

Systematic Theology at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

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Under the heading "Systematic Theology" the *Catalog* of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS) states:

Doctrines of the Lutheran, Church (Dogmatics) -Courses in the doctrines of the Lutheran Church are given five times a week for Middler and Senior students. All the teachings of Holy Writ, as these are understood and set forth in our Lutheran Confessions, comprise the material for the course in Dogmatics. Here, too, the goal is that of giving the public witnesses of the Gospel a thorough knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. All the details of the principal teachings for Christian faith and life as taught, unfolded, and illustrated throughout the Bible are gathered together in this study. The systematic and comprehensive understanding of all the truths of God's message of salvation won by such a study enables Christ's public witnesses to proclaim and apply God's Word with authoritative conviction and certainty. The textbooks used in these courses are works produced by three former Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary professors, each of whom was an outstanding teacher of Lutheran doctrine. They are: Joh. P. Meyer, *Dogmatics Notes*; Adolf Hoenecke, *Ev.-Luth. Dosmatik*; and John Schaller, *Biblical Christology*. In both Middler and Senior courses students are assigned a written paper on a doctrinal topic for each quarter (p 26f).

From this statement it is evident that systematic theology or dogmatics receives strong emphasis in the curriculum of WLS. For two full years the students spend three quarters of eleven weeks each with five lecture hours per week on this subject. The fact that 30 quarter hours in dogmatics are required for graduation from the seminary and the Master of Divinity degree indicates even to the casual observer the importance the seminary places on the study of Christian doctrine.

By way of comparison, for the Master of Divinity degree Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, requires 18 quarter hours of dogmatics, and Concordia Seminary, St. Louis requires nine hours plus six hours of electives in systematic theology. Both schools also have a required course entitled Religious Bodies of America. At Fort Wayne, Current Trends in Theology may be substituted for this. At both Concordias students may also choose from a wide selection of optional courses in systematic theology if they so desire. WLS does not offer electives in systematic theology during the regular school year, but only in the summer quarter of graduate and supplementary study. Both of the Concordias have required courses in the Lutheran Confessions that parallel those offered by WLS. Whereas the Concordias classify these under systematic theology, WLS treats them as a branch of historical theology.

Immanuel Lutheran Seminary of the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, requires six semesters of three hours each in dogmatics. This is the equivalent of 27 quarter hours. Bethany Lutheran Seminary in Mankato, Minnesota, requires three semesters (two semesters of three hours and one of four hours) in dogmatics, an equivalent of 15 quarter hours. In addition, a two-hour one-semester course in Contemporary Theology is required, and an elective in selected theological literature is offered.

All of these schools cover the entire spectrum of Christian doctrine in their required courses. The St. Louis program obviously is the most cursory.

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, is a Joint seminary of the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and the Lutheran Church in America (LCA). It requires 15 quarter hours in systematic theology for the Master of Divinity degree. The courses are as follows:

Junior	411	Creation and Redemption	3 hours
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Middler	420	Christian Missions and World Religions	3 hours
	422	Christian Ethics	3 hours
Senior	430	Eschatology and the Church	3 hours
	431	Constructive Theology: The Confession of the Gospel Today	3 hours

Only two of these courses, 411 and 430, are in dogmatics proper. The description of the course entitled Constructive Theology will be of interest. It reads: “An attempt to investigate the systematic theology curriculum through disciplined written construction of a theological position which can be stated with confidence and integrity, and which will serve effectively for the confession, proclamation, and defense of the gospel today” (*Catalog*, p. 73).

Turning to other seminaries of the Lutheran Church in America, we note that Philadelphia Lutheran Theological Seminary requires one semester of a three-hour course entitled Theology in each of the three seminary years. The courses are:

Theology I	God and Faith
Theology II	Christ and Pluralism
Theology III	Church and World

The course descriptions indicate that the doctrines of revelation, God, creation, humanity, Christ, salvation, the means of grace, Spirit, church, mission and ethics are treated.

