THE TASK
OF DOGMATICS

PROCEEDINGS OF THE LOS ANGELES THEOLOGY CONFERENCE

This is the fifth volume in a series published by Zondervan Academic. It is the proceedings of the Los Angeles Theology Conference held under the auspices of Biola University, in January 2017. The conference is an attempt to do several things. First, it provides a regional forum in which scholars, students, and clergy can come together to discuss and reflect upon central doctrinal claims of the Christian faith. It is also an ecumenical endeavor. Bringing together theologians from a number of different schools and confessions, the LATC seeks to foster serious engagement with Scripture and tradition in a spirit of collegial dialogue (and disagreement), looking to retrieve the best of the Christian past in order to forge theology for the future. Finally, each volume in the series focuses on a central topic in dogmatic theology. It is hoped that this endeavor will continue to fructify contemporary systematic theology and foster a greater understanding of the historic Christian faith amongst the members of its different communions.

LOS ANGELES
THEOLOGY
CONFERENCE

The Task of Dogmatics:

Explorations in Theological Method

Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders, Editors

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CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE AS ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENT TO A NARRATIVE

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CHRISTIAN DOGMATICS AND METADOGMATICS

Suppose that you are savoring a fine German sausage and ask your-self "how is this sausage made?" To satisfy your curiosity, you decide to observe what German sausage-makers actually do in order to pro-duce tokens of tasty meat—so you shadow some representative group of sausage-makers and note both their stated and practiced aims and methods for identifying German sausages, producing them, and commending them to sausage enthusiasts such as yourself. But having done this, you find that among your representative group of German sausage-makers there are very different and in fact incompatible approaches to the practice of German sausage-making.

Further inquiring about these disagreements, you come to discover that whereas some such disagreements are merely controversies about whose preferred practices best achieve some commonly recognized norms for making the best sausages, other disagreements seem deeper. Sometimes sausage-makers justify their preferred practices not in terms of which best conform to shared norms of German sausage-making, but rather in terms of different and competing norms of German sausage-making. In these instances, you find sausage-makers disagreeing about what genuinely

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counts as an authentic German sausage, who has the proper credentials to identify, produce, and commend German sausages, and the best methods for doing so. Deep divides in the practice of German sausage-making turn out to be grounded in competing *theories* of the norms of German sausage-making. So in your quest to understand the task of sausage-making, you find that some disagreements are *meta*-sausage-making disagreements— disagreements about the nature and content of the norms of German sausage-making, the standards of correctness for making German sausage.

When we savor the religious teachings constitutive of a Christian confession—perhaps including the Trinity, the Incarnation, or the atonement—we can likewise wonder just how the *dogmatic* sausage is made, so to speak. We might follow the lead of our sausage enthusiast and attempt to satisfy our curiosity by shadowing some representative sample of theologians that Christians have taken to be responsible for the task of formulating Christian doctrines and commending them for Christian belief. Were we to do so like the sausage-enthusiast, we would find that the diversity and conflicts in the practice of Christian dogmatics parallels the diversity and conflicts in the practice of German sausage-making: the doctrinal aims of various theologians seem ordered to different and sometimes incompatible ends by way of different and sometimes incompatible methodological approaches. Moreover, as in the case of sausage-making, so too here, much of the conflict and diversity we find in the practice of Christian dogmatics is grounded in deep theoretical disagreements about the norms of Christian dogmatics—metadogmatic disagreements about what Christian doctrines are and what they're for, about which or what criteria any proposed doctrine must meet in order to count as authentically Christian, about who has the proper credentials to identify, produce, and commend Christian doctrines, and about which methods are best for so doing.

The task of articulating and defending a metadogmatics was an especially important feature of North American theology in the '80s and '90s, largely in connection with the so called "postliberalism" of the Yale school associated especially with the works of George Lindbeck and Hans Frei.[1]

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1. There is some debate as to whether there really is or was any coherent social, institutional, or conceptual basis for marking out postliberalism as a unified theological movement. In *Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), for example, Paul DeHart attempts to distance Frei from Lindbeck and argues that the lumping of their projects under the auspices of "postliberalism" is mistaken. John Allan Knight, however, has provided a convincing rebuttal to that thesis by demonstrating the deeply shared commitments in the philosophy of language that undergird both of their theological projects. See Knight, *Liberalism vs. Postliberalism: The Great Divide in Twentieth-Century Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

