

The Most Dangerous Faith of All

Dogmatics as Prophecy

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February 19, 2018

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Dear madam rector, members of the advisory board, colleagues, students, family, and others who are interested:

On the occasion of my assumption of the position of Professor of Dogmatics at the Protestant Theological University, I begin with the thesis that will be central in this speech:

Christianity, especially in its Protestant form, is by far the most dangerous faith within the monotheistic traditions. This is why dogmatics is necessary as the constructive and critical reflection on what is precious and dangerous in Christianity.

This position and, thus, also this speech will be divided into three parts: the first on the Christian faith as the most dangerous faith, the second subsequently reflecting on dogmatics as prophetic reflection on this faith, and the third on the possibility of a Christian theology that escapes its own prophetic critique.

I

We begin with the first section of this speech: Christianity as the most dangerous faith. Christians nor specifically Protestants shoot people (with guns) in the name of their faith, nor do they blow up people waiting in airport terminals. On the contrary, Christians are above average in volunteering and, thus, contribute to the society of which they are a part.

If there is something left of the argument, then it is necessary to dig more deeply. What is the danger? Only a few months ago we commemorated the beginning of the Reformation, and we cannot give better attention to the Reformation idea of *ecclesia semper reformanda* than by asking ourselves what problems the Reformation has evoked, even in all the beautiful things it has brought us. Therefore, in this speech I want to address the most important insight of the Reformation regarding Christian faith as most dangerous: the doctrine of justification of the ungodly. That which is the most beautiful and precious of Protestant Christianity is, at the same time, its greatest vulnerability. The decay of the best is the worst, as the saying goes.

The idea of “justification of the ungodly” may sound technical or archaic to some listeners. What is meant by the phrase? The classic term refers to the idea Luther rediscovered in the Reformation, namely that our acceptance by God does not depend on our right actions but, instead, on God’s acquittal of us independent of our actions. I intentionally formulate this idea so that the vicarious work of Christ, which is the basis of justification, is not included. Not everyone connects the conviction that we are acceptable to God as we are with the vicarious work of Christ. Without connecting with Christ, we can link the phrase “you may be as you are”, popular in certain circles, to the idea of the justification of the godless, even when this statement occurs in contexts where the existence of God is denied. Later in this speech I will return to this point.

Why is the justification of the godless a dangerous idea? The justification of the godless gives people a positive and ultimate judgment about their lives. Whoever establishes a judgment with God about his or her own life as a whole establishes his or her own judgment with an absolute judgment. Surely, whatever we think about God, the word “God” represents a perspective that encompasses everything. It is an absolute perspective. If we thus believe that in that absolute perspective we are “saved,” “are justified in God’s eyes,” “have eternal life,” “are known as beloved,” or whatever other words we want to use to describe that insight, we appropriate such an absolute perspective for ourselves. As the formulation “have eternal life” makes clear, it is a final perspective. It is not just that we know ourselves to be acceptable up to now, in that we have not done horrible things or that someone has promised to forgive us for our offenses so far. We already now, in our current moment, take an advance on the final perspective. We say, “What is now will always be so. I got it. I am saved. Nothing can happen to me anymore.”

Many Protestants consider the justification of the godless as the core of their faith. Lutherans call it the article on which the church stand or falls. It is the most precious thing that a faith tradition can offer you. But at the same time it is an exceptionally counterintuitive and unnatural insight, not only from the perspective of faith but also from the perspective of science of religion, anthropology, philosophy, or sociology. This is what is at stake this afternoon.

Now some people might say: “We can easily abandon that danger if we leave Protestantism.” If the justification of the godless is, after all, a Protestant belief, then it is not necessarily connected with Christianity as a whole. However, it is not so simple. We cannot so easily come out from the dangerous Christian tradition. This idea is connected with the core of the whole Christian tradition: God who became man in Jesus Christ.

A core belief in all monotheistic traditions is the difference between God and the world. Quoting words of the early Karl Barth, citing from the book of Ecclesiastes, “God is in heaven, and you are on earth.” Or, with the words of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath.” That distinction between God and the world ensures that absolute power belongs only to God. We can apply that distinction to an absolute judgment regarding our lives, as I just talked about. Then the Pharisees assure in Mark 2:6, “Only God can forgive sins!” Only God can make an

absolute judgment about someone's life, and no one here on earth should claim divine authority. Thus, no one can forgive someone's sins in absolute terms. After all, nobody in this earthly life has an absolute perspective on himself or herself or anyone else.