Gettysburg Lutheran Theological Seminary requires two one-semester courses: Introduction to Systematic Theology, and Selected Theological Loci. The first is described as “a first theological course intended to sketch the present concerns of theological reflection and open the necessary questions for subsequent study.” The course description of the second reads: “Each semester one of the classic problem-centers of Christian teaching is examined; its logic is analyzed and constructive proposals are made.” Sample courses mentioned are The Church, and Christology, Jesus Christ as Life and Hope for the World. Obviously, no attempt is made to cover all areas of Christian doctrine.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary consciously and purposely strives to indoctrinate its students. For this it makes no apology. We quote the following paragraphs from the seminary’s Self-Study of May 1978:

WLS is a confessional school. As such it accepts Holy Scripture as the verbally inspired and inerrant Word of God and recognizes the Confessions of the Lutheran Church as a true and correct exposition of that Word. Hence all the courses of the Seminary, the theoretical and practical as well as the vicarship program, are arranged to maintain a scriptural and confessional emphasis. This scriptural and confessional emphasis rules out the option of doctrinal picking and choosing by either faculty or students. Both are bound by the Word of God.

Such a program is in conformity with that which the Apostle envisioned when he directed Timothy: “The things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also” (2 Tm 2:2).

This transfer of doctrinal truths from one generation to the next presupposes indoctrination, i.e., teaching by faithful men who themselves are committed to Scripture and the Confessions, and learning by faithful students who are willing to accept that same confessional stance. “Constructing one’s own theology” has no place in the program of a confessional seminary.

Research and reading have their proper place in the indoctrination process, but the primary forum of exchange between teacher and student remains the classroom. Hence the Seminary sees regular class attendance by all students as essential to the indoctrination process and vital for the maintenance of a confessional program at WLS (p 9f).

In the Middler course the areas covered are Prolegomena, Theology, Anthropology and Christology. In the Senior year Soteriology and Eschatology are treated.

Prolegomena, or Introduction, points out that theology, of which dogmatics is a branch, is a practical skill or aptitude which has as its goal first of all the glory of God and then the salvation of mankind. Scripture is identified as the source of dogmatics (the *norma normans*). The Lutheran Confessions are a secondary source (a *norma normata*), being derived from the Scriptures .

The following brief outline shows that the WLS course in dogmatics covers the entire field of Christian doctrine.

- I. Theology, the doctrine of God, the Author of salvation
 - A. The revelation of God
 - B. The essence of God
 - C. The attributes of God
 - D. The will of God
 - E. The Holy Trinity

- II. Anthropology, the doctrine of man, the object of salvation
 - A. Man's present abode (creation and preservation)
 - B. Man's nature
 - C. The image of God
 - D. The Fall of man
 - E. Sin

- III. Christology, the doctrine of Christ, the Mediator of salvation
 - A. The person and nature of the Redeemer
 - B. The two states of his existence
 - C. The mediatorial work

- IV. Soteriology, the doctrine of the personal appropriation of objective salvation by the sinner
 - A. Faith, the proper attitude of the heart
 - B. The means of grace, producing and preserving faith
 1. General remarks
 2. The Word
 3. Law and gospel
 4. The sacraments in general
 5. Baptism
 6. The Lord's Supper

 - C. The various phases of God's activity relating to faith (the Order of Salvation)
 1. Vocation (call)
 2. Conversion
 3. Justification
 4. Sanctification
 5. Preservation (perseverance and election)
 6. The mystic union
 - D. The communion of believers (the church)
 - E. The ministerial office
 - F. The Antichrist

- V. Eschatology
 - A. Death (the end of the individual)
 - B. The end of the world
 - C. Eternity

In the seminary's Self-Study the systematic theology department outlined its objectives as follows:

To help the student:

1. To gain a thorough understanding of Christian doctrine as it is presented in the Holy Scriptures;
2. To grow in the conviction that the teachings of our church are in harmony with the teachings of the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions;
3. To become acquainted with the heritage of the teachings of our Lutheran dogmaticians;
4. To grow in the personal assurance of the forgiveness of sins and of salvation through a devotional study of the teachings of God's Word;
5. To become thoroughly acquainted with the basic passages on which Christian doctrines are based;
6. To become proficient in distinguishing between Law and and Gospel;
7. To be able to recognize and refute false doctrines; and
8. To subject his human reason to the clear teaching of Scripture in childlike faith.

The course in dogmatics at WLS follows the *Dogmatics Notes* of Prof. Joh. P. Meyer. These *Notes* are largely based on Hoenecke's *Ev.-Luth. Dogmatik* and John Schaller's *Biblical Christology*. In the past twenty years these *Notes* have been revised a number of times for the purpose primarily of including quotations from and evaluations of twentieth century theology. This has resulted in a substantial increase in the *Notes*. Most recently the dogmatics department has occupied itself in regular weekly meetings with translating the Latin and German quotations in the *Notes*. To date the department has worked through the Senior course and about half the Middler course. These translations are not incorporated in the *Notes* as such but are supplied to the students as a study aid.