In *The Nature of Doctrine,* Lindbeck attempted to explain the diversity of practice in Christian dogmatics in terms of theologians' commitments to one of three distinct theories of what "doctrines" are.[2] On one theory, doctrines are informative propositions, on another they are expressions of experience, and on a third they are cultural–linguistic rules, and the differences we find in the modern and contemporary practice of the dogmatic task depend on which of these three metadogmatic theories the theologian holds. When Christian theologians are formulating and commending Christian doctrines, Lindbeck claims, they accordingly construe their task in one of three ways: their job is (1) to formulate some informative propositions that describe some objective realities in the same sort of way we find in the sciences, (2) to construct some symbols that express some inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations, or (3) to describe some regulative rules that govern a subset of cultural and linguistic practices.[3]

Hans Frei's posthumously published *Types of Christian Theology* similarly aims to explain the diversity of methods in Christian dogmatics in terms of five types of orientation toward the relative uniqueness of Christian confession.[4] If one takes a view of Christian doctrines as expressions of more generic truths, then theologians should attempt to understand and evaluate those expressions in terms of the methods of the general human, social, and physical sciences. But if the subject–matter of Christian doctrines falls outside of the domain of those disciplines as utterly unique, then it will only be intelligible and evaluable in terms of the community's internal language and the practices of its adherents.[5] Christian dogmatics governed by the metadogmatic commitments of a purely community–internal self–description is a form of "witness," while Christian dogmatics governed by the metadogmatic commitments of purely community–external description is a form of critical "reduction."

But in addition to these purely community–internal and community–external theories of doctrine, one might recognize more or less of an admixture of generic and unique content, best served by more or less methodological correlation with non–Christian academic disciplines. Thus next to pure reduction of the sort Frei finds in Gordon Kaufman (his "Type

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2. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 15–19.

3. Ibid., 18.

4. Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

5. Ibid., 2.

I''), he also recognizes in David Tracy and Wolfhart Pannenberg a form of reductive criticism more open to the uniqueness of Christian witness as a distinctive exemplification of its genera (Type II). In Schleiermacher's translation of Christian doctrine in terms of religious feeling Frei finds an equipoise between reduction and witness (Type III). He takes Karl Barth's dogmatics to be an attempt to give a theology of witness open to external scrutiny as a kind of critical self-description (Type IV). Finally, he takes D. Z. Phillips's appropriation of Wittgenstein to illustrate dogmatics ordered entirely to internal self-description (Type V).[6] So (presumably) whatever sort of form we suppose doctrine to take (whether propositional, experiential, or cultural-linguistic), Frei claims that our theory about its relative uniqueness will determine the aim of the dogmatic task along the spectrum of witness and reduction as well as the best methods for achieving that aim.

In the few decades since Lindbeck and Frei first attempted to survey the metadogmatic landscape, their proposed taxonomies of the available theories of the dogmatic task have undergone two sorts of developments: the critical revision of one or more of the theories in their taxonomy,[7] or else the proposal of some novel metadogmatic theory that does not clearly fall within the scope of Lindbeck's models or Frei's types.[8] What I propose in this paper is not to add my criticisms or revisions, nor to propose another

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6. Ibid., 28–55.

7. To cite just a few examples: see Kathryn Tanner's criticism of Lindbeck's reliance on Geertz for a theory of culture, and her revision in the direction of a more "hybrid" picture of Christian cultural identity in her *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). See also Christine Helmer's recent retrieval of Schleiermacher's conception of doctrine as a complicated interplay between experience and language in *Theology and the End of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014). Helmer, in my view, offers a more expansive vision of what Lindbeck calls an "experiential-expressivist" model of doctrine as over against a cultural-linguistic one. One way to read Francesca Murphy's criticisms of the "narrative theology" that she identifies with postliberalism in *God is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) is as an extended plea for a recovery of what Lindbeck mostly dismisses as a "propositional" model of doctrine, insofar as it emphasizes the metaphysical dimension of doctrinal exploration as aimed at objective realities. DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, revises received readings of Frei to offer a retrieval of his constructive project. Michael Rea proposes some interesting ways of appropriating Frei to classify the methodology of analytic theology regarding the divine attributes. See "Die Eigenschaften Gottes als Thema der analytischen Theologie," trans. Martin Blay, Daniela Kaschke, and Thomas Schärtl, in *Eigenschaften Gottes: Ein Gespräch zwischen systematischer Theologie und analytischer Philosophie*, ed. Thomas Marschler and Thomas Schärtl (Münster: Aschendorff, 2016), 49–68.

8. Medi Ann Volpe, for example, has argued that Lindbeck's taxonomy leaves out traditional views of the development of doctrine as aimed at the moral and spiritual formation of the theologian. See *Rethinking Christian Identity: Doctrine and Discipleship* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 13–25. Knight, *Liberalism vs. Postliberalism*, criticizes the whole of both liberal and postliberal theology as grounded in competing accounts of meaning and reference which are now largely defunct in the analytic philosophy of language, and calls for theology to proceed in dependence upon more recent theories of meaning and reference (principally those in the paradigm of Kripke). Lindbeck's taxonomy also arguably excludes contemporary theology informed by more recent theological turns in the phenomenological tradition as influenced by e.g., Jean-Luc Marion.

alternative proposal to set alongside all the others on the list. Instead, I want to note the kind of metadogmatic theorizing represented in this literature and then to offer a metadogmatic theory of a categorically different sort.

