

“Stingy Orthodoxy?”

Creeds and Confessions after Christendom

Paul R. Hinlicky

ABSTRACT: “To be God is to give” (Luther), and in this light, the gospel purpose of creeds is to articulate belief in divine generosity. This editorial essay argues for the creedal belief that true God is essentially and eternally, and thus also economically self-giving. It clarifies the contested relationship between belief about God and trust in God in arguing that beliefs about trustworthiness are entailed for trust to persevere in adversity. Adversity is then characterized theologically as the absurdity of actual evil in the good creation of God as figured in the devil who out of the malice of envy would drive creatures to lethal despair of God and even, for this purpose, corrupts creedal belief into instruments of a stingy, death-dealing orthodoxy. This devil must be named, defeated, condemned, and doomed for the generous love of God to prevail in time and for eternity; we should learn this from the genesis of Christian doctrinal theology in the primitive baptismal creeds that coupled renunciation of the devil with faith’s new allegiance to the God of the gospel. A confessing church of divine generosity, in distinction from a confessionalized church of stingy orthodoxy, situates itself in this apocalyptic confrontation to conceive of its doctrinal beliefs as antithetically structured. “To believe God is to disbelieve the idols” (C. Morse), yet herein the danger arises of a literalistic misunderstanding of the apocalyptic genre which demands clarity about the referent in whom the truth of creedal beliefs consists. The creativity of the Nicene Creed is explained in its ontological grounding of the economy of salvation in reference to the eternally self-giving life of the Father of the Son on whom he breathes his Spirit. The ecumenical intention of the Augsburg Confession is lifted up in this light to point the way beyond the end of Christendom and the institutional collapse of denominationalism to a realignment, which may require doctrinal reformulations in the Spirit’s ongoing work of constructing a gospel-mandated generous orthodoxy.

To Be God Is to Give

At the heart of Lutheran Reformation theology, the God of the gospel was freshly understood to live in inexhaustible self-giving for us and our human salvation, as seen in a Luther slogan, *esse Deum dare est*, “to be God is to give.” Within the

context of Western Augustinianism's doctrine of divine absoluteness, Lutheran theology maintained on the one side universal atonement against strong pressures from the Reformed for a doctrine of atonement limited to the elect alone and, on the other side, the Holy Spirit's sovereignty in the free and gracious gift of justifying faith against the papist doctrine of election on account of foreseen merit. Core belief in the gracious God sustains the gospel message through adversity, telling of something yet unseen in its fullness, a promise vouchsafed in the New Testament of Jesus Christ and delivered by the Spirit for venturing *faith*—*but*, just so, faith *not* yet fulfilled in sight. The self-giving of the self-promising God is a gift that therefore cannot be controlled, manipulated, or predicted by humans who would game it; trusting faith in this God comes on the scene of a conflicted and contested world to be granted by the free-blowing Spirit “where and when it pleases God” (AC, VI) who, as such, permits and justifies only trust in God who gives.

The message of divine self-giving for us, newly enacted and attested in the broken body and shed blood of Jesus, tells the best news, then, in a world still not transformed by it, proclaiming his cross until He comes again. The message has immediate consequence, to be sure. “Being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1). Believers have *already now* passed through the *last* judgment on account of this gracious present justification, if only they persevere through trial and testing in the lifelong penitence of *trust* in the promising God, i.e., disbelieving idols, newly living in its defiant hope that He fulfill divine self-giving for us visibly in the consummation when “God will be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28) upon the defeat of contra-divine powers. Genuine trust in *this* God for the time that remains, filial not servile, is therefore always accompanied by a healthy reverence of God as properly fearful trust echoes back love in response to the self-giving love which the promising God is. *Esse Deum dare est*.

Doctrine of the God of the gospel accordingly intends a *generous* orthodoxy (2 Corinthians 8:9). Such generous orthodoxy is made a rule of faith or norm in the creeds and confessions of the church through history, *rightly* understood to articulate the gospel's remarkable exchange in which the Son of God undertook human poverty in order to bestow divine riches (for, as sad experience teaches, creeds and confessions can be *gamed* when *badly* understood to produce a self-proclaimed and stingy, even death-dealing “orthodoxy”).

Faith as Trust (*fiducia*) and Belief (*fides*)

The Latin expression *esse Deum dare est* articulates a *belief* about true God based upon the event of divine self-giving effected and made known in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Luther's correlation of true God and true faith thus bears an important consequence. Trusting perseverance in contested human reality entails faith as *beliefs* about God as powerful, wise, and good to deliver on the gospel's promise; these beliefs are expressed in definite articulations, “articles” of faith, by which confessors

tell the good reasons for their hope on the witness stand of history. Essentially, they warrant trust by identifying and describing the generous God of the gospel. With these beliefs, confessors take a stand by making a claim to theological truth about the One in whom final trust is defiantly invested.

