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Crucial choices

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

My colleague Gijsbert van den Brink has informed you of a few things about the origins and the process of our project, and I would like to make a few comments about substantive choices that we have made. Let me start with some general remarks. Some of them my colleague already touched upon.

Dogmatics is not a static whole, systematic reflection on Christian faith. It is itself part of history and participates fully in it. Sometimes, even colleagues in the theological faculty still have the idea, that dogmatics is a field that pretends that God can be fully comprehended, that everything can be explained. Some might even think that the best theologian is the best believer. That is certainly not what we imagine that dogmatics is all about. It is a reflection on practices of faith, on the actual relationship with God, informed by the Bible and the teaching of the Church. Sound reflection on the Christian faith is a task that has to be done by every generation. Sheer repetition of what former generations said and wrote would be irresponsible. Every age is confronted with new challenges. The promise of the Holy Spirit should encourage us to fresh reflection. The gospel of John gives a clear statement: When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you in all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine, and declare it to you. (John 16: 13-14)

The task of systematic theology

What should this book do? I distinguish three tasks for this branch of theology and Van den Brink has already mentioned them. 1) Sometimes, dogmatics has a normative task. A good example is the first statement of the Declaration of Barmen in 1934, that Jesus Christ is the truth and the way, and that no other power, state or ideology, can pretend to have that role. (2) A second task is orientation, that is, to provide an understandable overview of the content of the Christian faith. (3) Third, sometimes dogmatic reflection has to respond to new situations and is therefore innovative. Let me give an example: aging. Many people in the modern

societies of Europe are living longer than in former times. For many people, there is such a thing as a fourth stage of life, and we speak of aging. That fact of modern life raises a question for Church and theology. How do older people deal with those years when they are already retired, but often still capable of functioning in society, in their neighborhood? Aging is a new challenge for Christian theology and ethics. One can also think of contemporary ecological problems. We can no longer deny that human intervention leads to ecological crises. Conclusion: We live in a different situation than our ancestors and. Therefore, face different challenges. Our contemporary challenges cannot always be answered with old answers. It is as if the Lord is challenging us with these questions. It is the task of dogmatics to help the Church to address such new challenges in the light of the faith (tradition).

Hiking guide

The second task, providing description/orientation, could be compared with composing a hiking guide. A hiking guide, no matter how beautiful its descriptions are and how accurately the environment is described, is not the walk itself. Only now and then does the hiker consult the hiking guide for the right direction or to find out something about the scenery along the way. Most hikers, however, will not be especially interested in the hiking guide. However, if you occasionally use the hiking guide, you have the chance of being better informed and seeing even more. But you should not continually stare at the guiding booklet, because then you will not see anything. In short, a dogmatics can be compared to a hiking guide. It is not faith itself. It can only serve faith and Church by pointing out pathways where one might travel, as well as dead ends, and also important crossroads.

1. The universality of God

What, then, are crossroads in our overview of Christian doctrine? Let me mention four elements that are significant.

First of all, God is not a subject that we have to look for. God is already there, and we, as well as our world are, biblically speaking, within his reach and touch. That is why we started our book with two chapters about God. We live in the orbit of God, and not the other way around. In traditional language: there is general revelation. In our daily life, in the rhythm of day and night, in the enjoyment of food, of light, of happiness or sorrow, we are within the reach of the living God. God is the mystery of life, God is deep hidden in life, deeper than most people, including those who say they do not believe, realize. God makes himself known

in many untold ways. We have only to discover him, and contemporary theology should accent this starting point of Christian faith anew. Revelation consists not only of special revelation, as we find it in the Bible. Of course, special revelation is the center, and stands center stage in our faith. At the same time, in his presence and manifestations the eternal, triune God is not restricted to what is called special revelation. We do not follow Barth's rigorous solution. We write: "For recognizing the particularity of God's revelation does not exclude the possibility that his revelation also makes itself known in the midst of everyday life. This life comprises more than superficial Western naturalism, with its closed worldview, wants to recognize." (188) In our book, however, we no longer call it general revelation, preferring to speak of the universality of God's revelation. "General" sounds too flat, too bleak.

2. The structuring role of Trinitarian theology

We encounter God in all kinds of ways. As a creator, as a savior, and also as the Spirit who renews and fulfills. We have tried to do justice to this by application of a Trinitarian structure. That is a second crossroad in this textbook which I want to highlight. Therefore, the chapter on the Trinity even precedes the chapter on revelation. But the doctrine of the Trinity also pervades and colors other sections of our book – in that sense, it is a real crossroad. We do not get to know God as abstract being, but immediately as the living, triune God. In doing so, we follow a development that in recent decades has become particularly strong in the English-speaking world, namely, a revival of Trinitarian theology. We do not know God simply as God, but more concretely as Father, Son and Spirit. God shows himself to be the giver of life, he shows himself in Christ as the savior, and the Spirit has been poured out to comfort and challenge us, in trial and error, and to live from the well of Christ. God cannot be captured under one heading, the Church needs more words for God, who is there, and refers to God as the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

It should be emphasized that a Trinitarian approach does not necessarily lead to speculation. Not at all! It is not without reason that we repeatedly emphasize that we have a recipient's perspective. We do not sit in the director's room and look at God over the shoulder or into God's mind. We are participants, recipients of the gospel, and even in our boldest claims we do not rise above our position as receivers. Surprisingly, we discovered often that we were close to the theology of G.C. Berkouwer. He often wrote that the mysteries of faith can only be understood

in the way of faith, that is, in the practice of prayer and living faith. Dogmatic reflection is close to mystagogy.

