

REACTION TO THE PRESENTATION BY PASTOR MICHAEL SEIFERT

THE PASTOR AS DOGMATICIAN

By

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First of all, let me thank Pastor Seifert for his fine essay: "The Pastor as Dogmatician." I appreciate the clarity with which he wrote. I also appreciate the evangelical tone he displayed in his essay. It is clear he carries on his ministry with a deep appreciation for God's grace and a passion for the spiritual welfare of others. There are many points in his essay which I would like to underscore.

To begin, I appreciate Pastor Seifert's emphasis on justification as the hub around which all doctrine must revolve. Christ is the heart and the core of the study of Christian doctrine. This is the point I also want to make clear to my students before I begin their study of the academic divisions of theology. The study of doctrine is really all about Jesus. Any system of doctrine which does not focus on Christ, but treats the Bible as a manual for holy living, will lead to Pharisaism, legalism, and despair. It will turn the Bible into a mere teaching manual for ethical behavior, for the good of humanity. It will turn the gospel of free grace into a system of Deistic therapeutic moralizing. God will be placed on a shelf to await a time when we ask Him to come and bail us out of the problems we have created. God's role will be therapeutic, that is, to make us happy. After all, many people believe this is the chief purpose of life. Then comes the moralizing. "When I am happy, then I can be nice to others." This is the level to which much of modern theology has sunk.

Pastor Seifert hit the nail on the head when he stressed an error in any teaching of Scripture ultimately affects Christ and the salvation we have through faith in Him. An error in creation, or in marriage, or in inspiration, or in election ultimately will undermine the Bible's teaching on Jesus. If Adam and Eve are myths, then Jesus, the second Adam, must also be a myth. Churches teaching theistic evolution are finding out their young people are coming to that conclusion in a hurry and are leaving their churches. No doctrine of Scripture is unimportant. Every doctrine, in some way, relates to the central doctrine of justification.

The study of Christian doctrine is Christocentric. It follows the apostle Paul's missionary method, teaching all the doctrines of Scripture, focusing on Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). The study of doctrine will be rooted in the means of grace through which God promises, gives, and seals to sinners forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. It will pay great attention to the

proper distinction between, and proper application of, the law and the gospel. Finally, it will also follow the three *solas* (*Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide*).

It is in the area of *Sola Scriptura* I discuss the “Wauwatosia Theology.” I agree wholeheartedly one cannot do dogmatics without first doing exegesis. If we are to present the teachings of the Bible, we need to be very sure we know what the Bible is actually saying. *Sola Scriptura* presupposes the principle, “Scripture is its own interpreter.” The historical/grammatical method of biblical interpretation is based on the belief that exegesis places emphasis both on the usage of grammar and word study in the original language as well as careful attention to the historical setting in which the section of Scripture is located. Both are vital to a proper understanding of what Scripture actually teaches.

At the seminary, Professors work with students who have a knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, who can dig into the original languages and mine what is there. In the doctrine courses I teach, I do not have this situation. Neither do we have this situation in the Bible classes and confirmation classes we teach. In cases like these, one must rely on the exegesis of the teacher of the course as well as on a reliable translation of the Bible.

One thing we can do is to place great stress on the historical setting of the text. “Who said this?” “To whom was it said?” “Does this passage apply only to the person who first received it or is it universal in its application?” “Why was it said?” “What is the relationship of this passage to the immediate context? To the wider context of the book? To the rest of Scripture?” When I discuss Paul’s section on justification in Romans 3:21-28, I spend some time putting this into the framework of what comes before in Romans 1:1-3:20. To understand Paul’s message on justification, one must put it into the context of what he said before. If one ignores the context of a passage, you can make the Bible prove almost anything. For example, when citing examples of faulty interpretation, I cite Paul’s statement, “Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.” This passage does not justify drinking wine in the dormitory. Rather, it was Paul’s personal health advice to his young co-worker Timothy.

