

THE IMPORTANCE OF DOGMATICS COURSES TO SERVE COURSES IN EXEGESIS,
HOMILETICS AND CATECHETICS

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Dogmatics is often looked upon as a rather theoretical course in a theological curriculum. In a dogmatics course the various doctrines of the Holy Scriptures are neatly classified and categorized, so that a comprehensive overview of the teachings of the Bible may be easily obtained.

Exegesis, Homiletics, and Catechetics are usually seen as the practical disciplines in a seminary curriculum. They teach the student the practical method of interpreting, preaching, and teaching the divine truths. Students for this reason often regard these practical courses as more important to them than more theoretical disciplines, the value of which is not so immediately apparent to them.

Yet there is a very close relationship between the practical theological disciplines and dogmatics. As I see the purpose of my assignment, I am to demonstrate that such a relationship exists and to point out in detail how dogmatics is related to each of the practical disciplines listed in the title of this essay.

The method I plan to use in my presentation is first to show the basic relationship of dogmatics to each of the three practical disciplines under consideration, and then to illustrate by several examples how this relationship affects the practice of exegesis, of homiletics, or of catechetics.

I. The importance of dogmatics courses to serve courses in exegesis

A course in dogmatics on the seminary level aims to present the doctrines of the Bible in an orderly or systematic manner, so that all passages of Scripture that treat of a given doctrine are brought to bear on the subject, and the available material on the doctrine in question is assembled in a comprehensive and comprehensible form. In order to accomplish this objective, however, the dogmatician must not only assemble all this material and arrange it in proper order, but must also make a thorough exegetical study of each passage involved in order to ascertain its content, its scope, and its bearing on the doctrine as a whole. In other words, dogmatics is first of all the direct result of good thorough-going exegesis of the pertinent Scripture passages that have to do with a given doctrine. Thus the importance of exegesis for a course in dogmatics is obvious and self-evident.

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We are to examine the opposite relationship. Of what importance is dogmatics for exegesis? Suppose that a student is studying a given Scripture text, perhaps in preparation of a sermon on a doctrinal subject. He finds that his text treats one phase or aspect of the doctrine rather fully, but is silent on other details of the doctrine in question. Here is where a dogmatics course can be helpful to him. Dogmatics is the result of the exegesis of all Scripture passages on a given Scripture doctrine. When a given Scripture passage on a certain doctrine is being studied, a thorough knowledge of dogmatics makes it easy for the student to relate this passage to all the other known facts on the subject. Dogmatics will place the passage he is studying in the proper perspective to the other parts of the doctrine under study and will enable him to see the relationship between the text he is studying and other statements of the Holy Scripture on the same subject.

Several examples may be used to illustrate this point. Suppose someone is studying Isaiah 45:9.11, "Woe to him that striveth with his Maker.... Thus saith the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker." The text in Isaiah takes the creative work of God for granted and refers to it as a self-evident fact without giving any details. These details are scattered throughout the rest of Scripture, from the opening chapters of Genesis to the closing chapters of the Book of Revelation. It is the task of the course in dogmatics to assemble and to classify this material and make an overview of it available to the student which will enhance his understanding of what is meant when God is called our Maker.

Or suppose that someone is studying Isaiah 59:2, "But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear." The effect of sin--separation of the sinner from his God--is merely stated here. The detail of how this came about is detailed elsewhere in Scripture. Dogmatics points out how the fall of man occurred through the disobedience of Adam and Eve to God's command, and how since that time man's insistence on following his own will instead of the will of God perpetuates and compounds this separation.

Or let us suppose that like the eunuch from Ethiopia someone is reading about the suffering servant of the Lord in Isaiah 53 and does not know of whom the prophet is speaking, of himself, or of some other man. Here the Christology of a dogmatics course gives all the necessary details. Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in the gospel accounts in the New Testament show that the suffering servant described by Isaiah in his prophecy is none other

than the incarnate Son of God and then supplies all the necessary details for a thorough understanding of Christ's redemptive work.