The observation is that we can distinguish between two different kinds of metadogmatic theory, each of which serves a different sort of aim. If our interest is to adjudicate the differences in dogmatic practice by appealing to a theory of the norms of dogmatic practice, there are two different kinds of norms that might interest us. On the one hand, we might be after a theory of the norms that tell us what counts as engaging in the dogmatic task *properly*, in doing it well rather than badly. On the other hand we might be after a theory of the norms that tell us what counts as engaging in the dogmatic task *simpliciter*—norms that someone has to satisfy in order to count as engaging the task of dogmatics at all, whether well or badly.

Let's go back to sausages. Consider professed German sausage-makers Horst and Ludger. On Horst's theory, to count as an authentic German sausage, the sausage must be made in Germany from German animals. Ludger disagrees—as long as the relevant processes are observed, the provenance of the sausage doesn't matter. However, neither Horst nor Ludger deny that the other one is actually a German sausage-maker engaged in the task of German sausage-making. It's just that each holds a theory of the norms of *good* sausage-making according to which the other is not a *good* sausage-maker. But we can also imagine Horst holding a much stronger view about his norm of provenance. He might think that satisfying the norm is not only necessary for making German sausage *well*, but that satisfying it is necessary for making German sausage *period*. Ludger, in that case, whatever he may think he's doing, is not in the business of German sausage-making at all.

How then should we classify the metadogmatic theories outlined by Lindbeck, Frei, and those who have responded to them in proposing their various revised and alternative theories? Are these all theories about what it takes to engage in the dogmatic task well, or theories about what it takes to count as engaging in it at all? It seems clear enough to me that they are interested in the former rather than the latter. Lindbeck advocates for a rule-theory of doctrine over a propositional or experiential-expressivist theory, but he nevertheless recognizes that those whom he takes to be guided by the wrong theories in their formulations of Christian doctrine nevertheless count as engaging in the task of Christian dogmatics.[9] Similarly, Frei's is

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9. Lindbeck's defense of a cultural-linguistic theory of doctrine concludes by characterizing that theory not as ruling out alternative approaches to doctrine by definition, but rather as involved in a

critical of the metadogmatic norms guiding theological method in Types I, II, and V, and he contends instead for the more "witness" based methodologies of critical self-description in his Types III and IV. But this does not lead him to conclude that after all there are only two types of Christian theology, and that the others are merely theology *manqué*, not truly instances of Christian theology at all.[10] The current landscape of disputes about the proper norms that ought to govern Christian dogmatics have likewise continued to maintain this same focus. Insofar as they exhibit a sustained willingness to count the fellow-disputants in their metadogmatic debates as participants in the task of Christian dogmatics, we ought to interpret their theorizing about the norms for formulating and commending Christian doctrine as attempts to convince those disputants to engage in that task *properly*, not attempts to get them to see that they are in fact not engaging in it at all.[11]

If this is so, then it has the surprising consequence that much of the most influential metadogmatic theorizing in the past thirty-odd years has had comparatively little to say about how we ought to theorize the shared norms of the dogmatic task that define the field of disagreement about the norms of doing that task well or badly. We may have achieved a good deal of clarity about the vast and growing terrain of competing conceptions about how Christian dogmatics ought and ought not to be done. But the variety and diversity of those conceptions as well as the apparent depth of their conflicts has had the effect of making it difficult to see how it could be that those guided by such different norms might be engaged in the same basic kind of work. It is thus likely to be controversial whether there is any commonly shared framework of the Christian dogmatic task within which we can interpret the disputes about its proper execution. And if we are inclined to think that there is such a shared framework, it will be a matter of metadogmatic controversy just how we ought to analyze it.

In the remainder of this paper, therefore, my aim will be to offer the beginnings of just such a metadogmatic theory. What I propose is that, whether the disputants about the proper execution of the dogmatic task recognize it or not, they are all likewise engaged in that task, whether well or badly, insofar as they are all engaged in the task of making explicit some

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performative contest with them whose outcome remains as yet undetermined. See *Nature of Doctrine*, 134–135.

10. Frei's preferred conception of theology is merely the one that he "likes best." See Frei, *Types of Christian Theology,* 13.