A young man, who later became an Assemblies of God preacher, once told me Scripture forbids infant baptism. When I asked him for his biblical justification for his statement, he quoted this passage to me: “Get up, be baptized, and wash your sins away” (Acts 22:16). His logic was, “Infants cannot get up; therefore they should not be baptized.” This would be laughable if it were not so tragic. A man once asked my daughter her husband’s occupation. My daughter told him her husband is a hog producer. After telling my daughter her husband is in trouble, he picked up his Bible, opened it to Deuteronomy 14:8, and read, “The pig is also unclean;

although it has a split hoof, it does not chew the cud. You are not to eat their meat or touch their carcasses.” He concluded by saying, “This is not my Word, but God’s.” Did God say this? Of course, He did. The question is, “To whom did God say this?” For the answer I will use the theme Prof. Lawrenz gave us in our isagogical notes for the book of Deuteronomy. It was, “The repetition and completion of a theocratic law code intended for a people about to possess themselves of the land.” God said this to the people of Israel under the Mosaic Law. This law is not binding on us.

This leads to the question of whether a dogmatics text has an appropriate use in the study of Christian doctrine. Does the temptation to accept material solely on the strength of the author’s presentation mean we should not make use of a dogmatics text? Yes, the temptation is there that one could misuse the text and become lazy about checking out whether passages really teach what the author says. However, this is not the only area where we need to be reminded to check out exegesis. There is also a danger to place the Confessions in a position over Scripture. We have checked out the Confessions and we subscribe to them because they agree with God’s Word. However, we are not bound by every exegetical interpretation of Scripture in the Confessions. In our hymns there are many fine statements of Christian doctrine. We don’t include the Scriptural basis for every doctrinal statement in our hymns. We have checked the hymns’ doctrinal content before we put them into our hymnbook. So we believe our people can use them without concern.

Much depends on how we use a doctrine text. In the doctrine courses I teach, I use the doctrine text I have written. But, I have also prepared study questions the students can use when preparing for class. The study questions are aimed at examining the passages quoted as a basis for the doctrines discussed. I want to make sure the students understand the passages are used appropriately. I spend a lot of time on the context for each of the passages. In most cases, I ask the students to supply the context for the passage in order to train them to determine the historical setting of the passage. At MLC, the teacher and the staff minister tracks each have six classes in religion. Of these six, two are doctrine courses. The first (Doctrine 1) covers Prolegomena, Theology, Anthropology, and Christology. The second (Doctrine 2) covers Soteriology, Eschatology, Marriage and the Family, and Church and State. Each covers one semester. Each has 42-45 class hours. Time is at a premium. Yet, time is still taken to check out the passages used to make sure they are being interpreted correctly.

Let me conclude this section. Yes, there is a danger doctrinal texts can erode the exegetical work people should be doing. However, I believe a doctrinal text can have a catechetical purpose in the summation of Christian doctrine. Luther’s Small Catechism is a good example of

this. A doctrine text can serve a useful purpose by putting individual doctrines of Scripture into a *corpus doctrinae* for the purpose of instruction.

As Pastor Pfeifer pointed out, an inter-relationship exists between the disciplines of exegesis, dogmatics, and church history. Prof. Lawrenz encouraged us to work through the exegetical basis for doctrinal statements as well as to understand the historical situation in which they were written. It is possible for people to forget the historical reason for a doctrinal statement and to become legalistic in the application of the principles it enunciates. Church history also has a role to play in the development of our dogmatics.

There are many other fine points Pastor Seifert made in his paper. I appreciate the emphasis that one cannot study the Bible without doing dogmatics any more than he can study the Bible without doing exegesis and practical theology. His emphasis on the practical and devotional use of dogmatics is also valuable. In the beginning of each semester, I start out by telling my students I pray their study of doctrine will strengthen their faith in Jesus. God has revealed doctrine to us in Scripture for our salvation. If we master the technical aspects of doctrine and eventually write a series of doctrinal tomes rivaling the dogmaticians of the 17th century, but remain distant from our Lord and His saving grace, we have accomplished nothing. Our study of doctrine begins with the recognition of what Paul says, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst” (1 Timothy 1:15).

Moved by God’s grace, we will use our study of doctrine in our pastoral theology. One of the finest pastoral works I have read comes from the hand of August Pieper. His work, “The Book of Job in its Significance for Preaching and the Cure of Souls,” gives evidence of a shepherd’s heart for his flock. I believe every called worker could benefit by reading this at least once a year. It will help to keep us on track with the goal of our ministry—the care of souls.

