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Theology and Doctrine

I. THEOLOGY BETWEEN CHURCH AND ACADEMY

Theology has to do with the study of doctrine; and in particular times and places, doctrine has to do with human beings' experience with divine reality that comes to but also transcends those temporal and spatial specificities. That is the argument of this book. My primary constructive aim is to inspire a revitalized interest in doctrine after decades of contentious dispute that, among other things, has served to isolate doctrine from serious engagement beyond a small circle of theologians and to render the term virtually a synonym for ecclesiastical authority that is inattentive to or even dismissive of human experience. How particular theologies define doctrine and the methods proposed for studying it vary widely among theologians and in different historical eras. But the one constant is the fact that commitments to particular accounts of the relationship between language and reality are entailed in theology's work of appropriating doctrine from previous generations and in conversation with contemporaries, in developing new doctrinal understandings, and in bringing doctrine into relationship with today's vital questions.

Personal biography, political context, and relationship with the church and the Christian community all contribute to the shape of the questions a theologian asks. His or her ideas may take a lifetime to develop; often it feels that more than a single lifetime is needed. As a theologian grows and changes, her ideas over time are continuously inflected by her personal, religious, and cultural circumstances. But then sometimes there is disruption. What has been taken for granted gives way, and the theologian is brought up short. There is a particular urgency to such moments. The theologian is impelled to seek out a language commensurate to the reality she sees emerging and to bring her

ideas into conversation with other thinkers of her time, within and beyond the academy and the church. In these circumstances theology's course might be changed forever.

Here are three paradigmatic moments of such profound reorientation in the history of Western theology. (1) Martin Luther (1483–1546), the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformer, endured sleepless devil-haunted nights until he found relief in the Christ who died for sinners. Luther's religious breakthrough, prepared for by years of biblical study, resulted in his coming to understand the human person as freed by the gospel. This discovery—which was both existential and theological, as are the others to be described—introduced into Christian discourse the intimate address of God's pronouncement of justification *pro te* (for you). (2) As an eighteen-year-old seminarian at Barby, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), who would later be hailed the "father of modern Protestant theology," experienced a crisis of faith. He struggled with the theology of Christ's vicarious atonement and with a God who would condemn humans to eternal punishment for failing to attain the perfection this God had intended for them. Schleiermacher was standing at the confluence of three intellectual movements—Pietism, the German Enlightenment, and Romanticism—and he drew on all of them as he fashioned a way out of crisis by developing a new vocabulary of immediate self-consciousness to explain Christ's person and redemptive work.[1] (3) When Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) confronted the racial politics of National Socialism in Germany in 1934, he pointed with unprecedented theological urgency to the word of God that spoke judgment on human politics, culture, and religion. The word of God, a phrase with roots in the language of the biblical prophets, found decisive identification as Jesus Christ in Barth's thought and led him to deeper engagement with the doctrine of the Trinity.

These three brief snapshots of theologians at work in times of personal and social upheaval vividly illustrate the perspective that orients this book. Theology, an age-old inquiry, makes its way toward new perspectives on truth by means of theologians' critical and constructive engagement with the contingencies and exigencies of their times and in conversation with their interlocutors in the university and in the churches. Theology is a discipline that is at once oriented to the transcendent and thoroughly located in a particular time and place. It arises out of personal needs and social crises but looks beyond

1. References to Schleiermacher's famous letter of January 21, 1787, to his father, in *The Life of Schleiermacher as Unfolded in His Autobiography and Letters*, vol. 1, trans. Frederica Rowan (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1860), 46–47; cited in Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultural Despisers*, ed. and trans. Richard Crouter, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xii.

them to truth. The theologian's study is always and necessarily open to the surrounding world, heaven and earth.

When we look to how theology fares in North America today, then, we see that its historical and social surround has significant repercussions for the work of the discipline. Multiple factors shape the situation of contemporary theology. Theology has as one of its locations the denominational seminary, which today finds itself confronted with unprecedented financial pressures as it contends with the question of how to train the next generation of religious leaders for the churches they will be called to serve. Traditional models of full-time clerical leadership appear to be increasingly unviable, and this leads to a creative but also daunting search for new ways of educating pastors who themselves will be living and working in a radically changed world. Online courses, compact courses, and weekend seminars held at a distance from brick-and-mortar seminaries seem to be the wave of the future (although because the future is always unknowable, one is right to be skeptical of these successively and confidently identified waves). Educational models are being developed that prioritize both professional training and preparation for alternative careers, anticipating a time when clergy may not be able to support themselves on income derived solely from their ministry. This is not a new problem—think only of Jonathan Edwards's constant struggles over remuneration with his vestry—but it takes on particular urgency in the context of the permanent crisis of neoliberal economies. The challenge of conserving church membership also presses both on the mainline churches and, since the 1990s, on the new evangelical churches that were once heralded as the thriving alternative to the mainline denominations. Churches in turn insist that "our" seminaries—"our" in scare quotes because levels of financial support are not always commensurate with a sense of proprietorship—do their part to adapt traditional seminary education to make church attendance attractive again. This model serves the church that changes through time.

Some denominationally governed seminaries take a different tack. They continue to be dedicated to the traditional foundations of theological education. In these academic environments, history and systematic theology are regarded as indispensable for theological formation, along with biblical studies, liturgical studies, and practical theology. Since the church has as its goal the maintenance of a living institution with a distinct mission to the world, it will want to cultivate its leaders in the particular traditions that have characterized its distinctiveness for centuries. The church in this perspective requires its theologians to uphold doctrines that inform the church's identity through the ages. Theology is for the church. This model serves the church's unique and enduring identity.