11. Thus, when Helmer criticizes, e.g., a cultural-linguistic conception of the doctrinal task, she is attempting to question the priorities and limits of a certain way of doing theology, she is not attempting to define them out of the dogmatics business. See Helmer, *The End of Doctrine,* 14–20.

sense in which Christians are ontologically committed to a Christian narrative of creation and redemption. To formulate and commend Christian doctrine, I claim, is at a minimum, to formulate and commend ontological commitment to a narrative. On my theory, therefore, the disputes stemming from Lindbeck about the nature of doctrinal content should be interpreted as disputes about the nature of the content expressed by a Christian narrative of creation and redemption. The disputes stemming from Frei about the aims and methods best suited to the formulation of Christian doctrine should be interpreted as disputes about the aims and best methods for articulating a Christian's ontological commitments to the content of a Christian narrative.

ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENT TO A NARRATIVE

The proper subject matter for the kind of doctrinal reflection that constitutes the dogmatic task on my theory is a narrative, a Christian story of creation and redemption through Christ. One abbreviated version of the story might go like this:

The one God who created all things made humans in the divine image, but in virtue of their sin humans have tragically fallen from their created purpose of bearing that divine image. But God in love and mercy set about restoring and redeeming humankind from their fallen condition and restoring proper relationships between God, self, and creation. This redemption was first mediated through the life of Israel and then through the fulfillment of Israel's promises in the arrival of their promised Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. In the self-giving love of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection from the dead, God the Son came to dwell with humankind and remedy the alienation and death brought by human sin. Upon Christ's ascension, God's Spirit continues to mediate Christ's redemption to the world through the redeemed community of the church, which continues to serve God's redemptive purposes in the world while awaiting a final consummation of those purposes at the end of the present age.[12]

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12. For an argument of the identity-constituting nature of narratives, as well as a slightly different summary of a Christian narrative, see Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). For a more explicitly metadogmatic argument about the function of a *scriptural* story in constituting a Christian religious identity, see David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1975); Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980); Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Living within a Text," in *Faith and Narrative,* ed. Keith Yandell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 202–216; Sameer Yadav, "Scripture as Signpost," in *Sensing Things Divine*, ed. Frederick D. Aquino and Paul

A salvation-historical narrative framework of this sort could be further adumbrated or else expanded in many different ways. It may require revision to include additional elements or omit others. It may exhibit the wrong narrative shape in the relevant agents and actions or themes it tracks. Clearly there is no one commonly accepted way that Christian theologians have told the Christian story about God's creating and saving work. Christian theologians routinely disagree on all the details of the above-mentioned sort. Still, one would be hard pressed to find a theologian whose engagement in the task of formulating or commending Christian doctrine was not in some way giving a descriptive or explanatory gloss on what it is that Christians mean or ought to mean when they appeal to some such story as constitutive of their religious identities. Indeed, the idea of Christian doctrinal reflection that is in no way a reflection on the meaning, reference, significance of a Christian story of God's creation and redemption through Christ has a vaguely incoherent or self-contradictory ring to it. The reason for this, I submit, is that the task of Christian dogmatics just is the task of determining the meaning, reference, or significance of some such story.

This is not to say, however, that the dogmatic task as such requires the theologian to take up an affirming stance toward all or any part of that story as it literally stands. Identifying the relevant story as a basis of Christian teaching is not tantamount to identifying what it teaches.[13] Nor is it defining of Christian dogmatics to place any necessary and sufficient conditions on what kind of agential or textual, discursive, or social processes a narrative or any part of that narrative must have in order to make it a proper object of doctrinal reflection. It is safe to say that the relevant story will usually have among its paradigmatic sources the Christian Bible along with the textual and interpretive traditions of its production and use as Scripture in the church.[14] But the relevant story or part of the story that serves as the basis

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L. Gavrilyuk (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). My conception of the role of a Christian narrative derives from the role given to Scripture in these works of Protestant theology, but with an expanded slot for that role which might be filled by other potential sources of doctrinal authority for Christian communities.

13. Rudolf Bultmann's dogmatic work furnishes us with a good example of this distinction, insofar as his demythologizing project depends upon first recognizing the importance of what it is that Christians receive in the deposit of their tradition, before turning to query it for what God might and might not be revealing by way of that deposit. For an excellent exegesis of the nature and significance of that project, see David Congdon, *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Dialectical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).