The Trinitarian restructuring of dogmatic themes, has, for example, a bearing on the doctrine of providence. In classical theology, providence became conflated with the Stoic doctrine of fate. Thus, it received a deterministic flavor, as if nothing matters since everything is fixed already from eternity. In the Bible, however, God provides through the lamb of God (Gen. 22) and through the Spirit, who is constantly at work. Providence is dealt with in the doctrine of creation and particularly ascribed to God the Father. So do we, but critically. Take, for example, the concept of *concursum*, which says that in all that human beings do, God is also acting. This implies a form of double agency. Even when we sin, God is also somehow acting, namely, in giving space and power for such behavior. At the same time, however, it is clear that featuring God's relation to the world in this way is too static. The biblical narratives give a much more dynamic picture, in which providence is not just a work of God the Father, but just as much of the Son and the Spirit. Take, for example, Romans chapter 8. The Spirit of God is still struggling, groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now (Romans 8:22-23). We eagerly wait for the adoption as sons and daughters. This is language of struggle, a not yet. It is this eschatological and pneumatological dimension in God's works that is not sufficiently given weight in classical discussions of providence.

3. Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

A third element that should be mentioned here is our choice to give pneumatology an essential place. We devote an entire chapter to it, just as we do to Israel. Next to Christology, pneumatology is a denominator, under which the whole work of redemption can be considered. The Spirit cannot be reduced to Christology, nor vice versa, Christology to pneumatology (currently very popular), but each offers its own contribution to Christian theology. The work of the Spirit receives ample attention in this book, Methodism and Evangelicalism included. This applies also to the charismatic renewal. Whereas these subjects are left out by quite a few theologians as not *salonfähig* or dismissed as subjectivist, we try to renew the reformed heritage by rereading the Bible and opening ourselves for these impulses. It is in accordance with worldwide developments, such as the rapid emergence and spread of Pentecostalism and the shift of Christianity's center of gravity from the West to the South.

4. Beyond absolute foundationalism

A fourth point that may be mentioned here, is that we try to go beyond modernist thinking in terms of an absolute foundation of our knowledge. Since Descartes, the idea has dominated in epistemology that one should first have a clear and unshakeable foundation of one's own knowledge, before one can move forward. In response, a previous generation of theologians (famous names like Abraham Kuyper included) felt obliged to answer the question of foundation first, turning the Bible into a kind of rational foundation for theology. Our book is in a different stream, say that of the 'Reformed Epistemology' (Nicholas Wolterstorff and Alvin Plantinga). They have shown that such claims of an absolute rational foundation from which we have to start can never be fully warranted and are highly problematic. Instead, we can usually trust our senses, including our sense of God, and we may thus start with what has been given to us. That does not absolve us of the duty to give as many arguments as possible, but we are intellectually and morally not failing if important insights and beliefs cannot be given an absolute foundation, for example, the moral distinction between good and bad. Our access to sources of knowledge is far more difficult and mysterious than modernity supposed.

In accordance with the foregoing, the doctrine of scripture has a different place in this book. It no longer has the basic function it had in Reformed scholasticism, for example. In the works of Charles Hodge, Benjamin B. Warfield, Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. The Bible is discussed in the context of pneumatology. The Bible is the result of God seeking fellowship with man, with Israel, and the Church. The Bible documents God's dealings with humanity and its response, and is thus the collective memory of the Christian Church. The Bible is therefore important because it holds the findings and treasures that the Church lives on.

Scripture as the foundation of doctrine and life plays a major, but not always the same role in the Christian tradition. The rereading of Scripture by Luther led to the Reformation and the purification of doctrine and Church. Under the influence of the Enlightenment, however, scripture became more and more the counterpart of thinking in terms of absolute foundation. In the universities, the quest for and requirement of an absolute foundation led to the supremacy of the natural sciences. In Reformed theology, however, this led to the belief that the framework of Christian doctrine should be a consistent transparent unity directly traceable to Scripture. As a result, it happens that Orthodox brothers, who both want to be faithful to the Bible, come to opposite views on some questions, for example, with regard to the question of eternal punishment. Then one draws a

conclusion on the basis that Christ suffered for all, and the other states that Christ very clearly teaches eternal punishment in the parables. Such opposing doctrinal conclusions may seem strange, but they are not. A second example, the many divisions of Reformed Churches in NL, even more than in Hungary, have shown that this attempt is impossible: our own backgrounds necessarily influence the way we read the Bible. Yet, even though we can't derive a fixed system out of it, the Bible remains the main norm and source of theology. When the Bible is used as a source from which a complete and consistent system of truth can be derived, one has overestimated dogmatics and underestimated the Bible.

Dogmatics should operate more modestly here, without pulling the teeth out of the gospel. The warnings in the Bible that unbelief and disobedience lead to judgment must stand and should not be brushed away in the name of a loving God. However, it also should be noted that warnings and judgments have always been spoken within a concrete context. The warnings and the promises in the gospel should not be pulled away out of the concrete context of those addressed, for in doing so, the words of the scripture become general truths that are directly applicable anywhere.

As we formulate it somewhere in our book: *There is a distinction between things that need to be said, things that can sometimes be said, things that can narrowly be said, and things that can not at all be said.* Dogmatics provides tools for pastoral care and proclamation, since it refers to God himself in his dealing with people. We humans are receivers, who don't sit in the control room. We receive enough light to find our way, not to oversee all of history and the universe.

All these four crossroads or elements permeate the entire framework. There is, we suspect, enough continuity with the Christian tradition, more precisely the Reformed tradition, which has always presented itself as a theology with a public function. It's about our lives, about life in the world, in society, about Church in the public domain.

Theological order and reading order

Another caveat: what I was talking about is a theological order that we have established. This order doesn't have to coincide with the reading order. If you really intend to read the whole thing from start to finish, it would be quite a tour de force. You can just as well start with the last chapter or, if it interests you, with the chapter on Israel, or whatever.

Thank you for your attention.