When in justifying *trust* we surrender ourselves to the care of One who first gave Himself for us, such questions of belief become urgent and inescapable: *who* is this One worthy of all our trust? *Why* is this One worthy of all our trust? Also, *why* then must we still walk by faith and not yet by sight? Note well: the necessity here is *analytical*, for the articulation of such beliefs is a matter of *logical entailment* explicating the *unique object* of justifying trust who as *living subject* is indeed trustworthy. It is precisely not the addition of a legal demand making the promise of God received in trusting faith conditional upon the intellectual work of adopting a belief from the smorgasbord table of human religiosity, let alone servile prostration before an authoritarian religious demand. Such transactional “orthodoxies” would be stingy, not a joyful exchange but a business as usual quid pro quo. Christians do not *have to* but rather *get to*—freely and joyfully—confess *the* faith in *the* God of the gospel.

Such are the kinds of questions to which the creeds and confessions in Christian history give answer; they spell out the beliefs *about* God by which genuine trust *in* God may flourish through adversity. It is important to grasp this situation under trial and testing in the world of penitent and properly fearful faith and of confessors put on the witness stand to give an account of their hope when all else seems desperate. Lacking awareness of this situation in life, the creeds and confessions may seem to issue answers to questions that no one is asking, answers that then fall upon the ears with a dull thud as an unintelligible demand to believe this or that improbable thing, which honest folk may conscientiously defy by saying, “I don’t believe *that*.” However, honest disbelief in beliefs demanded by stingy orthodoxy can be the sanctifying Spirit’s own critique at work to open up the window to the fresh clean air of self-entrusting faith in the self-giving God of the gospel. To believe in God is indeed to disbelieve the idols, even the idols of dying Christendom.

When I was pastoring a small rural congregation in Bible Belt Southwest Virginia some years back, a teenage girl who was friends with some of our kids started coming to church with them. As I met with the youth for Bible study, this young lady constantly piped up with a recurring refrain, “I don’t want to go down under.” She didn’t mean Australia. “I don’t want to go down.” When I asked her why she was worried about that, she produced a list of trivial reasons for nonconformity with puritanical ideals in which she had been indoctrinated. I got so exasperated with her anxious oppression by stingy orthodoxy that I burst out, “You’re going to have to work a lot harder than that to go to hell”, immediately telling how Jesus had descended into hell to proclaim his victory for its captives.

What is at stake in creeds and confessions is true God and false god. There is an ancient precedent, the salience of which renews today in post-Christendom, for such discriminating Christian “atheism:” Justin Martyr wrote to the Roman

Emperor Marcus Aurelius acknowledging that Christians are indeed “atheists,” as the Empire accused, in that they positively disbelieve the idols of Rome. Let us note such selective “atheism” as the possibility, indeed, necessity, for the reformation of dogma, when mandatory Christian belief in the self-giving God has been turned into some dogmatism of stingy orthodoxy, in the ongoing theological task under the Spirit’s unfinished work of generous orthodoxy.

The statement of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:19-20 helps us here: “the Son of God, Jesus Christ...was not ‘Yes and No’; but in Him it is always ‘Yes.’ For in Him, every one of God’s promises is a “Yes.” For this reason, it is through Him that we say, ‘Amen,’ to the glory of God.” The amen of trusting faith is voiced in response to this best of news in a world still not transformed to accord with it but rather awash with competing messages of liberation. In Christ, the ancient promises to fallen Eve on the first couple’s way out of the Garden of God into the trial of human history, to the idolater Abram summoned to wander in exile from his idolatrous homeland into an unknown but promised habitation, to wavering Moses at the burning bush that he announce to the slave master Pharaoh the Lord’s deliverance of captive Israel from bondage, to Israel under Joshua to receive by the obedience of faith the divinely promised inheritance of the land of Canaan, to sinfully righteous king David bringing the Ark of the Covenant to rest in Jerusalem as a place for the Name of the promising God to dwell, to chastened exiles returning from Babylon to live anew in the ruins of Jerusalem as Ezra’s “slaves in our own land,” there awaiting Messiah—all these scriptural promises of God are recapitulated in the Christian message of the promising God as summoned up and vouchsafed in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus “who loved us and gave himself for us” (Gal 2:20). Thusly we sing this *belief about God the Giver* who so loved the world:

Christ Jesus is the Ground of faith,
Who was made flesh and suffered death;
All that confide in Him alone
Are built on this chief Cornerstone.

(TLH 245, v. 2)

This confident trust, articulated and warranted as belief in the incarnate Son who was crucified for us, is free and joyful as well as penitent and fearful, reflecting the double nuance of the ground of faith. This ground of faith is the Spirit’s “already” of the “not yet,” pointing forward to the coming in fullness and power of the gracious reign of this self-giving God over us and all, indeed, to be “all in all.” In the middle of time, the gospel comes as *the* recapitulated promise of *Israel’s* God, well-grounded in Christ Jesus by his New Testament death for us *Gentiles*, summing up the scriptural promise of the God of Israel to succeed in becoming our God, thusly to prove to be the One at last who is God truly and to demonstrate it by the fulfillment of the promises in the consummation of all things.