14. Appealing to a Christian narrative therefore does not necessarily privilege narrative theology as it is often conceived, or narrative criticism of Scripture, or even the "post-critical" retrievals of premodern practices of theological interpretation more generally. Instead, it is a minimalistic claim that *however* one negotiates the normative significance of the authoritative sources of doctrine that are defining of a Christian identity, that significance will ultimately be take the form of a description

for doctrinal reflection may also derive from ecclesial traditions or official teachings beyond and outside the Bible, etc.[15]

In other words, while it is a defining feature of the Christian dogmatic task that it is a form of reflection on a Christian story of creation and redemption, those engaged in that task nevertheless can and do disagree about the proper sources of that story, the proper processes by way of which it has come to be an important mark of Christian identity, or the kind of internal shape or coherence it must have, etc. All of these more particular determinations about what constitutes a Christian story of creation and redemption are manifestly matters of dogmatic (and metadogmatic) dispute, but they are disputes about what sort of credentials a story ought to have to merit becoming the object of the dogmatic task. Grounding that task in a story with the wrong credentials doesn't preclude one from genuinely engaging in the task, only from doing so well, much like building an edifice with bad materials doesn't preclude one's activity from counting as an act of building an edifice. Likewise, the common need to identify a relevant narrative of creation and redemption to serve as the object of doctrinal reflection can explain the wide range of disputes we find about the proper sources of Christian doctrine.

Aside from the source of a Christian story, another important indeterminacy in my account worth noting has to do with what it is *about* a Christian narrative that supplies the relevant information for formulating Christian teachings. So, suppose you endorse Lindbeck's taxonomy on the nature of doctrinal content (along with whatever subsequent revisions you take it to require). Interpreted on my metadogmatic theory, you would thus hold that whereas some look to the relevant Christian story of creation and redemption to derive the propositional or cognitive content it conveys about some objective religious realities, others look to that story

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of some story about God's relation to the world and its significance for the unfolding of human life here and now. The fact that Christian adherence to some such story underdetermines any particular metaphysical, epistemological, and moral construal of that story. We can expect that the identification of the appropriate story to which Christians ought to adhere and the proper metaphysical, epistemological, and moral construal of that story will be matters of dispute.

15. Thus, I take this account to be compatible with various versions of Christian confession, which would include Roman Catholic accounts of the dogmatic task of the sort we find in, say, Griffiths's *The Practice of Catholic Theology: A Modest Proposal* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2016). I am simply too ignorant of the dogmatic task as practiced by, say Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses to judge whether they can be counted as satisfying this criterion for being engaged in the task of Christian dogmatics, but I suspect that they can, with most of the contention of many mainstream Christian theologians being whether it is possible to execute the Christian dogmatic task properly within the constraints that Mormons or Jehovah's Witness theologians place upon the sources of dogmatics.

as a norm for expressing the content of a Christian religious experience, and others find in it the regulative rules that govern a Christian form of life. In each case, some suitably identified story of creation and redemption is serving as the basis for "doctrine" variously understood. Christian doctrines, therefore, are expressions of whatever the relevant sort of content is that a narrative of creation and redemption conveys as Christian teaching. Disputes about how to properly characterize the relevant sort of content conveyed by a Christian narrative can explain the wide range of competing metadogmatic theories we find about the nature of doctrine.

We have thus far identified some commonly shared metadogmatic norms about the narrative source of Christian dogmatics and its role as an evidence base for the doctrinal outputs of dogmatics, but not the nature of the dogmatic task itself. What sort of reflection is doctrinal reflection? What is the aim that defines one's orientation to the relevant sort of doctrinal content of a Christian story as an instance of engaging in the dogmatic task? I take the defining aim of Christian dogmatics—one that is shared across its various competing metadogmatic construals—to be that of determining for Christians what it is to which their story *ontologically commits* them. While philosophers have understood the notion of ontological commitment in various ways, I follow Bradley Rettler in taking it to mean that when the content of a sentence implicitly or explicitly represents things as being a certain way, and one affirms that sentence, then one is thereby committed to there actually being something (or some things) that makes that sentence true.[16]

For example, if in uttering some sentence I affirm or imply that there are tables, then I have thereby ontologically committed myself to there being something that makes it correct to affirm that there are tables, even if I don't know what it is about the world that explains, accounts for, or makes it the case that there are tables. So maybe what makes it correct to say that tables exist is that there exist some subsets of atoms arranged table-wise, or maybe what makes it correct is some much larger state of affairs, like the current state of the world, or perhaps some phenomenologists are right and what makes it true to say that there are tables is just the appearance of tables to us in a certain way. Simply by affirming that there are tables, I don't ontologically commit myself to whatever *specific* truthmaker is responsible for ensuring that I have spoken correctly. Rather, I only

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16. See Rettler, "The General Truthmaker View of Ontological Commitment," *Philosophical Studies* 173 (2016): 1405–1425.

ontologically commit myself to the more general belief that *something* (or *some things*) that is so responsible.[17] But whereas it is not necessary for us to know what the specific truthmakers are for the content of the sentences we affirm, it is the metaphysician (or physicist, or phenomenologist) who ought to be "in the business of investigating what the truthmakers are/must be/could be for various sentences."[18]