Christianity runs straight away across this crucial monotheistic border. God becomes man. But, what maybe more important is that because God becomes man, the position of people who are connected to Jesus changes as well. That is, something crucial radically alters their position in the universe. They gain access to something only the monotheistic God deserves: a place and a status of inviolability with God. They do not just receive that status by the end of their lives, but through their relationship with Jesus Christ they receive that status in the here and now. Because of their place in the community of believers they are already now heirs of the riches of Christ and of God.

In fact, in recent years I have been occupied with just this theme as seen in the reception of the gospel of John in Christian theology. There the depth of God's incarnation is articulated in such a way that the problem we are dealing with today is brought clearly to the forefront. It is not for nothing that John 3:16 is a favorite text among contemporary Christian. John 3:16 famously expresses the core of the gospel as follows: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." This manner of gaining the status of eternal salvation from God, namely by believing in Jesus, seems to leave John's gospel ignoring the concrete "way" of living according to God's commandments—commandments found in John's day in the Torah and the words of the prophets. Thus, Jesus can say in John 14:6, another beloved passage from John's gospel, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Neither Judaism nor Islam (which religion, one may ask?) would dare to speak of someone to be just in God's sight without considering practical and concrete justice. In that respect, even Christianity before the Reformation hesitated in a variety of ways. Christianity up to the Reformation has always associated salvation with the believer's concrete righteousness. The concrete righteousness of the believer was always a condition for one's final acceptance into the heavenly kingdom of God. Only then, in hindsight, was the Church willing to speak of perseverance of the saints. The Reformation made a crucial change in that regard: a person can only become righteous because Christ's righteousness is bestowed on the sinful person, and that is without any merit on his or her own part. So, maybe for the first time in world history a person could be righteous before God without being actually righteous. As I have already shown above, the gospel of John contains this idea, and many will know that Luther found it there, and in Paul.

The New Testament testifies to the danger of this idea in various ways. The letter of Hebrews does so in a particularly impressive way. In Chapter 12 the believers are placed in heaven directly before the face of God. While even the fathers of Israel had to wait trembling at the foot of the mountain, the Christian believers stand without shame in front of the Most High in the heavenly realms. But precisely then the writer of Hebrews confronts the reader with the great danger of such a position: he who still sins has no possibility of repentance. Then there is no possibility to repent. Then God is the all-consuming fire.

Honestly, we have to admit that the Protestant tradition, especially the Reformed tradition, has always taken the position that when Hebrews attributes to believers with a grain of salt. How is it possible to stand, in this life, without shame before the face of God? On the other hand, the Protestant tradition has also replaced the perfectionism, which refers to the idea that believers are no longer allowed to sin. Hebrews associates this with the ability to stand before God. Protestantism (and the Augustinian tradition before it) replaced this with the idea of permanent sinfulness until one's last breath. Yet, that idea of continued sinfulness accompanied with the idea of perseverance actually puts that lasting sinfulness into perspective. You can remain a sinner and still be assured of your future eternal glory. At least, true believers can be assured. Not unfairly, the question of who are true believers becomes a pressing question for some Protestants. It is, in fact, the natural concern of every religion and, more broadly, every society: the concrete and practical righteousness that is asked of every person. The passing of that practical righteousness with an appeal to faith in Jesus Christ opens the door wide to what Dietrich Bonhoeffer would call "cheap grace."

But, should this idea of access to an unthreatened status, which is evidently a Protestant way of belief, really be called dangerous? Isn't an average Protestant a reasonably good person who does his work well and doesn't harm a fly, with maybe a few exceptions? And doesn't every Christian know that God's promises of eternal salvation must be accompanied by works of gratitude and a holy reverence for God's justice? So, what do we actually mean?

Whether Protestants are such good persons remains to be seen. Arguable, they don't do noticeably better than their secular counterparts. However, let us follow the costly nature of a divine status in a cultural-historical sense. Then, we can connect it with the history of our European continent where the Reformation began its history more than anywhere else. Can we not, then, make a connection between achieving this holy status and the emergence of the idea of a world without God? After all, if you have obtained divine status yourself by being allowed to sit in the presence of God's divine judgment, abolishing the higher being that gives you that status and determining your own destiny is not that great of a step.

In the twentieth century much has been written about the emergence of an ontotheology that has made God the highest being and a super-man, which makes possible the abolishing of such a super-man. What if the attempt to describe God is not the reason for the death of God but, instead, the doctrine of the justification of the wicked is the reason? Is it so likely that an intellectual interest in the character of God would cause the cultural landslide that has occurred in the Western world? Isn't it equally as likely that the issue behind this relates to salvation (soteriology) rather than being (ontology)?