A well-catechized Reformation Christian, if asked whether she *has been* “saved,” but knowing that the fullness of salvation consists in the redemption of our bodies

at the promised Parousia of Christ, would reply, "in Christ, this is my certain hope, the fulfillment of my faith. But as for now, I am in Christ by faith at peace with God. And what about you?" This blessed assurance under trial and testing is borne witness by the Holy Spirit who has been given to believers to assure them that they are indeed *already now*, and *despite* present appearances to the contrary, beloved children of God. Thus, for Luther, confession, e.g. the church's public assertion of its militant unity and integrity in gospel-necessitated beliefs about what the generous God in Christ has already accomplished and has yet to accomplish, is the first and chief theological work of trusting faith, active in love, by which public account is given for the hope that is in us.

But wait! Should not trust alone suffice? Wouldn't emphasis on belief in public, corporate, unified confession of beliefs as in the creeds and confessions threaten to slide into some noxious intellectual works-righteousness, thereby promoting a self-proclaimed ecclesiastical "orthodoxy" self-righteously boasting, "Unlike these others, we believe, say, that Christ descended into hell, that the damned will burn there eternally, that Christ himself will be their judge on the last day?" Is not such "orthodoxy" stingy? Isn't faith *as trust* nothing but a gift, no strings attached? Isn't faith *as belief* a pastiche of arbitrarily selected notions from an outdated worldview, a self-aggrandizing human act of exclusion in the religion business, falsely esteemed as meritorious for one's own sect yet therewith injurious to others outside the tribe who may now be religiously despised? Isn't the flip side of belief in divine vindication license for such vindictiveness on the part of true believers, luridly envisioning the tortures of the damned as part and parcel of their heavenly reward? To be sure, there is evidence for such stingy orthodoxy in the apocalyptic literature of Second Temple Judaism and traces of it survive in the Christologically modified apocalyptic of the New Testament: "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!" (Rev. 18:2).

Horried at the prospect of cruel, disproportionate and intolerant judgment and enabled by Enlightenment epistemology and cultural secularization, many in modern Lutheranism seized upon such objections to the emphasis descending from post-Reformation Protestant Orthodoxy on faith as belief. Charitably assessed, they were honestly motivated to address a crisis of confidence regarding traditional Christian doctrinal beliefs as articulated in the ecumenical creeds and historic confessions. Liberal theology accordingly put forward the revisionist alternative of childlike trust in a benevolent heavenly parent. They rationalized this reduction to minimal belief as the scientifically reconstructed religion of Jesus—a simple personal trust in a grandfatherly deity as opposed to the intellectual demand to hold traditional but complex and, in the modern age of science, increasingly dubious creedal beliefs: Virgin Birth? Resurrection? The Nicene Creed was impugned as an intellectualizing of the simple trust of Jesus, a "Hellenization of the gospel." Ironically, this reduction of belief in liberal Lutheranism itself precipitated a massive decline to the vanishing point of trust itself, epitomized when Nietzsche asked and answered, "Why atheism today? No one believes in God the Father!" If *belief* in God the Father is not indicated and understood rightly by the generous divine gift

of His beloved Son Jesus, the kind of fearful *trust* in God taught and enacted in the life and in the death of the beloved Son has ceased to be the ground and measure of faith and instead become a willful human utopianism.

That is exactly what happened. Scant years after Nietzsche's question-and-answer, Adolf von Harnack expressed revisionist Lutheranism's doctrine of God concisely: "God and the soul, the soul and its God." This characteristic modern reduction from unifying corporate belief in the triune God of the gospel to childish, privatized, and individualistic trust in a deified Benignity entailed neither penitence nor fear in the trust it recommended in that it had ceased to ponder the gospel-necessary question, "Why *not yet*?" Failing to ask this critical question, the experience about to overwhelm liberal Lutheranism in the "the land of Luther" during protracted years of trench warfare, snapped any surviving illusions of a benevolent heavenly parent, proving it rather to be modernity's "stillborn God" (Mark Lilla).

A discriminate Christian "atheism" is called for here, especially in the ongoing work of doctrinal theology to construct a generous orthodoxy from the *costly* grace of Christ. Adults, in any case, quickly learn that the rain falls upon the just and the unjust alike so that experience in life on the earth crushes what remains of privatized and childish faith. By contrast, the child's trust matures into adult faith's knowledge of the One who is God truly precisely in giving Christ *crucified* according to the Scriptures for our *sins* so that those who die with Him by faith in true fear and penitence may live with Him henceforth and eternally. Of course, adults can persist in being childish and even think themselves in this way to be spiritually elite, like the proto-docetists of 1 Corinthians 15 who imagined that resurrection had already taken place, that their select souls were already exalted to heaven, elevated beyond the cares and burdens of bodies on the earth and in society. There was no "*not yet*" operative in their theology, guarding against religious illusion as well as against grouchy illusion in stingy claims to have achieved "orthodoxy" in the fog and friction of the Spirit's ongoing warfare against the flesh, including the fleshly church of the religion business that would market belief in a good deal.