The many references to righteousness in the Old Testament and in the New which puzzle so many readers to this day as they perplexed Martin Luther in his younger years become understandable and clear when they are compared with some of the lucid explanations of St. Paul in his epistle to the Romans, where he sets forth that the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to believers justifies them in the sight of God. Dogmatics also call attention to the fact that this righteousness is an accomplished fact, even for those who do not know and believe this truth. Paul told the Romans that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8) and that "Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6). Again a comparison of all the passages that speak of justification throughout the Bible bring this doctrine into sharp focus for anyone studying a passage which merely alludes to it without giving all the detail.

Even in eschatology dogmatics can be very helpful to the exegete of any passage dealing with life after death. There are those who are not clear in their minds on the life after death. Others flatly deny it because there is no experiential evidence to prove it to them. Here dogmatics can muster a multitude of Scripture references to the fact that ~~after~~ temporal death man will continue to live eternally in either heaven or hell.

In all these instances dogmatics supplies the additional evidence, the additional proof, the additional details for a thorough exegesis of a given Scripture passage. This should be especially helpful for the young and as yet more inexperienced theologian, who needs extra corroboration for a given truth of Scripture. Dogmatics marshals all these facts for him and unlocks for him a rich treasure store of information and detail to assist him in his understanding of the Word of God.

II. The importance of dogmatics courses to serve courses in homiletics.

Courses in homiletics are designed to teach the theological student the art of preaching, that is expounding and applying the Word of God to the hearts of his hearers. It is one thing to teach the skills necessary for doing effective preaching, so that the mannerisms of the preacher do not detract from the message he is delivering. It is quite another thing (and much more important) that the message delivered by the preacher be the pure Word of God and that the preacher teach his hearers "to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you," as Jesus charged his disciples in the great commission (Matth. 28.20).

Here is where dogmatics enters into the picture. If a preacher is to proclaim God's Word in its truth and purity, neither adding thereto nor detracting from it, he must first of all be clear in his own mind what God's Word has to say to man. He must know the doctrines of the Bible. He must also be able to distinguish between that which the Bible actually teaches and that which some, substituting the thoughts of men for the truth of God, say that the Bible presumably teaches. In other words, he must know the doctrines of the Bible and must also know the antitheses to these doctrines that are taught by false teachers.

Dogmatics supplies the preacher with this information by first of all systematically assembling the teachings of God's Word in a clear and comprehensive manner, and then by pointing out false doctrines that have been taught and are still being taught which contradict the clear words of Scripture. In this way the doctrinal content of the sermon can be kept in full agreement with the Word of God revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and the application of biblical truth to the hearts of the hearers can be and remain that which the Lord intended when He revealed those truths through the prophets and apostles.

Again examples may serve to illustrate the importance of dogmatics courses to the homiletician. A sermon on the doctrine of God can be very one-sided and misleading, if he dwells only on the almighty and eternal power and majesty of God and neglects to speak at the same time of His love for fallen mankind, of His grace and mercy which constrained Him to save man from the consequences of his sins. What a distorted picture of God could be gained from the sermon of a preacher, who does not understand that God is not only the creator, the just and holy God demanding holiness from his creatures, but also the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin (Exodus 34:6-7). What soul-destroying havoc would be wrought by a preacher in a mission field who does not sharply distinguish between the true and living God who has revealed himself to man in the Scriptures and the god or gods that heathen have from time to time fabricated for themselves in their imagination out of forces in nature, heavenly bodies, or even imaginary human and animal forms, which they believe influence and control their lives!

Anthropology too plays an important part in producing effective and salutary preaching. If a preacher does not know and understand who man is, not a highly developed anthropoid ape, but a creature made in the image of

God, not a product of his environment, but a creature conceived and born in sin, afflicted with original sin and with no power or competence to do God's will and keep His holy commandments, he cannot properly minister to his fellowmen and show them how they may obtain the grace of God in the forgiveness of their sins. Such a preacher could not show his fellowmen how a child of perdition can become a child of God and an heir of eternal life.