A glance at the 1984 Fortress Press publication *Christian Dogmatics* edited by Carl E. Braaten of the Lutheran School of Theology, Maywood, Illinois, and Robert W. Jenson of Gettysburg Lutheran Theological Seminary, or at Tillich's *Systematic Theology* will show the great difference between dogmatics as it is taught at WLS and as it is taught at many other Lutheran seminaries. Tillich's work might more properly be called religious philosophy. One can read page after page without coming across a reference to Scripture. The Braaten/Jenson text, a cooperative effort by six ALC and LCA seminary professors, might best be described as an analysis and criticism of various churches' dogmatic traditions rather than a presentation and explanation of what the Bible teaches.

Biblical exegesis is almost totally absent in Braaten/Jenson. This is perhaps only natural when one considers the authors' view of Holy Scripture. They do indeed say, "The Holy Scriptures are the source and norm of the knowledge of God's revelation which concerns the Christian faith." But they add, "The ultimate authority of Christian theology is not the biblical canon as such, but the gospel of Jesus Christ to which the Scriptures bear witness - the canon within the canon" (I, 61). They deny the inerrancy of Scripture and assert, "Today it is impossible to assume the literal historicity of all things recorded" (I, 76). Employing historical-critical hermeneutics, they find the Bible to be self-contradictory: "Critical attention to what the texts actually say has exploded the notion that one orthodox dogmatics can be mined out of Scripture. There are different theological tendencies and teachings in the various texts. Ecumenically this has led to the practical conclusion that the traditional demand for a complete consensus of doctrine may be wrongheaded, if even the Scriptures fail to contain such a consensus" (I, 77). Of their composite work the editors frankly admit that the

authors “simply disagree, and this disagreement occasionally reaches the point of contradiction” (I, xvii). The ecumenical spirit of doctrinal pluralism makes it possible for or them to say, “We find it possible to disagree without either anathemas or relativism” (I, xviii). The *reiiicimus et damnamus* of the Formula of Concord is for them passe.

The textbook used by C.F.W. Walther, his edition of Baier’s *Compendium Theologiae Positivae*, is to a large extent a collection of quotations from the writings of various theologians, both orthodox and heterodox. In class Walther commented on the text. Adolf Hoenecke’s *Ev.-Luth. Dogmatik*, edited and published posthumously by his sons, consists in reality of material he wrote out and then dictated to his students. Both Hoenecke and Franz Pieper in his *Christian Dogmatics* enter more fully into an exegesis of the *sedes doctrinae* than Baier-Walther, with Hoenecke often excelling Pieper in this respect. In his Preface to Hoenecke’s work J. Schaller writes, “Hoenecke was a Bible theologian and did not wish to be anything else ... If his pen had not been taken out of his hand so soon, he would without doubt, for example, have enlarged on the exegetical proofs for his theses as fully as he was accustomed to giving them to his students in his lectures as a Supplement to what he had dictated” (I, xii, translated).

A recent discussion with Prof. Wilhelm Peterson of Bethany Lutheran Seminary indicated that the method of instruction used there involves the assignment of a number of pages in Pieper to be read in preparation for a discussion by the class.

Most of us who are present here are acquainted with the teaching method used by Prof. Meyer. This method is used also today at WLS. The discussion begins with a careful study of the passages on which each point of doctrine is based. The exegesis of the passages is developed from the context with frequent reference to the original Greek or Hebrew text. The *Notes* intentionally list only the Scripture references so the student will be led to study Scripture for himself. Thereafter pertinent passages from the Lutheran Confessions are studied. At times these may serve as a concluding summary. Only after the student has been led into the Scriptures are quotations read from various orthodox or heterodox theologians. The student is taught to evaluate each quotation in the light of Scripture. The class soon realizes that at times even the orthodox fathers nodded and made statements that cannot be supported by Scripture.

This emphasis on exegesis in the study of dogmatics is a unique heritage of WLS. In the interest of preserving this emphasis Prof. Meyer was reluctant to respond to the synod’s repeated plea that he write and publish a dogmatics textbook. His fear was that if he were to do this, the synod’s pastors would soon begin to say, “Meyer says,” instead of digging into the Scriptures for themselves. Consequently, after a halfhearted beginning in response to intense pressure, he abandoned the project.