On my analysis, the relevant sentences for the theologian are sentences belonging to a Christian narrative of creation and redemption, and the relevant sort of content affirmed by those sentences is determined by some antecedent theory of doctrinal content of the sort explored by Lindbeck. So if some feature of a Christian story includes a sentence such as "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19 NASB), and if the doctrinal content expressed by that sentence is a proposition that represents God's being in Christ reconciling the world to himself as an objective reality, then Christians are (or ought to be) ontologically committed to there being something (or some things) that makes (or make) it the case that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. If, on the other hand, the doctrinal content expressed by that sentence is the content of an inner feeling, attitude, or existential orientation, then Christians are (or ought to be) ontologically committed to there being something (or some things) that makes (or make) it the case that there are such inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations. Or if the sentence instead expresses the doctrinal content of a rule regulative of Christian practices of reconciliation, then Christians are (or ought to be) ontologically committed to there being something (or some things) that makes (or make) it the case that there are such rules that regulate their practices of reconciliation.

But just as it is the metaphysician's (or whomever's) job to investigate just what the truthmakers are for various sorts of sentences, what defines the task of Christian dogmatics is just to investigate what the specific truthmakers are, must be, or could be for the sentences constitutive of a Christian story of creation and redemption. Christian doctrinal formulations, however else they might be understood, are always at bottom just attempts to do two things: 1) to make explicit the Christian's ontological commitments and 2) to identify their specific truthmakers. Suppose, for example, that the relevant Christian story that provides the content for

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17. This is my own slightly revised way of putting the summary he gives. See Rettler, "The General Truthmaker View," 1405.

18. Ibid., 1421.

the dogmatic task includes (or can be made to include by the right sort of doctrinal theorizing) sentences about God as Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[19] In that case, we should take Christians to be ontologically committed to whatever makes it the case that God is triune.

On Christine Helmer's version of what we might call an experiential-expressivist view of doctrinal content, for example, such Trinity-talk would express the doctrinal content of there being some transformative experience of a reality whose pressures on our use of words and concepts merits our articulation of that experience in terms of Trinitarian language.[20] Christians are thus in her view ontologically committed to there being something (or some things) that makes (or make) it the case that there are transformative experiences of a reality whose pressures on our use of words and concepts merits our articulation of that experience in terms of Trinitarian language. An explication of the doctrine of the Trinity consists in articulating just what it is that makes it the case that there are such experiences, in terms of an exploration of the possible metaphysical, historical, cultural grounds that could explain such an experience.[21] Those theologians adopting a different metadogmatic view of the sort of doctrinal content expressed by Trinity-talk, however, will identify the ontological commitments of such talk differently, and that will no doubt send them searching after altogether different sorts of specific truthmakers to further explicate whatever it is that they take the doctrine of the Trinity to express.[22]

This theory of doctrinal explication as the explication of ontological commitment to a narrative leaves open the question of how to theorize the appropriate methods of investigation best suited for that task. It only requires that we interpret the range of possible approaches to the task of doctrinal formulation and commendation as various proposed approaches to specifying the truthmakers for the doctrinal content of a Christian narrative. So recall Frei's taxonomy of the five types of theology, from

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19. Of course, whether Trinity-talk belongs to the story that serves as the object and evidence-base for doctrinal reflection or whether we must earn the right to include such talk in our story by way of dogmatic work (i.e., by deriving it as a doctrinal formulation from some prior narrative that makes no reference to it) depends on one's metadogmatic views about the proper sources of doctrinal reflection.

20. Helmer, *The End of Doctrine,* 112–113.

21. Ibid., 169.

22. For example, Bruce Marshall has argued that the very concept of truth has a Trinitarian shape, and that not only orthodox beliefs about the Trinity, but all truths are made true by a Trinitarian reality. See Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 242–282.

those that most completely reduce the content of Christian doctrine to claims explicable by the humanistic, social, and natural sciences, to those that treat that content as most completely irreducible to explication in any terms other than that of the internal self-description of a Christian community. On my analysis, all five of Frei's types on this spectrum are predicated on different theories of the epistemic availability of the specific truthmakers for the doctrinal content to which Christians are ontologically committed. But we can interpret all five types as sharing the same basic aim of specifying what the relevant truthmakers are for their preferred notions of Christian doctrinal content and determining their methods for doing so by assessing the epistemic constraints that content imposes on us. For example, suppose, with Helmer, that we take Christians to be ontologically committed to experiences of a reality that merits our Trinity-talk.

But suppose, contrary to Helmer's view (as I read her), that the truthmaker of that experience is only identifiable by way of the experience itself, and further that the relevant experience is *sui generis*, irreducible to any other sort of experience to which I might compare it. In that case, we can imagine an experiential-expressivist taking up something like a self-descriptive witness view of a sort that belongs somewhere near Type V of Frei's taxonomy, while Helmer's own view might belong closer to a Type II or III. The methodological difference between the two, however, is explicable in terms of their different judgments about the epistemic availability of the relevant doctrinal content (in this case, an experience).

