

**Reaction to “The Pastor as Dogmatician”
By Michael J. Seifert**

Reactor: John F. Brug

I found “The Pastor as Dogmatician” by Pastor Seifert to be interesting, informative, and thought-provoking. I did not notice any major aspects of the paper that I disagreed with. My reaction, therefore, is limited primarily to observations and opinions that complement those of the author.

He notes that Koehler’s way of classifying the theological disciplines is somewhat unconventional (p 4). Both in his comments and in the questions for discussion at the end of his paper, he suggests that some critique of Koehler’s system would be in place. Since he has suggested this topic as part of our group discussion, I will not pre-empt it here, other than to note that both Pastor Seifert and Professor Koehler acknowledge that none of the four theological disciplines really fit into the pigeon holes that people construct for them. Another flawed or inadequate attempt at pigeon-holing disciplines is the traditional distinction between theoretical and practical disciplines.

After making it clear that exegesis is the foundation of dogmatics, the essayist asks whether the reverse is true: should our dogmatics influence our exegesis? (p 5). This is similar to the question: do we interpret Scripture by the Confessions or the Confessions by Scripture? Neither statement by itself is an adequate answer. Obviously the Confessions cannot serve as a norm over Scripture. In that sense it would be wrong to say we interpret Scripture by the Confessions. But the Confessions are the confessors’ summary of what Scripture says on certain topics. It would, therefore, be wrong for someone to say, “I interpret the Confessions by Scripture,” as a way of evading a *quia* subscription. The relationships are fairly simple: The Confessions depend on Scripture; Scripture does not depend on the Confessions. Dogmatics depends on Scripture; Scripture does not depend on dogmatics. But because a biblical dogmatics is simply a summary of what Scripture says, we can properly refer to dogmatic writings when debate arises over what Scripture says. The Confessions can serve as our confession of what Scripture says on certain topics.

Presenting this type of secondary confession to the church is essentially what Walther did during both the church and ministry and the election controversies. Because Walther was accused of being an American democrat and a Calvinist to boot, his immediate goal was to introduce “the voice of our church” into the debate, rather than to redo the exegesis of the pertinent passages.

It would be simplistic and even misleading to say that too much dogmatics was the chief villain in the decline of the Lutheran church. The main discipline that poisoned the Lutheran church in Germany was too much Bible study, more specifically, too much rationalistic, critical analysis of the Bible. Dogmatic study of the kind practiced by Walther played a key role in breathing new life into the Lutheran church. Just as it does not matter in the end whether one comes to faith by picking up a Bible and reading it or by someone coming and telling him what the Bible says, in practical terms it does not matter whether the church is revived by a great theologian who picks up his Bible and reads it (Luther) or by a great theologian who tells them what the Bible says (Walther).

One can hardly question the validity of the Wauwatosa men’s criticisms of Walther’s method of teaching dogmatics. They are the testimony of eye and ear witnesses, of students who had a scholarly

studious bent, yet found the course tedious. They did not recognize the “corrective” of sorts that Georg Stoeckhardt provided to the St. Louis curriculum, because it was not yet felt during their student years at St. Louis. Pastors sometimes evaluate a seminary’s curriculum based on their own experience years before.

August Pieper gives Adolf Hoenecke credit for putting a stop to the pedantry of using Latin in teaching dogmatics so that his students could devote more energy toward understanding the subject matter of the course rather than toward deciphering the language in which the material was taught. Although Hoenecke did not lecture in Latin and his students did not answer in Latin, several generations of WELS pastors may wish that the statement about the demise of Latin was a little more true than it in fact was. Staring at us from the pages of the first dogmatics test which I took as a student at WLS were five Latin quotations. We did not have to translate them. We just had to identify who said them—the rationale being that if you could read them, you could tell who said them. A certain percentage of the pastors gathered here can recall a time when all students at least pretended to translate the Latin quotations in class. Other examples of educational practices which potentially diverted energy away from understanding the message to understanding the language would be dependence on German or on the KJV for too long. Hopefully, our present system will replace an outcome in which all the students got a little from Latin with an outcome in which some get more, and a few develop more ability to serve the church through their non-biblical theological language.

The essay emphasizes the importance of regular reading of the whole Bible and regular review of dogmatics for the pastor. The seminary’s program for equipping students and pastors for life-long study offers several calendars for doing this in a consistent, systematic way. It is perhaps not important which system or calendar you use, but it is important that you have one. The *Grow in Grace* website is a source of useful materials.

In connection with his observation that over the last century the number of the hours in dogmatics class has declined from 500 to 300, the essayist asks four questions.

- Are we comparing apples to apples?
- Did students in 1919 spend more time overall in the classroom, so that dogmatic instruction made up roughly the same proportion of the curriculum?
- Has some of the content of 1919’s dogmatic instruction been absorbed into other courses today, which were not offered in the early 20th century?
- Is more homework required of today’s student, thus balancing out the difference in classroom hours?

Comparing the beginning and end of the forty-year interval from when I was a student till today, the amount of study expected is about the same, with these differences. Today a greater percentage of the *expected* work is *required*—that is, there are more strict accountability measures, more deadlines, more tests and papers, a set number of pages, etc. The proportions have shifted somewhat—more formal writing is required, less language preparation, more field experience, etc. The result is that students today tend to shift a greater percentage of their time toward the *urgent* things (tasks that have deadlines, studying for test, etc.) and cannot put as much time into the *important* things like reading and exploring theological and practical questions. Though the amount of study *suggested* and *expected* is about the

same, the amount being *done* by the dedicated student is, for the most part, less. In the old system the dedicated student could do more because there was more opportunity and the casual student could get by with less because there was less direct accountability to the system. Accountability to a considerable degree was to yourself and God. The main reasons for this change are the increasing financial cost of education and increased expectations for material things. As a married student, I could work 12 hours a week while my wife taught 1st and 2nd grade. Even as a married student I felt free to take lower paying “summer vicarships” with no undue financial pressure. We actually had more money during my senior year than during the year after graduation when my wife stayed home with our son and I was on mission code. As an unmarried junior I did not need to work at all. My summer job and what financial aid there was covered my expenses for the year. Almost no students have this opportunity today. Working in a secular job is not without vocational benefits for the pastor-to-be, but it is not the friend of study. We do offer financial support to selected students who study Mandarin in exchange for giving up their secular employment. Could we, should we do the same for other studies?

The chief enemy of the study of dogmatics is time, but at WLS we still do have one blessing that helps us confront this problem— namely, the strong program of pre-dogmatic study which most of our students have. They have been exposed to much of the content of the Bible on an elementary, high school, and college level. For most of them their first dogmatics course was confirmation. They have a pretty good knowledge of Bible history; perhaps grade schools and high schools could give more attention to the non-narrative parts of the Bible. One of the best capstones for high school religion is the study of Romans, which provides strong encouragement toward the pastoral ministry. But the most important background for dogmatics is Junior Isagogics and Junior Church History. Dogmatics students come to the course with a very recent study of most of the New Testament books and of the history of the church to the Reformation. A rather large percentage of the passages which they encounter in first year dogmatics they have recently studied in context. It is a great help to the dogmatics class that the students can place such luminaries and dark clouds as Augustine, Pelagius, and Hildegard von Bingen into their larger context. Lessening the opportunities for learning in isagogics and history lessens the preparation for dogmatics.

There is so much interaction between the theological disciplines that dogmatics cannot be understood as one compartment of a box, but as one organ of a body in which all of the organs work together.