Our responsibility as Christians, and particularly as pastors, is to communicate the gospel. “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation,” Jesus bids us (Mk 16:15). Paul urges, “Preach the Word ... with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Tm 4:2). We are to preach, but what we preach is all-important. It is to be God’s Word, the gospel in the broad sense, “the doctrine [of the Bible] and all its articles,” in the words of the Formula of Concord (S.D., X, 31; *Triglotta*1063).

In Protestant circles it is fashionable to speak disparagingly of dogmatics, as if dogmatics automatically robs God’s Word of its living power. The claim is that dogmatics leads to dogmatism. In a conference paper presented 60 years ago the author writes, “Let us approach the Bible from the angle of dogmatics and we are at once pressing a form upon that life-giving word” (W.F. Beitz, “God’s Message to Us in Galatians: The Just Shall Live by Faith,” in *The Wauwatosa Gospel: Which Is It?* (Marshfield, Wisconsin: The Protestant Conference, 1928), p 13). He insists, “It goes to show where our FORMAL study of our courses, dogmatics, has gotten us to. It cuts up for the intellect, but just such vivisection of the Body of Life makes for death; so that dissecting the Word of Life, the Body of Christ, in that way makes for a dead Savior, a corpse” (ibid, p 12). Again, “If we LIVE BY FAITH we will teach like He (Jesus) did ... He did not attempt to make the Father known to His disciples by a course of dogmatics, or Catechism ... Can you imagine Paul and Silas advising the jailer of Philippi to buy a set of dogmatics?” (ibid, p 21). The Catechism comes in for criticism because it is essentially dogmatics in simple form. The same can be said for the Creeds and the Lutheran Confessions.

Now if dogmatics introduces human philosophy, man's wisdom, into theology, it is indeed reprehensible. And it must be recognized that beginning with the later editions of Melanchthon's *Loci Communes*, the first Lutheran dogmatics, this has happened only too often. In an attempt to answer the question why some are saved and not others (*Cur alii prae aliis*). Melanchthon denied the Lutheran principle of *sola gratia* and ascribed conversion not only to the Word of God and the Holy Spirit, but also to the human will. In the election controversy that racked the Synodical Conference a hundred years ago, it was claimed that God elected some to salvation not solely by grace but rather *intuitu fidei*, that is, in view of the faith with which he foresaw that some would respond to the gospel when they heard it. All such philosophizing, all attempts to explain the inexplicable, all rationalizing, every approach to the Bible which elevates human reason to a magisterial role as judge of the teachings of the Bible is to be condemned and shunned.

If, however, dogmatics merely arranges the truths of God's Word in a systematic order so that they may be more easily and clearly apprehended, it serves a God-pleasing purpose. Clear apprehension of God's truth is necessary if we are to recognize and refute error. The church has formulated its creeds for the specific purpose of identifying and excluding error. Thus, for example, the Nicene Creed emphasizes that Jesus is "the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made," because Arius claimed that Jesus is merely a creature, similar to the Father (*homoiousios*), to be sure, but not of the same substance with the Father (*homoousios*). The Athanasian Creed explains the relationship between the persons in the Trinity and between the two natures in Christ in great detail and then closes with the statement, "This is the catholic faith; which, except a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved."

Yes, doctrine is important. Not just the Bible stories, but also the doctrines which are enshrined in them are to be learned and taught. We recall, for example, how Jesus drew the doctrine of the resurrection out of God's statement to Moses at the burning bush, "I am ... the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" (Lk 20:34-38; Ex 3:6).

Notice the emphasis Scripture puts on doctrine in these express commands of God: "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tm 4:16). "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching" (2 Tm 1:13). "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15). "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Tim 4:2,3) The teaching of doctrine is specifically mentioned as one of the purposes for which Scripture was given: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching [didaskalia], rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tm 3:16).