Christology is also important for the preacher of God's plan of salvation. If the preacher merely points to Christ as a glorious example of man as he should be, an example to be emulated in shaping one's life, and not as the Son of God become incarnate in order that he might be "wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities," so that "the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and that by his stripes we are healed," he cannot show men the way to salvation. His preaching would only make work-righteous, self-righteous hypocrites of his hearers, and in the process would destroy their souls eternally by depriving them of the message of their salvation by the vicarious atonement of Christ.

In soteriology especially a thorough knowledge of Scripture truth is required in a preacher, if he is to set forth properly the objective justification of man. Here it is of utmost importance that the preacher know that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:19). If the truth is not carefully stated and proclaimed that God has already done all that needs to be done to reconcile man with God, namely that the guilt of our sin has been atoned for by the death of our Savior Jesus Christ, man will always come to the conclusion that there is something that he must do or contribute to his salvation. Salvation must be proclaimed as an accomplished fact, as a gift of God's grace to the penitent sinner, who needs only accept the gift from the hand of his God to benefit from it. The division of systematic theology dealing with soteriology can be most helpful in setting this truth straight in the mind and heart of the preacher, so that he can communicate it properly to his hearers.

The tendency in modern preaching is often to emphasize the life in this world, to lead people to be more compassionate, more concerned, and more loving toward their fellowmen, to help them get more comfort and enjoyment out of life on this earth,--than to prepare them adequately for eternal life in the world to come. Here eschatology can help a preacher keep a proper balance between the one thing needful for eternal life and all the many concerns for life in this world that crowd themselves upon his hearers. A serious

concern for and knowledge of the scriptural information on man's ultimate destiny, death, resurrection and eternity, the end of the world and the final judgment will keep the preacher aware of the most important aspect of his message to his hearers, keeping them on the straight and narrow path that leads to everlasting life.

Thus the importance of Dogmatics courses to serve courses in homiletics is apparent. The Dogmatics courses outline, classify, and categorize the great wealth of scriptural truth which constitute the content of edifying and saving sermonic messages. A preacher who is himself not certain of his message will not be able to transmit it effectively and efficaciously to his hearers. Our preachers need to be thoroughly grounded in the Word of Truth, and this can be accomplished best by a thorough study of Dogmatics.

II. The importance of Dogmatics courses to serve courses in Catechetics

What has been said about the importance of Dogmatics courses to serve courses in homiletics applies mutatis mutandis to courses in catechetics as well. Catechetics is the art of teaching, and in theology it is the art of teaching the way of salvation, the Word of God, to others. This includes the instruction of the young on the primary and elementary level in Sunday schools, Christian day schools, and instruction classes, as well as other agencies and media used in instructing adolescents and adults.

In all forms of instruction it is important that the material taught be organized and arranged in an interesting manner, so that those being instructed may not become confused or misguided, but learn what they learn in such a manner that they will derive the maximum benefit from the material learned.

Here again Dogmatics courses can be a great help to the teacher as well as to the preacher. When a given biblical doctrine is being taught, it is important that he who is doing the teaching be thoroughly clear in his own mind not only about the immediate truth being imparted, but also about its relation to other closely associated truths. In other words, he needs not only to know the precise point of doctrine he is teaching at the moment, but must also know how this doctrine relates to other doctrines in the same general area.

The logical and systematic manner in which Dogmatics courses present the scriptural teachings is ideally designed to give the Christian teacher the necessary overview of all Christian doctrine, so that no matter which point of doctrine he may be treating at a given time, the rest of Christian doctrine and the manner in which it relates to that specific point he is treating is always known and clear to him. Should the pupil or catechumen then raise a question

regarding the subject matter being taught, the teacher will be able to answer the inquirer in such a manner as to clarify the point at issue and to relate it to similar points of doctrine.