These two visions of theology in the seminary do not exist in an academic vacuum. Whether theology is intended to guide the church toward relevance in the contemporary world or to serve the church's distinctive identity, both

models of theological mission are developed in relation to the broader pursuit of knowledge as it takes place in the modern academy. Theology is an academic pursuit, whether it takes place in a church seminary, university divinity school, or in the theology department of a denominationally affiliated college or university. The next generation of theologians already has in hand undergraduate degrees from the nation's colleges and universities by the time they begin their postgraduate professional training, and they will be taught by professors trained in graduate schools. Thus the assumptions and methodologies informing theological inquiry are always contextualized by the cultural and intellectual commitments of the day. The academic context within which theologians learn and work informs the self-understanding of the discipline, even if the explicit relationship of theology to the broader university context may not be at the forefront of theology's public rhetoric today. Like other academic disciplines, theology is oriented to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. Sometimes all of them are oriented to truth. However critical theology is of its relationship to the academy, however constructively it construes this relationship, theology's status as an academic discipline stands—or falls—with its openness to being in conversation with other endeavors dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge in the contemporary academy.

At the same time it must be acknowledged that theology's status as a viable intellectual discipline in the university, in particular in the secular university, is currently contested and fraught with struggle. A sometimes quite crude polemic has arisen in the past three decades that poses a particular challenge for theology, as I see it from my location as an academic theologian working in a department of religious studies in a secular North American university. The rhetoric goes like this: modern thought has developed as a free and rational enterprise, not only independent from but also sharply critical of authoritative and normative discourses. Within the frame of this historical achievement, theology is suspected of being a disempowering dogmatic discipline. More bluntly, religious studies scholar Tomoko Masuzawa calls theologians "petty criminals" whose primary interest is to keep hold of the financial benefits that come with university appointments.[2] The intellectual legacy of the German theological commitment to Christian universalism, Masuzawa argues, has so tainted the modern study of world religions that religious studies as an academic discipline must be abandoned. Its association with theology damns religious studies. Using a sporting metaphor, another critic writes that theologians

2. See this term in Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 328n15.

are "fair game" to religious theorists.[3] The only way to avoid being hunted down like a deer in season, evidently, is for theology to abandon its dogmatic doctrines—as critics state the issue—and to remake itself as intellectual history or as cultural studies or to foreground its political dimension in the new field of political theology. Only by fundamentally changing what is understood to be its core métier will theology satisfactorily conform in the eyes of its contemporary despisers to the spirit of free intellectual inquiry. In other words theology must stop being theology in order to obtain its visa into the academy.

And the worst of it is doctrine. Theology is a problem, and doctrine is the issue with the problem. Doctrine is the crime that theology must be prevented from committing upon the university. Meanwhile, to shift focus from the academy to the perspective of the churches, doctrine is purported to secure Christian belief in authoritative formulations. Within Christian churches, doctrine has to do with the unity of Christian identity across time and space. So the whole question of doctrine as it is currently set up functions as a firewall between the academy and the churches.

The rub is that theology is necessarily concerned with doctrine. But if doctrine is defined in exclusive terms as the authoritative linchpin of Christian identity, then theology's concern with it will only deepen theology's alienation from the university. On the other hand, can theology contribute to academic discussion when it inquires into the historical genesis and development of doctrine? Or when it asks how particular theologians in specific times and places interpreted doctrine in relation to their personal, social, and political circumstances? Or when it goes further to inquire into the relationship of doctrine to contemporary circumstances? This leaves us with a key question: how may theology investigate doctrine in a way that acknowledges its responsibility to church and academy while not falling into the abyss that in recent years has opened between church interests and academic inquiry, between sacred and secular, between the normative and the putatively nonnormative?

II. THEOLOGY'S CONCERN WITH DOCTRINE

Theology's relegation to distinct and multiple locations that have different agendas and interests affects how doctrine is understood. Is doctrine an outdated norm and thus irrelevant to today's Christians? Is doctrine capable of conveying what is common to Christianity through the ages, its core beliefs

3. Russell T. McCutcheon, "The Study of Religion as an Anthropology of Credibility," in *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain*, ed. Linell E. Cady and Delwin Brown (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 14.

and foundational identity, and if so, by which formulation and whose interpretation? Is doctrine a viable subject matter in the secular academy that now regards it as a dogmatic intrusion? The nature of doctrine inevitably changes as church and academy work out their respective aims and interests in interpreting and formulating doctrine. But given such competing interests, is it possible to work out the double task of considering (1) doctrine as a good of the church and (2) doctrine as the object of critical inquiry in contribution to the work of the university? In turn, can the academic study of doctrine connect the robust intellectual legacy of Christian theology with new generations of Christians in church and society?

Theology and the End of Doctrine examines the issue of theology's viability as an intellectual investigation into the content of Christian belief, doing so by critically considering the question of doctrine. I am interested both in doctrine as an intellectual practice relevant to the contemporary church and in doctrine as a question for theology in its relationship to the humanities broadly. It is a good moment to undertake such an examination: in the church, theology vacillates between doctrinal deconstruction and doctrinal preservation; in the university, theology is not quite sure what to do with doctrine as it engages its conversation partners in other disciplines. This work is an exploration, then, of doctrine and theology between church and academy.

Doctrine is theology's task as an intellectual enterprise, specifically as it is concerned with the way language and reality are construed theologically in the formulation of doctrine. This book may hold the promise of suggesting new areas and methods of theological inquiry as it invites a rethinking of theology's understanding of doctrine. That is my larger aim. In the meantime *Theology and the End of Doctrine* considers how the present situation of much Christian theology developed out of particular political and intellectual circumstances in the relatively recent past. The point of the book's historical excursuses is to establish what I consider to be the necessary framework for examining the constitutive elements of contemporary theology, all done with the hope that once parsed they may be recombined in new ways for the future.