Dogmatics is systematic, theology. It is addressed to the intellect, to be sure, but only as an avenue to the heart. Only if it does not touch the heart, only if it is a mere academic exercise, will it lead to dead orthodoxy. But it is a serious mistake to equate orthodoxy with deadness. Although the orthodox dogmatists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been and still are the whipping boy of many theologians who dislike their uncompromising zeal for purity of doctrine and their intense loyalty to Christ and his Word, these earnest men were anything but spiritually dead. Martin Chemnitz (1522-86), one of the principal authors of the Formula of Concord, worked untiringly to reunite the Lutheran church which had splintered after Luther's death. His *Loci Theologici* has recently been translated by J.A.O. Preus and is being made available by Concordia Publishing House. An excerpt, a condensation of the locus on justification, has been published in book form. John Gerhard (1582-1637), author of the 23-volume *Loci Theologici*, experienced the trials and hardships of the Thirty Years' War and wrote warm and edifying devotional books. John Quenstedt (1617-88), Gerhard's nephew and author of the monumental *Theologia Didactico-Polemica sive Systema Theologiae*, incorporated extensive exegesis into his work. Abraham Calov (1612-86) wrote not only his 12-volume *Systema Locorum Theologicorum*, but also a gigantic commentary on the whole Bible, his invaluable *Biblia Illustrata*.

Robert Preus points out that these theologians were eminently practical and sought to promote Christian life and piety. Some wrote the most stirring hymns and the most moving sermons. Preus notes that some of Calov's most technical writings are sprinkled with passages that have "a truly devotional ring to them" (*The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* [St. Louis and London: Concordia, 1970], 1, 47).

The church has been and still is threatened by the Scylla of rationalism on the one hand, and the Charybdis of pietism on the other. Rationalism overemphasizes the intellect, pietism the emotions. The age of Pietism in the Lutheran church (ca. 1690-1750) with its emphasis on the emotions at the expense of understanding and doctrine was followed by the age of Rationalism (ca. 1750-1850), which subjected Scripture to the critical judgment of reason.

The use of reason in reading and studying Scripture is indeed proper and, in fact, indispensable. But it must be restricted to the ministerial function of understanding and apprehending what Scripture has to say. It is necessary, for example, to recognize the meaning of vocables, the subject and predicate of a sentence, the force of verb tenses, the thought conveyed by various cases, and the sense of other grammatical forms and syntactical constructions. It is necessary, therefore, that we pay attention to the laws of language.

But we also need to observe the laws of logic, the universal laws of human thinking and communication. We need to recognize that when the Bible tells us that God loved the world and gave his only-begotten Son for it, that means he loved me and gave his Son for me. "World" is a universal term that includes every human being. According to the laws of logic that means that God's love embraces me too.

We must pay careful attention also to identifying whom God is speaking to in each instance. It would be a grave mistake to apply to ourselves God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son as a burnt offering. Luther underscores this principle in this treatise *How Christians Should Regard Moses*. He writes, "I must pay attention and know to whom God's word is addressed...That makes all the difference between night and day" (LW 35, 170). The Seventh Day Adventists with their sabbath observance and dietary rules and Jehovah's Witnesses with their objection to blood transfusions have failed to recognize this principle, in addition, of course, to their disregard of other valid principles of hermeneutics.

When Luther inveighed against reason as "the devil's prostitute" (LW 40, 175), he was speaking of it as the antithesis of faith. He was referring to the utter inability of natural man's reason to grasp the truths of God (1 Cor 2:14) and especially to its perverse and inveterate tendency to judge and argue according to the *opinio legis*, as Melancthon calls unregenerate man's work-righteousness in the Apology (Art. 111, 144; *Trig.* 197). According to Luther, reason in this sense of the term rationalizes and says, "I have sinned with works, therefore I must, in turn, render satisfaction with works, must wipe out sin and pay for it that in this way I may attain a gracious God" (St. L., XI, 869; Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959], #3727). "This notion," Luther points out, "is nothing but folly and blindness" (*ibid*). He insists that "the articles of faith are truly statements of such things as 'no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived' (1 Cor 2:9). They can be taught and understood only by the Word and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, whoever wishes to be a Christian, let him pluck out the eyes of his reason (Mt 5:29), hear only what God says, and give himself captive to God and say, 'Though the things I hear are incomprehensible and incredible, yet since God has spoken them and confirms them by mighty miracles, therefore I believe' " (LW 12, 284f). Anyone who wishes to be a Bible theologian must learn with Paul and Luther to "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor 10:5).