A final shared norm that I take to be a defining feature of the task of Christian dogmatics is that of the possibility of orthodoxy and heresy. Given the vastly different metadogmatic standards for determining what counts as good and bad doctrine, it might seem implausible to suppose that there is any shared conception of orthodoxy or heresy at work in defining the task of Christian dogmatics per se. But I suspect that the idea of specifying a truthmaker for our ontological commitments makes something in the neighborhood of those notions available to us. Two of the claims I've made thus far are especially relevant. First, I've claimed that a Christian narrative of creation and redemption is or includes a narrative that is in some way constitutive of a Christian identity. If a Christian denies or refuses to affirm a sentence that is constitutive of a Christian identity, then that Christian thereby denies or refuses a Christian identity. Suppose, for example, that Christians are ontologically committed to the claim that Christ is morally perfect or impeccable, and further that affirming the moral impeccability of Christ expressed by the Christian story is essential

to a Christian identity. In that case, for a professing Christian to claim that Christ is in fact immoral is to thereby deny something essential to a Christian identity. Such a denial, we might say, is a *heresy*, whereas its contrary, the affirmation of Christ's impeccability, is an *orthodoxy*. On the other hand, if there are sentences of the Christian story that we can judge to be nonfundamental or inessential for constituting a Christian identity, then while Christians may be ontologically committed to them, denying them may have various sorts of consequences for their Christian identity, but it does not amount to a denial or refusal of that identity.[23]

But, secondly, I've also claimed that it is the business of Christian dogmatics to investigate what the truthmakers *are*, *must be*, or *could be* for the doctrinal content expressed by the sentences of such a narrative. So if a Christian theologian succeeds in identifying something that *must be the case* in order for the doctrinal content expressed by a sentence to be true, and the sentence expressing that content is constitutive of a Christian identity, then it follows that one can deny a Christian identity not only by rejecting the content expressed by the relevant sentence, but also by denying what *must be the case* in order for that content to be true. So, for example, suppose that while Christian narrative ontologically commits us to Christ's impeccability as a matter of orthodoxy, it does not explicitly commit us to any particular claims about Christ's sexuality. Now further suppose that it must be the case that being impeccable is incompatible with being disposed to committing sexual assault. It would thereby follow that Christians are ontologically committed as a matter of orthodoxy to the view that Christ was not disposed to committing sexual assault.

To take another example, suppose that a Christian story constitutive of a Christian identity ontologically commits Christians to holding that there is a single entity identifiable as God, while identifying that entity with three distinctly divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And now further suppose that the necessary truthmaker for that ontological commitment is something that fits the traditional, Nicene formulation of the Trinity. It follows that Christians are thereby ontologically committed to the traditional formulation of the Trinity in the Nicene Creed. Identifying what *could be* or what is *actually* but *needn't be* the case to make a Christian's ontological commitments true, however, might be an important matter

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23. Rowan Williams spells out this internal relation between orthodoxy/heresy and the gradual evolving of a normative Christian identity or self-understanding in *Arius: Heresy and Tradition,* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 22–25.

for the dogmatic task, but they will not be matters of orthodoxy or heresy. Whenever Christians deny or disagree about either something inessential to the story or about something that merely could be but is not necessarily a truthmaker for something essential to that story, they do not flout any norms of orthodoxy and as such cannot court heresy. To be orthodox is to be ontologically committed to whatever doctrinal content is expressed by the identity-constituting features of a Christian narrative as well as being committed to the necessary truthmakers of that content.[24] To be a heretic, conversely, is just to deny or refuse the ontological commitments of orthodoxy.

My proposed theory of the Christian dogmatic task can therefore be summed up this way: to engage in the task of Christian dogmatics is to explicate the Christian's ontological commitments to the doctrinal content expressed by a narrative of creation and redemption, to identify the specific truthmakers for that content, and to appropriate the methods best suited to the epistemic availability of those truthmakers. Insofar as the dogmatic task involves making judgments of orthodoxy and heresy, those judgments are made on the basis of affirming or denying what is deemed to be either essential to a narrative constituting Christian identity or else a necessary truthmaker of one's ontological commitment to the doctrinal content of such a narrative.

Meta-Metadogmatics? Toward an Ecumenical Metatheology

I have been thinking about a way of defining the Christian dogmatic task as a kind of metadogmatic theory: it is the most general and commonly shared norm that guides the task of Christian dogmatics as it is variously practiced.[25] As such, I have argued that the theory can accommodate the wide and deep metadogmatic disagreements about what counts as a good and faithful execution of the dogmatic task. But it also occurs to me that the theory plays a similar structural role with respect to these divergent metadogmatic theories

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24. Note that claiming some truthmakers are necessary for the doctrinal content expressed by a story to be true is not the same as claiming that the truthmaker necessarily *exists,* only that the truth of the doctrinal content expressed by the story necessarily depends on its existing whether it exists necessarily or not.