Has doctrine's end already come? The end of doctrine has often been announced in recent years. Proponents of Christian orthodoxy have argued that the liberal Enlightenment and the long modern era—the period stretching from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, which witnessed the ascendancy of secular reason and the diminishment of the domain of faith (according to one familiar account of the era)—are responsible for eviscerating doctrine. The defenders of orthodox faith characterized the liberal strategy to place doctrine before the tribunal of reason, with the result that doctrine was given the poor choice of either accommodating itself to the alien standards of modern reason or being rejected by rational consensus.

Following the Enlightenment's assault on faith, according to these same proponents of Christian orthodoxy, doctrinal evocations of the supernatural and the miraculous became unintelligible, unsupported as they were by science; hence faith's mysteries could (so onlookers allege) be enforced only on those who unknowingly assented to propositions that the church imposed on them. By the standards of naturalist reason, the ontology presupposed by a doctrinal worldview that includes angels and devils, saints and spiritual forces, transcends sense perception. Naturalist reason saw this ontology as an obsolete relic of medieval Christianity; the worldview had only to be demythologized by reason. This was the fate of the idea of doctrine in modernity. So doctrine has been in crisis for a while, according to the story told by some of its contemporary defenders.

This is not the story of doctrine's end that I will tell. Rather, I will argue that those who sought to protect doctrine from what they deemed modernity's assaults have brought doctrine to its present-day challenge. This is a crisis made by doctrine's defenders, not by its revilers. I am especially concerned to probe how it came to be that theology assigned doctrine a normative function within the Christian worldview cut off from connection with the living reality of God. This is what I mean by the end of doctrine: it has come to an end when it cannot by definition say anything new and when the sole measurement of doctrine's significance is its contribution as the authoritative enforcer of the church's identity.

I proceed to this point via a historical review of theology's development in modernity. I am interested in how debates among certain leading theologians mapped out and then went down particular paths that led to where we are today. I will look specifically at the German theological legacy, in particular the inheritances of Martin Luther and Friedrich Schleiermacher, and at how interpretations of these theologians over time propelled twentieth-century theology forward. Debates over the theologies of Luther and Schleiermacher, often fiercely contested, were the engine of modern Protestant theology. The two figures continue to shape the current theological landscape in ways that are distinctly contemporary. This foray into the history of theology sets the stage for my proposing a new direction for doctrine.

To anticipate my argument aphoristically: a theology that views doctrine in relation to the reality that doctrine aims to articulate is a theology that relates experience to the production of knowledge. When doctrine speaks its truth, it speaks of experience. For this is what is at stake in this work and in the fate of doctrine. How do we understand the relationship between experience and knowledge? In particular, how do we understand the relationship between the human experience of God and human knowledge of God? Once doctrine is reconnected to divine reality and human experience—only then will theology

be inspired to approach doctrine with intellectual curiosity, academic rigor, and a deep sympathy for the church's witness to God in this world.

But first there is the question of why theology ought to be concerned with doctrine in the first place. Accordingly, this chapter begins with theology's unique contribution to discerning life at its deepest and most exigent core. The eternal is what ultimately compels theology. Theology relishes the challenge of expressing the truth of God in language that can sustain Christian confidence. Theology's gaze is inward, into the eternal essence of things, and outward, into places where God dwells among humans. When modern historicism jolted theology out of heaven and down to earth in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it delivered a shock to doctrine. How profound a shock can only be appreciated against the background of eternity's gravitational pull on theology.

III. THE LURE OF ETERNITY

Luther's crisis of faith, which came to be so pivotal for the making of the modern West, hinged on the burning question "Where do I find a gracious God?"[4] Luther was possessed of a terrified conscience. He was tormented by the devil; he bent his own body beneath the blows of the whip and the rigors of the fast, and his spiritual torment brought him sickness and pain. But Luther was no ordinary friar. He had the experience of his night terrors, specifically his fear of eternal salvation lost. Luther's fear arose at the point where his personal history and psychological distress converged with the manifold crises of his times: corruption and war. In the course of his days, Luther frequently encountered the sculpture of Christ as Judge, possibly located in the cemetery surrounding St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg,[5] and his fears drove him to the gates of eternity. "Here I felt," Luther wrote as an old man looking back at his momentous breakthrough, "that I was altogether born again and

4. For this question, see Theodor Dieter, "Why Does Luther's Doctrine of Justification Matter Today?" in *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times*, ed. Christine Helmer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 199: "Thus Luther's question—the Luther of the Reformation—is not, 'How do I find a gracious God?,' but 'Where do I find a gracious God?' The answer can only be 'by faith in the gospel.'"

5. In his sermons, Luther frequently alludes to the image of Christ as Judge, although the historical question of where in Wittenberg he encountered the image remains open. It would not have been on the lintel of the town church because this was decorated with a scene from the coronation of St. Mary. The sculpture may have been placed in the cemetery, although this too is uncertain since there are no images of the cemetery in the early sixteenth century. Personal correspondence with Dr. Martin Treu (July 2, 2013).

had entered paradise itself through open gates. . . . Thus that place in Paul [Rom. 1:17] was for me truly the gate to paradise."[6]

Luther's crisis of conscience was brought on by the actuality of eternal damnation in the Christian imagination as he powerfully experienced it. The terrible question "What if I have not done enough?" was the cause of his trials and *Anfechtungen* (spiritual terror). Luther was not the only theologian to be compelled by the quest to see the eternal outcome of life. Thomas Aquinas, it is reported, was so moved in his old age by the vision of eternity that he never wrote another sentence. As a young man the modern theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher was fascinated by the infinite ways that the universe revealed itself to religious feeling and intuition (later in life he tempered his theological positions with recourse to Kant's critical philosophy). There is a speculative desire and existential urgency among theologians to look beyond the limits of what reason may know, and this looking beyond often precipitates crisis.