In line with this, we can also reintroduce the painful questions about a dangerous religion and, subsequently, a dangerous ideology. Is there a part of the world that is richer, that has more political and financial power, which has more military power, which is more convinced of the supremacy of its own moral and cultural values than the Western world? This includes Europe and North America, which have all been profoundly influenced by the Reformation. Might not that cultural sense of

supremacy be an extension of the believer's invulnerability that began with a phenomenon of awe and wonder and ended with a painful nihilistic ideology of "do whatever feels good to you!" Maybe Islam includes ideas that can be exploited for justifying violence, but does Christianity, especially Protestantism, give rise to sneakier forms of evil, like the unbridled supremacy of the self that cannot even be named?

II

So far we have dealt with the first part of the statement with which we began: Christian faith is the most dangerous faith in the three monotheistic religions. I have tried to give expression to that daring statement and to use those words to shake you up with the scourge of an old-fashioned prophet. But now I will move to the second part of the thesis: dogmatics is meant to protect from abuse the mystery of salvation that has appeared in Christ. I will say something about dogmatics in three steps. First, I will outline a view of dogmatics which aims to describe the reality of God in connection with the reality of the world, as it is suggested by many systematic theologians. Second, I will argue that this approach to dogmatics does not fit well with the classic dogmas with which dogmatics began. None of these dogmas can be understood as an attempt to describe the reality of God. Finally, I will outline how dogmatics, in so far as it has a critical and technical function, is intended to protect the mystery of God and God's revelation in the flesh from abuse precisely by linking them to concrete righteousness.

All sorts of different trends can be found in contemporary dogmatics. Yet, the main schools are held together by seeing the task of dogmatics as a descriptive one. This task includes a number of different types of description. One school sees that description as a narrative description. It sees the task of dogmatics as describing the great story, or the great drama, of God and humanity that takes place from creation to consummation. Others, such as my teacher in dogmatics, Christoph Schwöbel, speak less of a narrative in dogmatics but, instead, see the task of dogmatics as speaking about God and God's actions and, in light of that, the whole of reality. Here too dogmatics is primarily about a world-and-life-view. Finally, there are others, especially classic Reformed dogmatic scholars, who see dogmatics as the coherent representation of what God's revelation has handed down to us regarding the knowledge of the Triune God. What these three movements have in common, and they represent some important currents in contemporary dogmatics, is a view of dogmatics as description of the reality of God and God's revelation in the world.

In this speech I cannot delve deeply into why this is so and what this has to do with the role of dogmatics since modernity. At the moment, I limit myself to making it clear that this understanding of dogmatics is difficult to square with some of the most important classical dogmas: that of the trinity and Christology. If we highlight these two classic dogmas, it is fairly easy to see that they can hardly be called "descriptive." Let us consider Augustine's Trinitarian formula, which is closely related to the Nicene Creed and has had much influence on subsequent traditions. The formula is as follows: The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, but it is not three gods but only one God. For

many people this formulation evokes a feeling that something is not quite right. That is, God can hardly be one and three at the same time. Thus, jokes are often made about the numerical skills of theologians.

The same problem occurs with Christology. For this we turn to the formulation crafted during the Council of Chalcedon. According to this Council, the two natures of Christ are unmixed and unchanged, undivided and unseparated. I sometimes ask my students how many things in this world meet that formula. The answer, as far as I can see, has to be zero. After all, if something is unmixed, it is divided, and if something is unchanged, it is separated from anything that could affect it. Therefore, a common reaction in modern dogmatics is to see the Christological formula of Chalcedon as deficient and inspired by a tradition that was trapped in “substance-thinking,” a thinking in separate objects. In modern dogmatics the idea is that a modern relational thinking would solve the problems in these two dogmas.

But would the Church fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries have been so dumb as to not know that three is different than one or that something unmixed cannot at the same time be undivided? Might the problem be in modern dogmatics rather than the tradition, because modern dogmatics would like to see these formulations from its own perspective of description rather than as....yes, as what???

In the work of Augustine, apart from this cryptic description of the Trinity, we also find great emphasis on the incomprehensibility of God. “If you understand it, it is not God,” is a concise quote that beautifully reflects this emphasis. In his interpretation of Christology, Augustine sees the conviction that Christ is one person in two natures not as a theory about which you can know the exact content. Instead, he sees it as a heuristic tool for reading the Bible. After all, our knowledge is in part. To quote another favorite line of Augustine’s: “We now see in a mirror dimly.”