For example, when the destruction of the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah is taught, not only God's fierce wrath and anger against sin and His ruthless judgment on impenitent sinners who reject His grace will be taught, but attention will also be called to God's great grace and mercy in saving Lot and his family in spite of the ^{Lack of} ~~his~~ interest ~~of~~ of his sons-in-law and the inordinate curiosity and disobedience of Lot's wife to God's instructions for their safe escape. This treatment of Lot's family by a gracious God indicates that our God is able to protect his believers, even when they are surrounded by wicked unbelievers.

When teaching children the effects of sin the teacher should not content himself with pointing out the disastrous consequences of sin as such, since many sins bring with them automatic penalties (the wages of sin is death), but a thorough knowledge of the entire body of biblical revelation on sin will also include the fact that unforgiven sin separates man permanently from the grace of God, in other words, brings about eternal damnation.

The facts concerning the life of Christ, His conception and birth, His development from childhood through adolescence into manhood, His suffering, death, burial, resurrection and ascension are clearly set forth in the second article of the Apostles Creed, and are known to every catechumen who has memorized those well-known words. Yet if the teacher is thoroughly versed in Christian doctrine, he will not content himself with imparting only these well-known facts concerning the life of Christ, and perhaps a few of the works of our Lord, such as His miracles of healing, but will also emphasize in his teaching the threefold office of Christ as our prophet, proclaiming the revealed Word of God to man, as our priest, making the one sacrifice for sin forever for all men, His own self-sacrifice on the cross, and as our king who rules the universe and controls the destinies of men and nations in the interest of His church on earth.

When teaching the chief parts of the catechism on Baptism and the Lord's Supper, it is important that these topics be taught as what they are, the God-given means of grace by which God kindles faith in the hearts of men and sustains that faith in the hearts of believers. It is important that the means of grace be taught, not as something which man does, but which God gives. It is important that the means of grace be regarded as having within themselves the power to effect the desired result, quite independently of man's administration of them, in other words, that the effect of the means of grace in

bringing about the forgiveness of sin is not due to the manner in which man administers them nor to the person who administers them, but to the divine Word which makes them effective. Here it is also important to realize that such an activity as prayer by which we often implore these divine blessings from God must be sharply distinguished from the means of grace by which these blessings are imparted, and that prayer is not a means of grace, but only a plea that God use the means of grace in bestowing His blessings upon us. A thorough knowledge of the area of soteriology in dogmatics will enable the teacher to teach such subjects effectively and in full agreement with the teachings of Holy Scripture.

To a child death is a thought that is more or less remote from his thought patterns. Not until a death occurs in his immediate family or circle of friends does the child think of death seriously. Even then there are many unanswered questions and misunderstandings in the mind of a child regarding death. It is perhaps one of the most difficult concepts for him to master. Here dogmatics can again assist the teacher in conveying to the child the biblical truth regarding death. He can explain to the child that death is not the end of existence, but only the temporary separation of soul and body, which will be reunited at the last day on the day of resurrection and that both soul and body live eternally in either heaven or hell. The distinction between temporal death and eternal death or damnation can also be clearly brought out on the basis of scriptural teaching on the subject.

In all these areas the importance of dogmatics courses to serve courses in catechetics is apparent. Our Christian day school teacher, or on our mission fields, the evangelists, catechists and student preachers must be as thoroughly grounded in the basic Christian doctrines as it is humanly possible to make them, so that they can expound the Scriptures properly, rightly dividing the word of truth, can preach the Word of God efficaciously for the edification of their hearers, and can teach young and old the Bible truths in such a way that ignorance and misunderstandings are dispelled by the bright and shining light of the Word of God. In all our theological training there is no substitute for being thoroughly grounded in the truth of Scripture as is set forth in orderly fashion in a good course in dogmatics.