Theologians have the benefit of an intellectual partner willing to assist them with the task of orienting thinking to eternity. Philosophy has offered theology the tools to conceptualize in "clear and distinct ideas" and to speak with finely crafted concepts. If thinking about eternity is to acquire a scientific value, it requires rigorous logic and good arguments. Plato directed reason to knowledge's unwavering stability. Knowledge transcends both opinion and faith because it is oriented to the eternal forms that are without temporality. Philosophy offered theology the epistemological means to attain stability in contemplation, that is, by ascending past the ephemera of transient appearances and elevating spirit to the eternal forms. Christian theology claimed this epistemology of ascent as its own. Yet theology's subject matter challenged theologians to refashion philosophy's instruments to suit a God who transcended the apex of the ascent.

So theology's attraction to eternity is shared with philosophy, but there comes a point when theology must go it alone. The history of the Western theological tradition may be written as the story of theologians coming to the fork in the road at which they must part ways with philosophers. The parting does not imply rejection: Luther, like the late medieval theologians William of Ockham and Pierre d'Ailly, made philosophical distinctions, created terms, defined concepts, and so on. But Luther refashioned these instruments exclusively for theology's subject matter. At stake was the preservation of God's eternal identity. Theology, in other words, was concerned with something greater than logic. The semantics of its verb tenses were made to convey

6. *LW* 34:337, in "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings [1545]."

eternity. God is the truth about eternity. Theology's unique position among the sciences is predicated on its compulsion to study the eternal reality.

Theologians occupy a precarious position in providing evidence for their claims out of their own lives and experience. Perhaps this is what accounts for theology's often acerbic, sometimes even brutal, quality. Theology can be a mean enterprise. Aligned with power and in the service of ecclesiastical hegemony, theological polemics have consigned dissenters to flames and dissenting colleagues to scathing reviews. Theology's obsession with binary oppositions as the key device of theological reasoning has at times reached for the power to exclude even to the point of violence. Theology's preoccupation with the eternal gives the discipline a sense of its high stakes that makes the philosopher's learned play between possibilities or her willingness to entertain counterfactuals seem less urgent and pressing. Or even trivially playful: Is the reality of omnipotence approached by musing on the question of God's capacity to grow the largest ears in the universe, as I once heard a philosopher of religion suggest in a seminar on God?

But we must say today, at this time in history, that too many heretics were burned, diversity was too fiercely condemned, and too much living reality has been ossified into the hard forms of orthodoxy. The theological commitment to truth must be more than intellectual. It is radically personal, and at the same time it aspires to the universal. Truth is not about the play of possibilities. Truth is anchored to the actuality of subjectivity together with all of creation. "I believe that God has created me together with all that exists," Luther explains in his interpretation of the first article of the Apostles' Creed in the Small Catechism of 1529.[7] The determination of all of reality is inscribed into the theologian's commitment to the object of belief. The aim of doctrine is to compress it all into an abbreviated formula accessible to humans.

That doctrine speaks of eternity is the lure of the human enterprise of theology. Much is at stake in guarding doctrine. Political and ecclesiastical battles raged over terminology, sometimes over single letters, as in the controversy in the early church about the first *i* in *homoiousios*, which erupted as theologians and church leaders struggled for precision in determining the Son's likeness to (with that *i*) or identity with (sans that *i*) the Father. Much later in time, the Protestant Reformers insisted on the church's responsibility to preserve doctrine in its purity. Throughout Christian history excommunications have been issued and anathemas have thundered forth from the church. The history of doctrine bears the marks of this contentious and violent history that is also the story of personality clashes, worldly power, and a fierce loyalty to the truth of doctrine as one party or another understood that

7. *BC* 354.2.

truth. But although it is certainly true that the development of doctrinal language was implicated in struggles for power, this is not the whole story. Such contention also gives evidence of theology's pursuit of a truth that derives its content from eternity. Doctrines point to eternal mysteries to be enjoyed and contemplated but never exhausted.

Sometimes at the core of this unedifying history of the search for doctrinal precision is the paradox that theology is a discipline existing in time as it makes claims about the eternal. Distinctions between time and eternity, creation and eternal destiny, God and the world—theology's pivotal polarities—are made with the confidence that God will not let the world fail at its own project and that God has woven the world itself into God's own project. Theology aims at this truth. It strives to develop a nomenclature and conceptuality that comprehends this truth and points to it, and theology adheres to an epistemology that maintains the paradox between its own claims, articulated in time, and its referent in eternity. Theology's lure is eternal truth, while time is its crisis.

IV. HISTORICIST SHOCK

Time perennially challenges Christian theology. Time has been theology's nemesis, from the early church's struggles to comprehend Christ's death in relation to the mid-Platonist concept of divinity's eternality and changelessness onward to Karl Barth's early metaphorical account of Christ's incarnation as a "tangent . . . touch[ing] a circle, that is, without touching it."[8] The question is, Can theology do justice to the heart of the Christian religion, its central mystery and paradox, "the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14a)? Can abstract theology speak clearly of the lived reality of Christianity? Over centuries, Christian theology has been occupied with quarantining speculative axioms inherited from the Greeks, such as the view that God can neither suffer nor change. Such realities of the Christian faith and the questions that they raised have required theology to formulate the apposite terms of philosophical speculation. God's eternal being united with human nature and "was born from the Virgin Mary . . . and crucified under Pontius Pilate"—that reality has compelled Christian theology to think about God in relation to time, as well as in relation to pain and death.