25. Much of what I've said thus far has been in a descriptive mode, as an analysis of what I take to be the formal backdrop that in fact governs what theologians are doing, whether they recognize it or not. But insofar as my theory is a controversial one or faces rivals, I would also want to argue that this is what the task of Christian dogmatics *ought* to be.

that those theories themselves play with respect to the practice of dogmatics. That is, whereas dogmatics attempts to explicate the substance of Christian confession and commend its teachings to Christians, and metadogmatics attempts to explicate the norms that guide the task of dogmatics, what I have proposed can rightly be read as an attempt to explicate the norm that guides the task of metadogmatics, the common standard of correctness that guides theologians when they are trying to explicate the norms that ought to guide the task of dogmatics. So perhaps my theory is best seen not as a metadogmatic theory but instead a meta-metadogmatic theory.

I'm not sure much is at stake in the terminological issue. But I do wish to avoid giving the false impression that the order of determination for these three distinct levels of theorizing is a strictly top-down affair. On that picture, first we should fix the more general underlying norms of doctrinal theorizing, then we can be guided by those to determine the more specific norms of doctrinal theorizing, until at last (if we aren't too tired by then) we may finally get around to actually engaging the task of deriving particular doctrinal formulations about, say, the meaning, reference or significance of the Incarnation.

On the contrary, the direction of our theorizing may well (and often does) include a bottom-up rather than top-down type of doctrinal theorizing. It may well be the case that, for example, the way we understand Christian teaching about the Incarnation has significant implications for what we think we ought to be doing when we formulate and commend doctrines, or for what we take to be a common feature defining of all Christian dogmatics. Nor do I wish to suggest that we can resolve lower-level controversies simply by appealing to higher-level theories. For one thing, the higher-level theories leave open what sort of theories best satisfy their norms. For another, we should expect that our meta- (and meta-meta-) dogmatic theories are or could become every bit as controversial as our first-order dogmatic views about the Incarnation, for example. But if all this is so, then what's the use of offering such a theory?

What initially sent us looking for a theory of the defining norms of Christian dogmatics that all of its practitioners share was just our noticing how deep and wide the metadogmatic disagreements are between them, whether those disagreements conform to the taxonomies suggested by Lindbeck and Frei or not. Ironically, what originally motivated Lindbeck's work on the nature of doctrine was an interest in ecumenical dialogue. He hoped that by advocating for a cultural-linguistic theory, he could find a basis for recognizing common rules that regulate a Christian form of life

despite the deep differences in the propositional or experiential commitments that divide Christians. But the reception history of Lindbeck in North American theology has mostly resulted in fomenting a corresponding sense of division amongst theologians. The state of post-postliberal theology has encouraged a kind of tribalism amongst theologians operating under distinct paradigms of the dogmatic task with their own literatures and conversation partners, and without much engagement with alternative paradigms.[26] It's almost like the taxonomies and their revisions function like a noncompete clause, or an injunction to "stay in your own lane."

The purpose of articulating a more expansive theory of the task of Christian dogmatics that can place all of these competing paradigms on the same field of discourse is thus very much in the spirit of Lindbeck. If our attention can be turned from our preferred theories of doctrinal sources, content, method, and the role of doctrines in defining Christian belonging, and if we can instead fix our gaze on the common desiderata that all our rival theories are trying to secure, then perhaps our gaze will meet, and our preferred theories will confront questions that they are not often enough made to answer.

So, for example, analytic theologians might become more open to engaging the metadogmatic theories of postcolonial, black, or feminist theologians who identify colonial, white supremacist, or patriarchal corruptions of their preferred evidence base, content, methods, or standards of communal belonging. Likewise, recognizing that the deep structure of their theorizing involves a form of ontological commitment, liberationist theologians might become more open to the methods of working out such commitments offered by a theological use of contemporary analytic philosophy. If a mutual recognition of our shared interests in the dogmatic task made engagements of that sort possible, then I suppose that the task of Christian dogmatics would be better for it.

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26. If you doubt this, then simply attend the next American Academy of Religion meeting, mark your schedule to attend papers covering the same general theological topics in the Theology and Continental Philosophy Group, the Postcolonial Theology Group, the Analytic Theology Group, and the Systematic Theology Group. Then make a note of the shared theological norms, argument strategies, aims, and bibliographical sources across those papers. My prediction is that you will come up with very few, if any, such shared norms, strategies, or sources.