus form them into inner life. People who are preoccupied with doctrine look clean past history and its development and fail to notice how thereby they disdain God's gov-

ernance in history. This avenges itself in this that they go wrong in their dealings. They want to arrange their dealings logically and systematically but don't realize that in history life always comes first, and that a system can evolve only from a fundamental knowledge of life. Hence professional systematizers have always wrought nothing but disaster.

In our case the people who fail to observe history are those who think that the education of our children, our congregations, and also our teachers and preachers, has to proceed by steps from simple to difficult, from external observation to inner intellectual digestion. Because this notion too, however, is for them simply an imposed rule rather than an inner spiritual possession, they adhere to an external, mechanical application of the rule. For example: One should not have children learn by heart anything that they have not conceptually understood. As rule and regulation this proposition has a false effect. But if it has been gained as an inner spiritual possession from faithful observation of life entire, then it is of great value.

Do those people who live by the rule insist that a child should first be guided to the concept of physical pain and stomach complaint before it presumes to formulate the name of Mother because the intellectual understanding of love, of course, follows upon the understanding of distress? To the naked superficial intellect this seems logical, systematic, on target. Life as it is appears paradoxical to the intellect, and the intellect wants to regulate it, that is to say, wants to force it into external forms, and consequently makes a manufactured product of it. Yes, life is paradoxical. One learns to understand this even with the in-

tellelect if one modestly recognizes that all knowing and understanding remain fragmentary. This modest recognition, however, is a matter of feelings. If one understands this, then one will hardly hinder a mother from showing her little one a picture of the Savior and rejoicing when the little child says the name of the Savior and prays its Abba Father and says other charming words. Here a simple average woman is dipping out from a deep inner well of life. She handles with an instinctually sure touch the most transcendent material, employing the most transcendent as well as the loveliest media that grip the feelings, and the way she does it is in itself one of the most beautiful songs that can be sung about the life of mankind. This is the way God Himself has done it in the history of the Gospel.

We observe in the Old Testament the springtime of evangelical proclamation. Here an abstract thought-life is not yet dominant. The great visions of the Gospel can be presented only by means of great imagery. God Himself employs the like in Paradise, and the singers and prophets of the Old Testament made use of imagery throughout that era. This is natural, since all of the detailed knowledge of the following centuries, it must be remembered, is necessary for an intellectual understanding, while here the intellect is not at all uppermost, but rather the inner life which reposes in the feelings.

The dominance of abstract thought does not set in before the Alexandrine era when, after Malachi's time, prophecy has ceased. Here the dogmatics of the scribes is on the rise. We recognize what this brought about from the opposition which Jesus in the gospels has to face, and we find it more

precisely defined in the Talmud. Here we have the definition of terms and the legalistic mind side by side in close collaboration.

We have already discussed above the development of concepts and the association of concepts. This is, it was stated, the instinctually sure, unconscious organic work of the intellect with which it renders its services to the comprehension achieved by the feelings. Something else is the definition of terms which comes about in the interest of academic learning. This definition sets in, in full force, when the candor of infant life has passed out of the development of the individual and nations. Then the distinguishing intellect enters the picture. This then becomes the main concern for the maturing youth and in the academic pursuits of national life. Because this development is accompanied by a recession of the life at heart (*Herzensleben*), such intellectual activity assumes three characteristics: the intellect imagines that it can set aright the paradoxical side of life; it wishes to do this by rule and regulation because, as it supposes, logic in itself forms the most stringent law of all; and it divorces people from one another because they do not all actually operate principally with the intellect and now, what with intellectual distinctions, they mutually distrust one another, and because, aside from this, it still remains true that only a strong life at heart keeps people in fellowship. One can observe this again and again in education, politics, and church life. Hence we hardly have to take up time explaining how and why the dogmatics of the Jews constituted legalistic practice and a symptom of intellectual, spiritual, and political decline.

What is more important for us to study is how the Savior faces this phenomenon. Jesus was the teacher of the people and even gathered about Him a school of 12 disciples. For all that, Jesus was not a schoolmaster but a herald. His 12 disciples did not form a seminary such as we have, rather, this work comprised a piece of congregational organization which had already begun before the election of the Twelve. Hence Christ's private instructions will have been of the same character as Christ's discourses, which are recorded as the most significant and representative reflection of His teaching activity. In the Sermon on the Mount and in individual instances of controversy the Lord regularly demonstrates how the pedagogy of the scribes gets lost in specious distinctions which in the end become external and shallow, and, from the great life of the Gospel, posits as against these the practical assertion of any given proposition. His discourse always addresses itself to the heart, never to the one-sided intellect generally in command among the Jews. This is the changeless ancient approach originating in Paradise. It remains the ever new approach which alone ever and again creates life.

Exactly the same is the approach of Paul, who has often been called the dogmatist among the apostles. Paul had absorbed the style of the scribes from Gamaliel, the scholar of Hillel. Hillel has been considered, on testimony of the Jews, as the slipshod opponent of the strict Shammai. This is hardly the whole truth. Hillel was to a greater degree influenced by the free Greek style so that he did not, like his opponents, engage in hair-splitting, but rather allowed himself to be guided by knowledge of fresh life, and hence came

to emancipate himself from the intellectual pedantry of legalistic Jewry. For example: Acts 5:34-39. This school will most likely have exerted its influence on Paul's mind. But now, when we size up Paul's style, we can recognize how the Gospel endowed it with its own character, that of a herald's proclamation. It is identical with that of Christ except for this difference: Christ is still speaking under the economy of prophecy, while Paul is speaking from fulfillment. Paul is not talking

doctrines in the sense of propositions and theses in which conclusions are inferred from concepts, even though the propositions are God's revealed Word; rather, he talks life, experience, history; and his application of Scripture always is made in this sense that prophecy contains life and history, and not theory.

How this style ever and again vanished in the subsequent course of church history, and how reason regularly went on parade, this is a subject by itself.