The conceptual challenge of time became most pressing in academic discussions following the advent of historicism in eighteenth- and early

8. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. of 6th ed. by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 30 (on Rom. 1:4).

nineteenth-century German theology. This modern theological tradition was unique among the theologies produced in other European contexts for making the study of history the dominant academic model for the humanities.[9] The influence of German theology's preoccupation with history was far-reaching. Biblical studies, the philosophy of history, and the emerging discipline of religious studies were irrevocably shaped by a view of history that integrated an appreciation for the uniqueness of historical events with the effort to determine their causes. History is a human science. It is produced as reflection on questions of human agency and its limits, and it adheres to the rules governing historical causality.

Consider only this single strand of the trajectory of modern German theology. Martin Luther limned the mystery of time capable of the infinite (*finitum capax infiniti*), for example, in his Christmas hymn ("Whom all the world could not enwrap, Lieth he in Mary's lap"),[10] and three hundred years later German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher set out to construct a secure historical footing for theology. Schleiermacher opened the way for modern theology by taking up the challenge that the new historical science posed to theology's eternal doctrines. But no good intellectual effort goes unpunished: Schleiermacher's name inevitably circulates in contemporary discussions of theology's capitulation to modern historicism's paradigm. The problem of Schleiermacher—the problem that much of my analysis of modern and contemporary pivots on—is the problem of history and eternity.

Friedrich Schleiermacher is widely considered the father of modern theology. One important aspect of his portfolio at the turn of the nineteenth century was to conceptualize the academic disciplines and their relations to the pursuit of knowledge on behalf of the newly founded University of Berlin.[11] This included envisioning a place for theology in the university and devising a curriculum for theology that would serve the church as an institution outside the university while at the same time ensuring that theology maintained its necessary role within the university and in conversation with other academic partners. Schleiermacher had a foot in both worlds: among his other responsibilities in Berlin, Schleiermacher served as Reformed pastor of the ecumenical

9. See Sheila Greeve Davaney, *Historicism: The Once and Future Challenge for Theology*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 9–13; Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

10. *LW* 53:241, v. 3 of "All Praise to Thee, O Jesus Christ [1523?]."

11. See the historical account in Appendix A, "Theology in the University," specifically "The Case of Berlin, 1810," in Hans W. Frei, *Types of Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 95–115; and Thomas Albert Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 267–302.

Reformed-Lutheran Trinity Church. Theology as a "positive science" located within the university was assigned the task of coming up with theories that church leaders might utilize to correct false practices within their communities and to foster healthy piety. In this way theology would have as part of its mission the "care of souls" in support of the church's vitality.[12]

Successful fulfillment of this ecclesiastical mandate for theology required that Schleiermacher understand the present situation of the church and its relationship to the past. To this end, Schleiermacher made productive use of the emerging academic interest in the historical disciplines, calling on them to aid theology in its mission for the church. The historicist turn drew theology's gaze from eternity to time. Henceforth theology would be preoccupied with the ideas and practices of religious communities as these ideas and practices changed over time in the evolving life of communities, from their origins to their present-day manifestations.

This new envisioning of theology as a historical discipline had implications for the study of doctrine. Schleiermacher defined dogmatic theology[13] as "the knowledge of doctrine that now has currency in the Evangelical church."[14] Doctrines were the normative faith statements of the contemporary church. Their normativity had to do both with doctrine's capacity for articulating a lively faith and with the manner in which faith statements are organized within systems of dogmatic theology. Doctrines offered a focused glimpse of the present-day consensus of belief among Christians, informed by the recognition that this contemporary moment was shaped by doctrinal developments in the past. In other words, doctrine is always seen in its dynamic and dialectical relationship with the lived experience of Christians over time. Its inner dynamism—its motor force—was the questions and controversies that had arisen in specific Christian communities in different times and places. Doctrine was about faith lived in history rather than about truth fixed for all time.

The problem of Schleiermacher, as it was defined and addressed by the theologians who appear in the pages of this book, was related to the unease

12. Luther too regarded consolation as one aspect of doctrine. On this topic, see the insightful articles by Bo Kristian Holm: "Der Trost kommt vom Sehen—zu Katechismussystematik und Lehrbergiff," in *Denkraum Katechismus: Festgabe für Oswald Bayer zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Johannes von Lüpke and Edgar Thaidigsmann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 109–24; idem, "Zur Funktion der Lehre bei Luther: Die Lehre als rettendes Gedankenbild gegen Sünde, Tod und Teufel," *Kerygma und Dogma* 51, no. 1 (2005): 17–32.

13. It is significant that Schleiermacher rejects the term "systematic theology" in favor of "dogmatic theology." He favors "dogmatic theology" because it connotes the historical approach of the discipline. Theology is descriptive even when it studies the doctrines that are valid in the present context of the church.

14. *BO* 72 (§195).

provoked by this historical rendering of doctrine. Within the limits of historical reason, a theology that purports to represent God's eternal truths on earth is no longer a viable account of theology's identity and mission. The question then becomes how doctrine may make claims concerning divine truth in time. This is a classic conundrum written right into the New Testament. American theologian George Lindbeck formulated the problem this way: "How can religion claim to preserve 'the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3), as all religions in some sense do, when it takes so many forms in both the past and the present?"[15] Schleiermacher's theological program paved the way for the contemporary theological (and sociological) preoccupation with religious communities and congregations as venues in which doctrine is produced to promote their flourishing. Yet the academic commitments that Schleiermacher prescribed for theology have been challenged for ostensibly compromising theology by deriving its principles from sources other than the Christian faith. This critique acquired sharp and precise focus in 1924 when Swiss theologian Emil Brunner identified the heart of the problem of Schleiermacher's approach to doctrine to be not his historicism, but an appeal to experience and metaphysics that allegedly falsified the objective truth of the word of God.