The principles of rationalism are very much alive today in the hermeneutics of the historical-critical method, which is the basic premise of modern theology. But its companion, pietism, is equally alive today in the charismatic movement, a virus that has infested and infected virtually every branch of the Christian church. Pietism or Pentecostalism is an old error going back to the Montanist movement of the second century, to which the first of the Latin church fathers, Tertullian (ca. 150-220), fell victim.

Rationalism and pietism are bedfellows in their indifference to doctrine and in their practice of religious unionism. Over the years our synod has lost pastors and lay people to both errors. How important it is that we maintain a healthy balance in our theology, neither overemphasizing nor underemphasizing the role of the

intellect, on the one hand, nor, on the other hand, of the emotions! Such a balance can be maintained only if God gives us his grace and in spite of our unworthiness preserves his Word among us in all its truth and purity. Dogmatics is not a branch of theology that is in conflict with exegesis, as some have supposed. When dogmatics is properly taught, there is no conflict or rivalry between dogmaticians and exegetes. Exegesis and dogmatics in the proper sense of the term go hand in hand. The Lutheran church's great dogmaticians, as we have heard, were also outstanding exegetes. Dogmatics is, in fact, based on exegesis. It merely groups and systematically arranges the results of biblical exegesis. Both exegesis and dogmatics can be guilty of rationalizing. Both can be perpetrators of false theology. Think, for example, of Zwingli's "exegesis" of the "is" in the Words of Institution! When, however, exegesis and dogmatics are practiced in a humble spirit of childlike faith, when both exegetes and dogmaticians simply let Scripture interpret Scripture, then both are useful and necessary for sound biblical theology. It was because of their failure in both respects that Jesus reproved the Sadducees, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures" (Mt 22:29).

Of critical importance in the teaching of dogmatics, as in all theology, is the need to distinguish carefully between law and gospel. The Formula of Concord asserts "that the distinction between Law and Gospel is to be maintained in the Church with great diligence as an especially brilliant light, by which, according to the admonition of St. Paul, the Word of God is rightly divided" (Ep., V, 2; *Trig.* 801).

Luther, too, emphasizes that, although both law and gospel are God's Word, "everything depends on not mixing them together; otherwise one will know and retain the proper understanding of neither the one nor the other" (St. L., IX, 798; Plass, #2276). He points out that distinguishing law and gospel is easy in theory, but difficult in practice: "In itself the difference is easy and clear, but to us it is difficult and well-nigh incomprehensible. For it is easy to say that the Gospel is nothing but the revelation of the Son of God or the knowledge of Jesus Christ and not the revelation or knowledge of the Law. But in the conflict of conscience and-in practice it is difficult even for those who have had a lot of experience to hold to this for certain" (LW 26, 72). "Therefore," Luther says, "place the man who is able nicely to divorce the Law from the Gospel at the head of the list and call him a Doctor of Holy Scripture, for without the Holy Spirit the attainment of this differentiating is impossible" (St. L., IX, 802; Plass, #2276).

The failure to distinguish clearly between law and gospel has spawned a host of heresies in the church, which need not be cataloged here. Suffice it to say that the confusion between justification and sanctification that pervades the thinking and teaching of so many nominal Christians and Christian churches has its roots in this failure.

The argument is often heard that no one church can claim to have God's truth in its entirety. For any person or church to make this claim is considered to be the height of arrogance and presumption. Rather it is said, different churches have different insights, and all can contribute something to the understanding of their fellow members in "the body of Christ" (by which Christendom as a whole, not the invisible communion of saints, is usually meant). As the individual Christian never achieves perfection in his sanctification, so, it is argued, every church's knowledge of the truth is always imperfect.

This argument was made by the former president of the ALC, Fredrik A. Schiotz, in his address, "The Church's Confessional Stand Relative to the Scriptures." He stated:

Although redeemed and restored to fellowship with God through Jesus Christ, the believer still lives in the limitations of the Old Adam. His sanctification never achieves perfection in this life. His will cannot attain perfect holiness nor can his mind attain perfect knowledge. His best efforts to formulate a theology in terms of propositions and statements will fall short. To assume that the church can arrive at human concepts or expressions that are in every respect correct is as much a symptom of pride as to assume that the church or its members can achieve sinlessness in this life (Office of Public Relations of the ALC, reprinted in *Christian News*, March 3, 1969, p 27).

Schiotz is embracing and reiterating Tillich's so-called "Protestant principle," which, Tillich asserted, "does not accept any truth of faith as ultimate except the one that no man possesses it" (*Dynamics of Faith* [New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1952], p 98). Truth is a will o' the wisp or mirage that man continually pursues but that always eludes him, just as a carrot dangled in front of a donkey never gets eaten.