Therefore, we could also read classic dogmas differently. That is, they are not attempts to describe the reality of God but attempts to preserve the mystery of God. Many people have the firm conviction that dogmatics reveals all the secrets about God. Dogmatics reduces everything to a concrete truth that you must stamp in your head. Not infrequently has dogmatics functioned this way in the history of Christianity. The mysterious character of the doctrine of the church serves to ensure that, in any case, you learn by heart even those things which you do not understand.

But, dogmatics is not meant for that. Dogmatics is, if it is meant for good, to preserve the mystery of God that comes to us in Christ and enters us through the Holy Spirit. True dogmatics protects us from the misuse of the salvation that is given to us. If we reflect on that last idea, then we automatically approach other dogmas than we have discussed thus far. What do the later hot issues in the history of dogmatics, address but the question of the relationship between practical justice and obtained salvation? Names come to mind: Donatism, Pelagianism, Anabaptists, Arminianism, Socinianism. Are we ourselves committed to doing practical justice or does this not really matter? How do you prevent pride and arrogance, especially among believers? Or, how do you prevent false humility, which is perhaps equally as problematic? The heresies I just mentioned are important for the present because they are continual reminders to the church that faith in Jesus Christ can never be without practical

justice. No main stream of Christianity has ever dared to deny that. Those who tried were punished. However, the above movements knew one thing: even if no one dares make such claims, it still happens! It surely happens, that people with the comfort of forgiveness on their lips, destroy the lives of their fellow man and even sometimes their close relatives. That is impossible to swallow!

And that is why dogmatics is ultimately, according to its true nature, prophecy. It is prophecy against all those ways of speaking, thinking, or acting where God-given righteousness is corrupted into a vehicle of power, arbitrariness, and self-delusion of the people. All those forms of wickedness are denounced and unmasked as false religion in true dogmatics.

III

To this point we have seen in the first section how Christian faith is much more dangerous than it might initially seem. In the second section I have explored how dogmatics is best understood not as a science that tries to describe the world and the reality of God as accurately as possible but, instead, as a prophetic critique of the domestication of the mystery of God and the salvation that meets us in Christ. Now in the closing section I will make clear why dogmatics is not only prophetic (in the technical sense: 'elenctic') but also a constructive (or, 'irenical') discipline. For, if dogmatics is to be elenctic, dogmatics must also testify to what we actually meet in Christ. Dogmatics cannot simply be a prophetic criticism of anything. Dogmatics is primarily prophetic criticism of the understanding of the subject of Christian theology: God's revelation in creation and in Jesus Christ.

In other words, with the help of the Reformation's distinction between Law and Gospel, if the Law really needs to protect the mystery of God and its revelation in Christ for what it is, then the Law cannot nullify the Gospel and certainly cannot be without the Gospel. Even in the Reformation it is understood that the Gospel, in its fullest sense, is the fulfillment of the Law so that the requirements of the Law cannot be met except through faith in the Gospel. And so, true theology cannot only criticize the Gospel but, at the same time, must also be a witness to it.

That is quite a mouthful. I have previously suggested that dogmatics is mainly a prophetic critique of the idea that we can draw God into our reality in such a way that we can know everything about who God is. Or, we become so sure of our salvation that we no longer need God. From that perspective, it seems as if dogmatics as prophetic criticism prefers to keep the Gospel as small as possible. This way the Gospel is as well protected as possible. If salvation in Christ does not go too far into this world, its mystery character will be sufficiently protected. It is as if, to use the language of Jesus' parable, we have buried our precious talent in the ground so that we do not lose it.

The question is also whether it is possible: can the gospel actually exist in our history without becoming our possession? Without becoming something with which we make ourselves feel good or turn into a game of power? Is not the prophetic power of the law so great that there is no place for the gospel? Which church does not pretend to have the truth? Which preacher can ultimately avoid the idea that he or she speaks on behalf of God, when in fact these are simply ordinary humans words

completely determined by a particular time and place? And which believer who possesses eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ does not claim absolute judgment of one's own life?

However, dogmatics can never be only elenctical. If dogmatics becomes only elenctical, we will always only critique forms of faith. Our theology becomes so negative that we cannot say anything about the mystery of God. Every discourse that bears witness to God or any rite that presents God is pulled down by merciless deconstruction. This seems holy, but before we realise it, every image of God is weakened and, ultimately, only the image of oneself remains. Then you are simply a god on the throne of your own criticism and, in the meantime, you have been left in a deadly loneliness.