V. LINGUISTIC TURN

The linguistic turn is understood primarily as the direction taken in philosophy following the publication of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. But language has also been of recent interest to theologians. Two theologians in particular, working within the broad Lutheran inheritance, have emerged as proponents of a word-oriented theology, deepening Luther's insights into the power of God's word to forgive sins but recontextualizing this insight with resources drawn from contemporary theological, philosophical, and anthropological theories of language.[16] Writing in Germany, Oswald Bayer has elaborated Luther's understanding of the *promissio*, that is, God's promise of forgiveness, which is identical to its fulfillment in

15. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 78; cf. the 25th anniversary ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009). (Unless otherwise noted, I cite pages from the original, 1984.)

16. Reinhard Hütter analyzes the theology of both Oswald Bayer and George Lindbeck as leading contemporary examples of how theology can be a church practice. See his *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

the spoken declaration "*Ego te absolvo* [I forgive you]." Luther's theological innovation, according to Bayer, was to draw attention to the "speech act," uttered by God and rendered concrete for hearers in the words of institution ritually spoken by the priest during the worship service.[17] Bayer borrowed the terminology of "speech act" from philosopher of language J. L. Austin. In the United States, meanwhile, another Lutheran theologian, George A. Lindbeck, made constructive theological use of the hermeneutical model of culture proposed by American anthropologist Clifford Geertz.[18] In *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (1984), published just slightly more than a decade after Geertz's game-changing *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Lindbeck proposed a cultural-linguistic model for understanding religion, and by extension for understanding Christian faith as a worldview constituted by particular usages of language. Lindbeck was writing in the context of multiple commitments: a professor both at Yale Divinity School and in the Department of Religious Studies at Yale University, he was also deeply dedicated to ecumenical dialogue between Roman Catholics and Lutherans. He was one of several Protestant "delegated observers" at the Second Vatican Council. Lindbeck's constructive proposal for theology and doctrine found wide-reaching acceptance in Protestant and Catholic theology alike for offering a way past constructions of doctrine that served only to underscore what it identified as ineluctable differences among Christian communions. Theologians concerned with connecting theological reflection to church identity read Lindbeck with special avidity.

The linguistic turn in theology inspired a generation of theologians working in the inheritance of Bayer and Lindbeck to view the church as the necessary context for theological work.[19] They came to see the linguistic-literary idioms of the church at worship as a discursive practice by means of which believers are initiated into the life and language of the community and become capable of interpreting various life circumstances in terms of the faith.[20] Belief is a matter of disciplined fluency. The believer is a competent

17. See Hütter's description of Bayer's concept of *promissio* in ibid., 77–88; as well as my "The Subject of Theology in the Thought of Oswald Bayer," *Lutheran Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 21–52.

18. On the reception of Geertz by Lindbeck, see my "Luther, History, and the Concept of Religion," in *Lutherrenaissance: Past and Present*, ed. Christine Helmer and Bo Kristian Holm, Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, forthcoming).

19. See Hütter's book that corrects for, as he argues, "a thoroughgoing fundamental pneumatological as well as ecclesiological deficit" in both Bayer's and Lindbeck's proposals (*Suffering Divine Things*, 26).

20. Hütter articulates this distinction as follows: "As 'catechetical theology,' it is concerned with gradually accommodating a person to the faith praxis (catechetical

"speaker" of Christian discourse, which in Geertz's terms becomes a model of and model for the world as it is found, and in this way believers inhabit this world of particular meaning as their own. As Lindbeck puts it, "To become a Christian involves learning the story of Israel and of Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one's world in its terms."[21] The believer is the "hearer" of the gospel.[22] The believer's competence in speaking the language of the faith, which is equivalent to living the faith, is exhibited in language conforming to the underlying "grammar" of Christian discourse.[23] It is this notion of doctrine as "grammar of the faith" that has been attractive to theologians.

The phrase may be traced back at least to Luther, who appealed to the Holy Spirit as having "his own grammar."[24] But in its contemporary iteration it evokes the idea of church identity as significant for an understanding of doctrine. Theology as church practice (to allude to the title of Hütter's book) has as its task to identify the rules governing the structures and usage of Christian discourse. On the one hand, theology guides and orients hearers to competent speaking; on the other hand, theology investigates the doctrines responsible for the normative grammar of the church.

This emphasis on language as the nature of doctrine in a Christian worldview evokes Luther's reformation idea of the *verbum externum*. Luther used the term to identify God's word of forgiveness as external to human reality. As Luther understood it, only God, not humans, forgives sins, and God's word of forgiveness spoken to the sinner, "*Ego te absolvo*," is God's action that effects true forgiveness. But while Luther emphasized reception of *God's word* as the human posture in this encounter with the Divine, contemporary theologians aligned with the cultural-linguistic approach to theology stress the reception of *doctrine*. Doctrine is identified, in Hütter's words, as "the rules that are decisive for the identity, welfare, and cohesion of a certain group and distinguish that group from others."[25] Precisely as rules informing an identity said to be continuous through time, doctrines must be protected from innovation that might conceivably falsify their truth.

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learning): as 'intratextual theology,' it is concerned with maintaining the praxis of Christian faith in the most varied life situations and with interpreting these situations within the context of faith praxis (peregrinational learning)" (ibid., 50–51).

21. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 34.