The fallacy of this argument was already pointed out by Luther. He distinguishes between sins against love and sins against the Word and insists, "The Word must be perfectly pure, and doctrine must always be thoroughly sound" (LW 9, 166). Love, on the other hand, can be infirm and impure. Again he says:

Doctrine and life are different things. Therefore you should distinguish them very well, for God is not so much concerned about life as He is about doctrine. Therefore He often permits His own to stumble, as we read. But when doctrine is concerned, He has not allowed them to budge a hairsbreadth, for an evil life is not nearly so harmful as an evil doctrine. An evil life harms no one more than him who leads it, but evil doctrine often misleads an entire country (St. L., XI, 2258; Plass, #644).

Scripture repeatedly admonishes us to teach nothing but sound doctrine, as we heard earlier in this essay. The Scriptures provide the absolute standard by which all doctrine must be judged. The Bereans are commended because they "examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Ac 17:11). Paul tells Timothy that "if anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing" (1 Tim 6:3,4). Peter insists, "If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God" (1 Pe 4:11). Concerning false prophets he says that they are "bringing swift destruction on themselves" (2 Pe 2:1). Isaiah directs us "to the law and to the testimony," reminding us that those who do not speak according to this word are in darkness and have no light to offer (8:20).

All of the admonitions in Scripture to avoid false teachers would be pointless and meaningless if it would not be possible for us to recognize false teaching when we hear it. Scripture bids us to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 Jn 4:1). This means that their teaching is to be judged in the light of God's Word. It is to be compared with the Holy Scriptures, the sole and authoritative standard for all doctrine and practice. *Sola scriptura* is a basic principle that we have inherited from the Reformation.

False teachers do, to be sure, come in sheep's clothing. They try to conceal the fact that they are ferocious wolves. Nevertheless, Jesus warns, "Watch out for false prophets" (Mt 7:15). In the familiar passage in Romans 16:17 Paul urges us, "Watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them." The claim that Christians are not able to recognize teachings that are contrary to what they have learned from the Scriptures implies either that they are spiritually blind and ignorant or, God forbid, that God's Word is not clear.

The assertion that God's Word is so transcendent that it cannot be expressed in human language has a ring of piety. But it is in reality devilish. God chose to use the vehicle of human language to convey his truth to us, and what he reveals to us in the Holy Scriptures is divine truth. It can be apprehended by us and conveyed to others. "Your word is truth," Jesus declared to his heavenly Father in his high-priestly prayer (Jn 17:17). "If you hold to my teaching [my *logos*, my Word]," he told the Jews who believed in him, "you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:31,32).

God has revealed his truth to us in the words, statements and propositions of Holy Scripture. These words, statements and propositions conform to reality. God's truth can and should be expressed also by us in words, statements and propositions. In so far as our words, statements and propositions agree with the words, statements and propositions of Holy Scripture, they also conform to reality. Hence Paul admonishes, "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching [*logoon*, words]" (2 Tm 1:13), this despite the claim of modern theologian like Hans Kueng that "articles of faith are propositions ... and are not *a priori* free from the laws that govern propositions," including the law that they always fall short of reality (*Infallible? An Inquiry*, translated by Edward Quinn [Garden City: Doubleday, 1971] p 157ff).

In response to Erasmus' censure of Luther's "obstinate assertiveness," Luther insists, "Take away assertions and you take away Christianity" (*The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33, 21). Luther explains that by assertions he means "a constant adhering, affirming, confessing, maintaining, and an invincible persevering" about "those things which have been divinely transmitted to us in the sacred writings" (LW 33,20). He points out that Paul in Romans 10: 10 calls this "confession," saying, "With the mouth confession is made unto salvation," and that Christ says, "Everyone who confesses me before men, I also will confess before my Father" (Mt 10:32).

The Bible warns that as the end of the world approaches, "evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Tm 3:13). Like Timothy, therefore, we need to heed Paul's admonition, "Continue in what you have learned and become convinced of " (2 TIm 3:14). That is and must remain our aim and purpose as we teach dogmatics to the students God sends us. These truths "he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and the they in turn would teach their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands" (Ps 78:5-7). God help us to be faithful to this sacred trust!