The Surd of Actual Evil

If we would retrace these developments to restore for theology the necessity of well-grounded and well-articulated beliefs for genuine trust to persevere in a world that has not yet been transformed to accord with the gospel promises of life, righteousness, and peace, we face a significant difficulty but one crucial for understanding the organic necessity of creeds and confessions that emerge in the pilgrim course of the church militant. As mentioned, this necessity is to articulate the beliefs of persevering faith, particularly salient when trust is put to trial. That *real* difficulty is, in a word, *the devil*. Reflect for a moment on what *this* reality means. The *reality* of a determined agency of malice in opposition to the creator God and the goodness of his creation! The figure of the devil, crucially important within the

gospel narrative, thusly betrays a genuine *absurdity* at work, defying comprehension. It is an absurdity that afflicts all of Christian doctrine from the beginning with the figure of the serpentine "father of lies" (John 8:44), a "murderer from the beginning." Moreover, this actual evil will afflict creation until its final resolution (Revelation 20:7-10) by the God who makes all things new by making an end of actual evil. The distinction aimed at here in generous orthodoxy is this: there is a last and final judgment. In it the devil is to be damned, not its human victims.

However, how is it possible for such opposition to God, who is creator of all that is not God, to be actual? How can such virulent rebellion against the Creator and His goodwill for the creature be contested radically by that the *unlikeliest* of messiahs, the crucified "King of the Jews?" Why is it just *this One* who is needed to proclaim and enact an *approaching* sovereignty of God, on the march to roll back the dominion of this old evil foe and, not less unlikely, by his consequent death and ultimate vindication as the risen One, to mediate human reconciliation, not to what *now is* but to what is *promised yet to come*?

Notwithstanding our speechlessness before this acknowledged absurdity of actual evil, an important benefit attends our inability to answer difficult questions about its origin and ontology even while disciples acknowledge its actuality, as that unlikeliest Messiah taught them urgently to pray, "save us from the time of trial and deliver us from the evil one." It is redemptively salient today that Christians are therewith forbidden the characteristically modern presumption of thinking that by our own power, wisdom, and goodness we can get to the so-called "root causes" of evil, putting us in the "radical" position once and for all to "root" out evil in a "final solution." In one fell swoop of our cross-modified apocalyptic theology, all of the attempts in recent centuries of ideological secularism to root out evil are forbidden to us: Marx and the capitalists, Hitler and the Jews, Stalin and the kulaks, Mao's Cultural Revolution and Pol Pot's killing fields, "manifest destinies" at work in enslavement regimes, genocides and apartheids, total war mass destruction bombings (whether by utilitarian Truman or vengeful Churchill), not to mention countless other military misadventures since then up to the present day, all justified in the lofty but lethally ironic slogan from Vietnam: "bombing villages to save them."

Christians living under modern secularism ought to know better insofar as they squarely face up to the *not yet* of God's promise. *Believers* who will someday judge angels are *not yet* wise enough or good enough but are merely sufficiently powerful to imagine that they can uproot mysterious evil once and for all. Evil behaviors, to be certain, must be recognized and outwardly constrained (as Romans 13 affirms), but evil cannot be eliminated without eliminating our common humanity in which it is deeply rooted (the very insight, lethally distorted by secularist self-exculpation and scapegoating, that rationalized the "radical" modern slaughters). Such is the humiliating but salutary perplexity forced upon us when theologically we face up to the devil as figuring a root absurdity besetting Christian doctrine and its surprising but ultimately realistic interpretation of this frustrated world. Facing up to this, the

contours of Christian hope can thusly be narratively sketched: the accusing Satan *already* has been cast down from heaven by the risen Christ who intercedes for us there as our Great High Priest, but this cruel accuser now rages on the earth (Rev. 12:7-17) like a lion seeking to devour until the ascended Christ prevails in battle against it for the peoples of the earth—until the “not yet” is no more, when Christ the victor has put all enemies under his feet so that God becomes all in all. This battle is His, not ours; it is not waged by us but for us *one and all*, or, *not at all*.

Such a doctrinal roadblock against root-evil curiosity in theology further comes to our benefit today as we realize that Christian doctrinal affirmation in the creeds and confessions bears an indelibly *antithetical* character so far as it continues to be informed by its biblical sources. The Shema of Israel (which should be translated, “YHWH is our deity, YHWH alone!”) shares in this antithetical structure (it articulates this-worldly henotheism not metaphysical monotheism) just as it is recapitulated by Paul in I Corinthians 8:6. When we reiterate the primordial confession that Jesus is Lord, we, affirming this belief, deny saving lordship to any and all other comers. The reign of God Jesus proclaimed and enacted is poised against the kingdom of the devil, and the Holy Spirit comes to do battle with unholy spirits. Apocalyptically framed, the point of such Christian belief is not to comprehend God in majesty, as Luther would put it, as if to grasp God “in his naked essence,” but rather to identify the God of the gospel on our ground, the ground on which the cross stood. Be it noted and registered immediately, however: in Luther, this important distinction is not a dualism because true God clothed in His word to us as the God of the gospel is this very divine essence presenting itself in a form hospitable to human creatures and just so also hostile to their Enemy. Thus, the chief cognitive purpose in doctrinal theology attending to Christian beliefs is to identify the actors in the cosmic conflict between creator God and Satan, the foe of God and of creation, so that Spirit-endowed believers may intelligently cooperate with God to struggle *appropriately* as redeemed creatures, to struggle *not* against flesh and blood with swords of steel but rather with the gifts of the Spirit against spiritual forces of wickedness. Believers participate in Christ’s battle for us by battling the evil deeply rooted within themselves (Rom. 7: 24), penitently and fearfully, by bringing the judgment of the cross to bear upon themselves in lifelong repentance. In just this way, trust is made pure and precise as belief requires sole reliance on the *God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*.