22. Lindbeck explicitly alludes to Luther's idea of the *verbum externum* (external word) in order to explain what he means by religion: "A religion is above all an external word, a *verbum externum*, that molds and shapes the self and its world" (ibid.).

23. Lindbeck, ibid., 81: "In any case, it is not the lexicon but rather the grammar of the religion which church doctrines chiefly reflect."

24. WA 39/II:104.24: "Spiritus sanctus habet suam grammaticam."

25. Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, 57.

So *reception* is a concept of common interest in theological accounts of doctrine's function in the church. But as even these few sentences above suggest, the term is multivalent. "Reception" may include studying how the Christian canon is real as a unity by applying to it a specific rule of faith or creed.[26] "Reception"—when it means receiving the "practical wisdom of the church, expressed in doctrine and normed by the canon"—may be understood as enabling practitioners "to participate in the *same* theo-dramatic action to which the Scripture attests."[27] Or the "reception" of specific doctrines from the past that are taken theologically as normative articulations of the central elements of the Christian faith may be understood to possess epistemic primacy in a Christian worldview. (This understanding of reception and doctrine will occupy me in chap. 3.) So there are various theological proposals that claim for doctrine as linguistic-literary construction a normative status vis-à-vis the church's identity—all share a common emphasis on reception as the appropriate human posture.

But while the appropriation of Luther's theology of the word is central for this emphasis on the reception of doctrine in the cultural-linguistic school of contemporary theology, it comes at the expense of another equally crucial aspect of Luther's understanding: his stress on *experience* as necessary to theology.[28] This omission first dawned on me when I began to notice the unified and consistent criticism of Schleiermacher that has taken shape in modern and contemporary theology. It occurred to me that this view of Schleiermacher was, strictly speaking, not "about" Schleiermacher at all. On closer inspection, it became apparent that "Schleiermacher" was being deployed to name and to secure a theoretical gap—really a theoretical abyss—between language and experience. Flogging Schleiermacher contributed to the taken-for-granted, once-and-for-all nature of this gap in modern theological conversation.

26. Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 41: "Canon and creed fitted together, and only canon and creed fitted together, could make and can now make one whole and integral guardian of the church's temporal self-identity."

27. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 350, 354, italics original. Olli-Pekka Vainio characterizes Lindbeck's theory of truth as "performative." See his *Beyond Fideism: Negotiable Religious Identities*, Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology Series (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 72.

28. Luther famously makes experience necessary to becoming a theologian. See "Quae faciant theologum: 1. gratia Spiritus; 2. tentatio; 3. experientia; 4. occasio; 5. sedula lectio; 6. bonarum artium cognition," in WA TR 3:312.11–13 (no. 3425); cited in Oswald Bayer, *Theologie*, Handbuch systematischer Theologie 1 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994), 57n107.

In Lindbeck's *Nature of Doctrine*, for example, "Schleiermacher" represents a theological position that "locate[s] ultimately significant contact with whatever is finally important to religion in the prereflective experiential depths of the self and regard[s] the public or outer features of religion as expressive and evocative objectifications (i.e., nondiscursive symbols) of internal experience."[29] Lindbeck interprets Schleiermacher's understanding of immediate self-consciousness as "prereflective experiential depths of the self," identified with a generic religious experience that would only at a later phase of religious differentiation be identified with a discourse specific to a particular religion. At stake here was Schleiermacher's ostensible failure to grant doctrine a preferred status as the expression of Christian truth that secured the church's identity across time. Schleiermacher's emphasis on psychology was said to be responsible for separating interiority and human experience from exteriority and the word of God.

The "problem of Schleiermacher," as I will refer in the pages ahead to the instrumentalization of a particular reading of Schleiermacher in contemporary discussions of theology and doctrine, orients the historical investigation of this book. What are the origins and what is the legacy of this reading of Schleiermacher? To answer this question, I turn to German theology as the starting point for twentieth-century theological reflection. The history of German theology cannot be told without situating it in its necessary relationship with German history and politics over the century, with the world crises of the two World Wars, the Shoah, and by the horrific destruction of life and landscape throughout Europe and Russia. So while my primary interlocutors are theologians writing in the North American context, I begin with issues that were at the forefront of European theology more than a century ago.

First and foremost, this means Luther. His role in the history of German theology, specifically his development of the notion of the "word" in theology, cannot be overestimated. The evolving theological conceptualization of the "word" had significant implications for the understanding of doctrine. The trajectory of this theological strand eventually extends into the early twentieth century, where it is contextualized and recontextualized several times over by the philosophy, theology, and politics of successive eras. The aim of my intellectual history is to probe these braidings of "word" with various conceptual approaches in different historical circumstances in order to better discern how assumptions about the relationship between doctrine and language have arisen and taken hold. We will see how, by the time we arrive at contemporary North American theology's conceptualization of word and doctrine, the semantic field of "doctrine" has come to be ruled by linguistic

29. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 21.

and epistemic interests. The telos of my argument is here: that as doctrine has moved away from reality into language, a development that reaches its apotheosis in the late twentieth century, doctrine loses its inner power.

While it may seem that the story ends with this, my argument is that this is the end of a chapter of a history; the end of doctrine so conceptualized opens the space for a new chapter in the evolving story of Christian doctrine. So the end of doctrine heralded in the title of this book also signals a beginning. What about doctrine reconceived as an invitation to consider and engage the living God, doctrine as a guide to discerning God's actions in individual lives, within communities, and in history? If this becomes the end of doctrine, "end" in the sense of its purpose and project, then there is no end to doctrine. The experience of surprise will become important in the closing pages of this book, for it is my avowed aim to reconceptualize doctrine in such a way that doctrine may acknowledge what is unexpected and surprising about the actions of the living God in history and personal experience. Hence the constructive portion of this book emphasizes the production rather than the reception of doctrine. Clearly these are not mutually exclusive: just as it is a reality of human life that we are always both subjects of our worlds and subject to them, so doctrine is always both received and produced, inherited and innovated.