The gospel certainly leads us to consider the study of doctrine from a devotional perspective. Looking at the attributes of God as a mental exercise will wear one out or be boring. However, looking at God’s attributes from the perspective of law and gospel, revealed for our salvation and sanctification, makes this study edifying.

There are many other points on which I would like to comment, but it is time to bring this reaction to a conclusion. I do not want to write a reaction longer than the original paper. Before ending, however, one more point I wish to make is the blessing God has given to our Synod through our Seminary. For 150 years the Seminary has produced shepherds for God’s flock—men who care about the souls entrusted to them and who are there to minister to them. In these two days we are focusing on the three disciplines that make up Seminary students’

training. In the end, all three areas work together to do one thing: produce pastors. We produce generalists, not specialists. We do not expect all our graduates to excel in dogmatics, exegesis, or church history. We do not expect all will receive notoriety in the Synod because of their scholarly work. We do expect all have been equipped to serve as shepherd's of God's flock. My grandfather, father, uncle, and brother-law were pastors. None of them have their names enshrined in synodical history as being among the great dogmaticians of their times. However, of one thing I am sure. It was said of them by their members they were there for their people when they needed them, doing the work of their ministry. Their training equipped them for their service. Ultimately, this is the goal of the Seminary. As one wanders through the environs of the classroom building, looking at the pictures of the graduating classes, a few names will be familiar to us. However, most will not. Yet, these pictures are a cloud of witnesses who give testimony to God's grace in using our Seminary to train pastors for God's people. What a blessing each and every one of these men were, gifts given by a gracious God to His church. These were the shepherds God provided for His flock, men who were there for His people with the balm of Gilead to heal their sin-sick souls.

For 150 years God has used our Seminary to provide faithful shepherds for his flock. 150 years is a long time. Troubles can hit the church in a very short period of time. It was shortly after Luther's death when Melanchthon created all kinds of problems for the church with his doctrinal deviations and compromises. Not long afterward came Spener and Francke and the scourge of Pietism. Semler in Germany provided the impetus for rationalism. The Prussian Union forced the Lutheran Church to compromise Lutheran doctrine with Reformed. Our forefathers came to America, founded our Synod, and began their own Seminary. Thankfully, Augustus Rauschenbush, Walter Rauschenbush's father, became a Baptist and did not go to Milwaukee. Thus, the Wisconsin Synod was spared the scourge of Walter Rauschenbush and his social gospel which turned most seminaries into preparers of people for social work. The Northwestern Conference around Watertown stood for Confessional Lutheranism and worked to establish our own Seminary. Hoenecke resisted Walther's attempts to get our Synod to become a district of the Missouri Synod. God brought our Seminary through the election controversy, through the days when Missouri was flirting with the ALC, producing the Common Confession, when the historical/critical method corrupted the seminary at St. Louis, and when the Seminec exodus took place. God still kept our Seminary faithful to His Word and its mission.

Think of the satanic currents at work during the time our Seminary has been in existence. There have been Rationalism, Romanticism, Religious Liberalism, Darwinism, the Social Gospel, Liberation Theology, Existentialism, Neo-Orthodoxy, the Historical-Critical Method, Cultism, Modernism, Post Modernism, Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movement. Evangelicalism

and Fundamentalism have also created temptations to veer from our mission and method of ministerial training.

Today, the Seminary is still producing faithful shepherds for God's people. What has brought this about? It is our gracious God, Who alone deserves praise for this. He has kept us faithful through His means of grace. Our heritage is one of careful exegesis of Scripture, doctrine that is based on Scripture alone and which centers on Jesus Christ, and a pastoral theology which trains men to be evangelical pastors to God's people. Given the landscape of dangers we have passed through, what are the statistical odds we would still be faithful to our mission today? God's grace is amazing! At this time, then, let us step back and marvel at God's grace. Let us behold the length and the breadth and the depth and the height of God's love in Christ. Let us treasure our heritage, defend it against all errors, and always remember the blessings we have from God through our Seminary and its training of future pastors. God be praised for His grace! What more can we say than to join Paul in his doxology in Ephesians: "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen" (Ephesians 3:20-21).