Back to the Drawing Boards

Broadly speaking, the preeminent 20th century Lutheran systematic theologians, Pannenberg, Jenson, and Jüngel, have thusly argued each in their own way with varying degrees of success for the dePlatonizing of Christian theology in favor of apocalyptic as “the mother of Christian theology” (Käsemann). The most basic concept of theology in the doctrine of God is to be newly resourced in scriptural eschatology by constructing a gospel-informed doctrine of the Trinity to provide the deep

grammar of divine generosity. These well-intentioned endeavors, however, remain too dependent upon the philosophical theology of Hegel (an idealist, post-Kantian reprise of Neoplatonism for "divine simplicity *comprehending difference*") according to which the verdict of history provides both verdict of God and the true theodicy. However, Hegel's quasi-divine verdict of history always entails the justification of evils necessary to accomplishing history's rational goals. Antitheses exist to serve syntheses in the dialectical forward march of progress toward the consciousness of human unity with God. There is no eschaton of judgment identifying, defeating, and condemning the devil. As in Origen of Alexandria, even the devil must be reconciled for the love of God to prevail in history.

There is much to learn, certainly, from Hegel's post-Kantian philosophy of religion in which he attempted by philosophical means to continue basic elements of the Lutheran dogmatics and ethics he had internalized as a seminarian. Hegel was right in critically judging that the ontotheological scaffolding of simplicity *without difference*, otherwise known as Perfect Being Theism or Classical Metaphysics, has collapsed beyond repair and is no longer available to serve culturally as the rational-philosophical foundation of Christendom. But Hegel's modernized alternative of simplicity *comprehending difference* nevertheless perpetuates the Platonic idol of simplicity. In Hegel, difference is ultimately overcome by incorporation, in the recognition of otherness as one's own self enriched. This reconciliation of the negative (of the not-I to the I) is Hegel's updated iteration of Origen's reconciliation of the devil. Giorgio Agamben is right, then, to critique Hegel as modernity's preeminent anti-messianic thinker. In place of an apocalyptic break-in from outside the system of mendacity prevailing on the earth to assert saving truth for the inferior and unworthy, Hegel gives us an immanent evolution of that system to consciousness of its own divinity, producing today a culture that is not only post-Christendom (and increasingly post-denominational) but weirdly convinced of its own divinity. What would a return to genuinely messianic thinking bode for the future of creeds and confessions, where Jesus as the Christ is necessary to break the spell of a totalizing system of mendacity?

If we take our clues from the origination of Christian creeds in the sacrament of baptism, we rediscover how affirmations of believing trust entail definite renunciations declaring what is *not* to be believed. To believe in God is with ancient Israel to disbelieve the idols and indeed with Pauline apocalyptic to identify and renounce the demons that animate them. Converts in early Christianity accordingly underwent catechetical preparation for their baptism so that they would fully comprehend the new life of spiritual struggle they were getting into and to understand the gifts conferred upon them in the rite of Christian initiation to live in this new way. Forgiveness of sin entailed letting go of one's sins to receive in their place the righteousness of Jesus with the unction of the Holy Spirit and, henceforth in that power, to follow Jesus, the author and pioneer of faith, living already now into the reign of God.

Consequently in the drama of the baptism, the candidates solemnly renounced the kingdom of the devil with all its pomp and circumstance and counter-confessed allegiance to the God of the gospel: the Father who so loved his captivated creation that He gave his only Son into the hands of sinners; this beloved Son out of love so obeying His Heavenly Father's perplexing will that he drink the bitter cup of divine wrath to rescue those very sinners under its righteous indictment; the Holy Spirit who steeled Jesus for this world-turning ordeal and raised Him from the dead to declare the Father's vindication of Him who gave Himself for us. Easter is *God's* gospel, God's *ownmost* word spoken and acting to declare for us this obedient, humiliated, shrouded-with-sin and sealed-in-the-tomb Jesus as nevertheless and indeed the Father's beloved Son, that Jesus's self-giving love for the ungodly is also His own heavenly and eternal love. The baptismal creed gave expression to this "economic" Trinity, the Trinity as known in the gospel narrative battling here below on the plane of immanence against demonic forces to regain and liberate the creation.