There must be a narrow path on which the prophetic power of the Law is not annulled by the Gospel while, at the same time, the Gospel is not deprived of its power by the Law. The Gospel, after all, makes possible that which the Law requires. For dogmatics this requires at the outset a clear insight into its own limited place in relation to the religious community. Dogmatics does not provide formulations that act as the foundation on which the church of Christ can be built. Dogmatics always lags behind, not only actually, but also in principle. Christ is not truly present in dogmatics but, instead, in the signs of bread and wine. Sometimes, we have forgotten this in the Reformed tradition. The right teaching is not the guarantee for the presence of the Lord, but the presence of the Lord is the condition for doctrine. The Lord is already there, and dogmatics must be continually careful not to step on the Lord's feet.

At the same time, the Lord is in the brokenness of the Christian community. Therefore, people may call the Christian community back to its service to the Gospel. In part, they do so by continually exploring the mystery of the salvation that God accomplishes in Christ. This is especially true because the length and breadth of that Gospel constantly escapes the community of faith and her servants. It is in that light that my research of the Lord's Supper should be seen—something I hope to develop further at the PThU. On that subject, the Christian congregation, especially in Protestantism, seems to have lost sight, in many ways and for a variety of reasons, of the mysterious presence of Christ in the sacrament.

I see it as my task to be able to discover again and again, in holy stumbling with the lived reality of faith and in reliance on the Spirit, how we can rediscover that mysterious presence of Christ in the sacrament, which, thank God, always has been present and continues to be so. This rediscovery is always within the framework of our turn to justice because there is no discovery of the Gospel that is not judged by the Law. Those who live out of this mysterious presence live closer to Christ, and those who live closer to Christ learn to do righteousness.

The presence of Christ in the Christian community is, therefore, a gift and given. Thus, this presence remains in the hands of God alone. So, the Gospel is the fulfillment of the Law without jeopardizing the Law. The question that is asked of us is not whether we make sure that God is present. God is present in the church, in the world, and in our own hearts, and that is not a product of our own efforts. The question that is asked of us, and that we may ask each other, is whether we do righteousness. That righteousness is always one that comes to us, not one we can decide for ourselves or that we can

bring about ourselves. If we claim to do righteousness and our fellow human beings suffer, it is not righteousness. Justice is a public secret. This is why it is never just ours.

Righteousness come to us. That is why the Law also points us to a righteousness that appears to us in Jesus Christ and transforms us, from which we live and witness to. But it also is and always remains a righteousness from God, which is why it is to our salvation.

Thanks

I would like to thank the Executive Board of the Protestant Theological University for appointing me as professor of dogmatics and for the trust they have placed in me. This also applies to the Board of Trustees and the Synod of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands which confirmed this appointment. The fact that you chose a candidate who has no experience as a minister in the church indicates how highly you have assessed my academic qualifications. But, it also shows that you have utmost confidence that the bond with the church is very important to me.

I also want to thank many people who have been indispensable links on my journey here. I cannot name them all by name. I have therefore invited some, including those who have played a role in my education long ago, to this speech. I see it as a tribute to your contributions to my personal and intellectual education. I mention by name my promoters—Marcel Sarot and Dirk-Martin Grube. Then I would like to mention those who taught me during the dangerous existence of an academic post-doc trajectory: Christoph Schwöbel, Lieven Boeve, Matthijs Lamberigts, Karla Pollmann, and Peter Liebrechts. Mentioning all my colleagues from the VU, where I have worked with great pleasure for almost eight years, should not go overlooked. The temptation is to name some by name, but it has proved impossible to draw a clear line on where to stop. With many of you I have built a bond that will not be broken by a thick layer of concrete and institutional concerns. I love you very much! I am pleased that many of you are here today. As a representation of the students of the VU I would like to mention the names of Ruben van den Belt, Ruben van Wingerden, Annemarie Foppen, and Jelmer Heeren, because without their excellent feedback on my trial lecture I would not be here.

Students of the PThU, I so enjoy the classes we share together and the moments of silence and prayer at the beginning and end of them. It shows that we are not studying in our own name but we are going before the face of the Almighty. Colleagues, we have already begun to get to know each other and work together. I look forward to growing in this collaboration in research, education, and service to the church and society.

Thanks to my family for everything I have received from them. I think of our parents, brothers, sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law, and all my nephews and nieces who are present today. I also think of my father, who is no longer here today. I am grateful that my mother can be here today.

I am also happy that my wife and children are here today, although that is by no means such a simple task. Just a few of the challenges—listen to your father or husband for 45 minutes without being able to respond. And in the subject of theology! We are not used to that at home, and that is just as well. You mean more to me than I can say.

I have said.