Yet my focus at the end will be on doctrine as production. Again, while production presupposes and is intimately related to reception, it is production that discloses most clearly and strikingly how doctrine is (1) articulated by human beings in (2) the available light and language of their times, in order to address (3) a living and multifarious audience (4) and in relation to the circumstances of particular times and places, while at the same time always (5) aiming and yearning for transcendence. The making of doctrine is where and when terms are disputed, clarified, and defined; verbal formulas become caught up in the crossfire of ecclesiastical, political, and academic controversy; and there is wrangling over Greek and Latin conceptuality.[30] As we will see, an investigation into doctrine inevitably entails epistemological questions. Doctrines aim to have the status of knowledge about God, self, and world, in the sense of knowledge as making truth claims, and so the epistemological assumptions that inform theologians' conceptualization and articulation of doctrines must be identified and analyzed. Likewise the determination of content, which is also a dimension of doctrinal production, will make the

30. The classic study on the particular type of development that characterizes doctrine is by Cardinal John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1878; repr., Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1968); see also Maurice Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine: A Study in the Principles of Early Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

point that the production of doctrine's content is a process of negotiation among conceptual-intellectual, spiritual-mystical, and linguistic-literary resources. That theologians return over and over to the doctrines of Christ and Trinity is evidence that these doctrines represent endless fascination with the Christian God and the reality of this God in people's lives. As an academic discipline, theology's contribution to the production of these doctrines is a concern of this book.

Theology will be better able to negotiate a healthy—an intellectually productive and existentially compelling—relationship between academic commitments and the interests of Christians in the churches once it is able to recognize that its doctrines require creative and faithful attention to see that they partake of and contribute to the life-giving and life-sustaining effects of the gospel. If theology's goal is, as it ought to be, to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5), then theology as the practice of disciplined and attentive thought helps prepare the way for God's truth (cf. Ps. 23:3) to come into church and world. What the all-too-human, all-too-fallible, and highly contested work of doctrine is about, in the last analysis, is how to refer to a God who is experienced and known by humans.

VI. A LOOK AHEAD

This book is constructed in two parts. The first, which is historical and diagnostic, is framed by the question Emil Brunner posed in 1924 in a scathing critique of Schleiermacher. To make Brunner's question my own, I ask: Why is Schleiermacher criticized for conflating a (naturalist) philosophy of identity with mysticism, and then for appropriating this conflation as the philosophical ground to his theology? Brunner charged that Schleiermacher betrayed Christian theology to an alien philosophy and that he translated the goods and graces of theology into the cultural idioms of the early nineteenth century. The critical terms in play here are rather perplexing when compared to Schleiermacher's actual understanding of theology and religious experience. Still, the issue of reality and language became a problem for contemporary theology with Brunner, as discussed in chapter 2, "From Ritschl to Brunner: Neither Mysticism nor Metaphysics, but the Problem with Schleiermacher," and more so in the theology of the twentieth century, as traced from Karl Barth to contemporary theology in chapter 3, "From Trinitarian Representation to the Epistemic-Advantage Model: Word, Doctrine, Theology."

Throughout the discussion I pay close attention to the role of reality and language in theology and its implication for doctrine. I argue that doctrine

has been increasingly understood in its affinity to language. Setting the terms for this developing view was the philosophical framework dominant at the turn of the twentieth century, neo-Kantianism. Later in the twentieth century, doctrine was increasingly conceptualized in terms of its function within a worldview. This part ends by pointing the way ahead to a new conception of the relationship of word and reality, which will orient the constructive section in the second part of the book.

Chapter 4, "Language and Reality: A Theological Epistemology with Some Help from Schleiermacher," proposes a methodology for connecting word to reality. Here I proceed in conversation with Schleiermacher, an old interlocutor of mine. I am at special pains to reconstruct the theological epistemology that I think informs Schleiermacher's understanding of the New Testament. My aim is to show how, in Schleiermacher's view, the earliest layers of the New Testament are related to specific popular experiences of Jesus of Nazareth and then subsequently how these early acclamations serve as parameters for the development of Christian doctrine. The production of doctrine emerges from this account as that which witnesses to Christ's transformative effect as the living reality of Christianity while remaining open to individual meaning-making and intersubjective discussion. Doctrinal production is not coopted on a single level of experience or thought.

The final chapter, "Acknowledging Social Construction and Moving beyond Deconstruction: Doctrine for Theology and Religious Studies," extends the epistemological and biblical focus of chapter 4 by situating the production of doctrine between theology and religious studies. If doctrine is inevitably social construction, then the relevant questions should concern the ways in which doctrine is articulated in such a way as to be adequate both to the divine reality it seeks to attest and to the historical reality that shapes its formulations. The focus of this last chapter, in other words, concerns the recovery of divine and human reality as constitutive aspects of doctrinal production. In this regard, theology can align itself with new currents in religious studies that likewise evidence concern with the reality of human experience's religious dimension. As religious studies seeks to move beyond the reductionism of the discipline, it may be viewed as a resource for theology's attempts to address religious experience as that experience witnesses to the reality of God. Theology does not need to constrict reason by holding doctrine captive to an epistemically primary proposition; it can set reason free to recover the reality of doctrine's content from history, metaphysics, and experience. When doctrine is opened to the particular reality of God and God's engagement with humanity in the world, its articulation bears witness to a living Christian faith. It is thus to the life of doctrine that this book intends to point.