It is one thing to recover and acknowledge this apocalyptic sense of the primitive Christian baptismal creed as an historical fact and quite another thing to take it seriously, let alone preach it in the 21st century for the world that imagines itself to have come of age. Truth be told, many of us are embarrassed by it. Some years ago, in a congregation I was serving, I was preaching on one of the dramatic stories of exorcism in the Gospel of Mark when a relative newcomer to the congregation, a professor at the local university, started loudly groaning during the sermon until he got up and, as he exited the sanctuary, burst out, "Why do we have to listen to these old stories!?" Meeting with him afterwards, I discovered that the previous pastor had taken him in without any catechesis and that in fact he had never been instructed in the Christian faith. I peacefully released him as he would not confess faith in Jesus because he could not see what difference it would make. He just wanted to belong to a convenient neighborhood fellowship of nice people. In painful fact, confessing belief in Jesus as Lord made no difference to him because the enemy of God and of us all had totally fallen out of the picture we present today of the Christian message. In most iterations, both "liberal" and "conservative," we market religion as little more than "monotheism and morality," practically as "therapeutic deism," wherein the demonic has been trivialized into psychological hangups inhibiting personal advancement according to secularist standards of success.

On the other hand, it is also certainly true that a literalistic interpretation of the economic Trinity according to the gospel narrative presents definite difficulties that inhibit contemporary embrace in full understanding. If anyone points out that the narrative presents us with three distinct personal agents at work collaboratively against another distinct agent in a battle taking place over the heads of human beings, a chorus of protests erupts: Tritheism! Superstition! Mythology! Belief in the economic Trinity thus called into question, belief in the devil cannot be anything but a noxious remnant of a superstition that will bring in its wake witch trials to persecute "uppity" women, exorcism in place of psychiatric pharmacology, even holy war against perceived infidels by a new licensing of idolatrous Christian nationalism

at war with real or imagined antichrists. In fact, however, such difficulties of apocalyptic literalism were early on acknowledged and addressed in the development of creedal Christianity. Indeed, they *necessitated* the qualification of the baptismal creed by the ontological affirmation of Nicaea to clarify the gospel's claim to truth.

The Ecumenical Creativity of Nicaea

What we know as the Apostles' Creed derives from the old Roman baptismal creed. For the faith in which we baptize and are baptized, it identifies the God of the gospel on the plane of immanence, i.e. within human time and space, in potent figures readily relatable as they are publicly portrayed in proclamation. However, without questioning what these figures ultimately refer to, the Apostles' Creed is satisfied to reassert in condensed summary the gospel narrative to form the trust and practice of Christian community life in the world. This corresponds to George Lindbeck's "cultural linguistic" model of doctrine based upon an external word that summons a religious community into existence and ever sustains it there. The cognitive purpose here is pragmatic, as we have seen, not to comprehend God metaphysically but to identify God and believers in their world on the plane of immanence. A probing question, however, arises which cannot finally be begged. Identification refers to something beyond the significations themselves to make sense, and the sense consists in successfully identifying the referent. Reference to what? What in the world is the scripturally derived and creedally parsed language operative in the Christian community concerning the economic Trinity of the Apostles' Creed talking about?

An insurmountable difficulty in answering this important question arises when these figures of the economy, as constructed in the gospel narrative, are taken and demand to be taken with wooden literalism. Then the heavenly Father ceases to be the Almighty Creator of all that is not God and becomes someone's sugar daddy (or abusive parent) in the sky; the beloved Son becomes an invulnerable warrior striding triumphantly upon the earth laying waste to enemies (whose destiny to the cross was essentially a temporary setback, if not a big mistake); and the Holy Spirit becomes warm and fuzzy feelings that energize my piety and unite my tribe in collective self-cheerleading posing as praise of God. Feeling the force of this objection against mistaking metaphorical narrative in wooden literalism and wanting to clear the air, the arch-heretic Arius drew an ontological line of division between the transcendent deity and immanent figures of it, thusly to subordinate if not utterly disqualify such naïve literalism. He, in fact, reiterated the Platonic subordinationism: the unbegotten God is singularly true God in the metaphysical sense so that even the closest figurations of this Deity as Son/Logos and Spirit are finite and creaturely. Incoherently, Arius continued to refer to the unbegotten God as the eternal Father ("incoherent" in that, as Athanasius countered, father and son are correlative terms so that father too is a figure on the plane of immanence; otherwise, the correlation of father and son implies reference to an ontological

plurality of relationality on the plane of transcendence, violating the simplicity that Arius defends). Arius's successor in the heresy, Eunomius, brought the Arian position into strict consistency when he discarded the appellation, father, to replace it with the metaphysical designator, the Unbegotten, as alone truly God.

As such, the Nicene Creed, which was finalized at Constantinople in the year 381, arose not only to refute Arian subordinationism but also to protect the baptismal creed from literalistic trivialization. The serious question to which the Nicene Creed gives answer is: "What *in the world* are we talking about when here and now on this earth we identify true God as Jesus, His heavenly Father, and Their sanctifying Spirit?" On the grounds of the middle axiom that God is truthful in His saving self-giving and thus self-revealing, the Nicene Creed executes a necessary and much needed inference—with the gospel narrative of the economic Trinity confessed at baptism in defiance of the devil's regime, we are referring to an eternal Trinity from whom the entire economy proceeds *as a free and sovereign decision of inexhaustible generosity*, even as its expression and depiction in the gospel narrative is accommodated to the mundane capacities of embodied creatures that they may grasp and cling to the thusly named God "clothed in his word" and so persevere through many trials and tribulations.

If we do not mistake Luther's formulation of this for the error of modalism (according to which an unknown deity temporarily adopts revelatory modes, e.g. at one time of the Father, at another the Son, and yet another the Spirit), the economic Trinity of the gospel narrative is thus in Luther's sense "the mask" of the eternal Trinity. The Christian claim to truth is that the self-giving of the God of the gospel is grounded in the eternal being of God to which the economic language refers. The self-giving portrayed in the economy, moreover, is a truthful expression for us of the deity whose eternal being consists in self-giving. True deity from eternity to eternity is the Father generating the Son on whom He breathes his own Spirit so that in the Spirit, the Son returns the glory to the Father. The self-giving of God for us in the gospel is not adventitious nor capricious but a truthful expression for us of who and what God is eternally as will be publicly demonstrated in the consummation of all things. Obviously, this ontological inference remains an act of faith in that the validity of the inferred reference depends wholly and ultimately upon the promised action of the eternal Trinity to bring the redeemed creation to fulfillment in the eternal kingdom.

This, then, is the gospel necessary creedal affirmation. God truly is eternally the Father of His own beloved Son on whom He breathes His own Spirit so that in time human creatures united to the Son by the Spirit are fulfilled in the eternal glorification of God the Father. When Christians employ the title, "God," for the creator of all that is not God, they name "the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and forever, the one who is God truly. Amen." For Christians, consequently, the divine is not an aloof, lonely, naked perfection of being on the analogy of temporally perduring things but a living dynamism of personal communion, a generative

being of self-giving love. That affirmation is what the Nicene Creed is good for when it affirms ontologically "God from God, light from light, true God from true God." Strictly speaking, moreover, we are herewith assigned the subject matter of dogmatic theology precisely as doctrine of God since the Nicene Creed ventures to enunciate the ecumenically binding common confession, "we believe"; it is *the* dogma of *the* corporate Christian faith, the public faith in which we believe, the faith in which we baptize and we are baptized. The triune God is essentially the God who gives antecedently and eternally and thus truthfully and definitively in time and space. The knowledge of such a God is the essence of generous orthodoxy.

Affirming that Christian faith *logically* entails such definite beliefs about God binding on the Christian conscience of trusting confidence in the God of the gospel and so articulated in "dogma" is merely to say that none of us already knows what the Christian faith is, that it rather must be learned, and that this life-long learning stretching into eternity is based upon divine teaching, if it indeed is to make claim to truth binding upon Christian conscience. In the Lutheran tradition, however, a real difficulty arises when logical entailment as has just been described is not sharply distinguished from a heteronomous demand to submit intellect to a mystifying rational puzzle on pain of salvation.

In the freedom of faith, *only joyfully* do we get to confess Jesus as Lord and the Triune God; in the freedom of this belief, we likewise do not submit either conscience or intellect to any other claim to salvation, sacred or secular, even when dressed in Christian verbiage. Thus, even, if not especially within the field of Christianity, belief that would be imposed by the coercion of conscience with threatening alarms of fire and brimstone must be actively repudiated while the belief that is given with trust in the named God of the gospel must be articulated, explained, and taught from the primary norm of Scripture and as guided by the historical creeds. Indeed, this very ordering to gospel freedom may impose on contemporary doctrinal theology the obligation not only to test novel spirits but also to repair traditional formulations for adequacy to the gospel and vulnerability to co-optation by stingy orthodoxies. For this ongoing theological task of creedal Christianity, it is imperative to recognize that *generous* "orthodoxy," with respect to the *self-giving* God of the gospel, is the Holy Spirit's work in progress, not fixed formulations carved in stone.

Creedal Declines, Surprising Renewals

It is sad to say, then, that difficulties did not cease after the accomplishment of the Nicene Creed, and from this point onward, *creedal contestation* arose in dividing Christendom to claim orthodoxy for one faction and to reject the heterodoxy of the other faction. This intellectual arrogance, indeed the triumphalism of such human-all-too-human one-upmanship in the religion supposedly of the Prince of Peace, has given dogma and dogmatic theology a bad reputation. In the East, subsequent to Constantinople, there were four more claims to ecumenical orthodoxy in

councils addressing difficulties in Christological doctrine that arose from the Nicene Creed's Trinitarian approach (albeit still entangled with the metaphysics of divine simplicity), thereby resulting from the outset in the simultaneous excommunication of Miaphysite followers of Cyril and their Nestorian foes at Chalcedon.

The end result of the East's seven ecumenical councils was, in any case, ambiguous Christologically, as may be seen in John of Damascus in whom the Patristic Era is often said to have concluded. He succeeded in articulating the assumption of human body and soul by the Trinitarian person of the eternal divine Son but went on to divide the humanity between the deified rational soul and the mortal body and its passions, which it wore like a cloak. As a result, the portraits in the gospel narrative of Christ in perplexity, anguish, and finally extinguished in the utter defeat of death had to be offloaded not merely onto the human nature but within the humanity from the deified soul, in any case innately immortal, onto the corruptible body. The nearly unconcealed purpose was to explain away the gospel narrative's portrait of Jesus's soul in anguish of death, explaining His despair as "playacting" for our sakes. The gravamen of the Fifth Ecumenical Council that "one of the Trinity suffered in his human nature" was, strictly speaking, sidestepped by body-soul anthropological dualism. In the process, the doctrine of the resurrection became the riddle of how, or even of why, the naturally immortal soul would need to have its decomposed body parts reassembled for eternity.

On the Western side of Latin-speaking Christendom, there was a failure to grasp the *logical* nature of the Nicene Creed as an *inference* on the grounds of divine truthfulness (in antithesis to demonic mendacity) from the economy of salvation to the reality of the eternal Trinity as its referent. Within this inference, the ontological unity of the eternal Trinity was grounded in the so-called "monarchy" (*not* "the divine right of kings," but the "sole principle of origin") of the Father, meaning that the unbegotten first person, bearing aseity as a distinguishing personal property, logically precedes and orders the other persons in the one eternal life, the so-called *taxis*. The Father is the unbegotten begetter of the Son and unbreathed breather of the Spirit. Ontologically, the Father is thus the sole principle of origin even as the Holy Spirit is the corresponding agent of the personal unity of the three persons in loving communion. The Father, (note well: *not* an abstract divine nature), provides as such the *ontological* unity in the divine life of the three persons. Accordingly, the original Nicene Creed's formula in Greek concerning the Spirit reads "who proceeds from the Father;" i.e., *ontologically* in the life of the *eternal* Trinity. This wording, however, seemed to Westerners to ignore the economic teaching—important for the identification of the Holy Spirit in the world as the Spirit of Jesus as of the Father—that it is the divine Son together with the Father in heaven who has promised upon His ascension to send Their Spirit upon disciples. Gradually, the language of the Nicene Creed was altered in the Latin West by the *filioque* to read that the Spirit "proceeds from the Father *and the Son*." Not only did the unauthorized emendation of the text of the Nicene Creed offend the Easterners but, as it seemed to them, it ignorantly violated divine unity in thinking

ontologically of a collaborative generation of the Spirit, i.e., a ditheism threatening return from monarchical trinitarianism to pagan theogony.

As these abstruse but antithetical positions hardened, alongside the growing political alienation of Byzantium from the Latin West, a deeper motive emerged among the Westerners that came to supreme expression in the so-called Athanasian Creed (which is not a product of Athanasius or his school but of later Augustinianism). Stretching all the way back to some anxieties of Augustine, whose concern was to affirm the ontological sameness of the three as equal expressions of the same divine substance, the Athanasian Creed grounded divine unity in the simple divine nature to constitute a single divine subject; this creed solidified *filioque* Trinitarianism. At length it perpetuated, if not generated, the notorious logical conundrums to be embraced as "mysteries" on pain of salvation (as expressly threatened in the Athanasian Creed): "The Father is God; the Son is God; the Holy Spirit is God. And yet not three gods." We are well on our way to treating the Trinity as a mathematical riddle, as Tillich lampooned, a mystification "put on an altar to be adored" but playing no role in the economy of salvation and ceasing to do any theological work aside from sonorous mystery-mongering. Here we have left far behind the economic Trinity's distinct personal agencies collaborating in intricate and passionate drama to overthrow the tyranny of the devil and set free its captives. Despite good intentions in Augustine, the West lost sight of the Nicene Creed's confession of the *eternal* tri-unity of divine being upon whose freely willed action turns the fulfillment of the promise of creation, the truth of the gospel narrative and the creature's redemption. On these fully articulated beliefs, human trust in the gospel promises of God depends.

The Ecumenical Intention of the Augsburg Confession

Up until the time of the Reformation, such doctrinal grievances of regional churches against one another were articulated in overreaching anathemas and new creedal formulations produced in new councils or, when this procedure proved cumbersome, increasingly by episcopal or papal decrees. The papal Fourth Lateran Council, for example, codified the influential doctrine of analogy that every similarity between creator and creature is encompassed by an ever-greater dissimilarity, a decision that reinforced divine simplicity *without difference*, a transcendence ironically *limited* ontologically by its negation of immanence, producing, as Hegel later pointed out, a "false infinite," i.e., a self-contradictory finite infinite delimited as "the Beyond" by an opposing sphere of finitude. Eschewing such entanglements, the Lutheran Reformation had attempted to reframe divisive metaphysical disputes over Christian doctrine by putting them back into the apocalyptic frame of confession under trial (Matthew 10:32). Indeed, the epigraph of the Augsburg Confession from Psalm 119:46 reads, "I will also speak of your decrees before kings and shall not be put to shame." As the Preface to the Augsburg Confession, written with the ecumenical intention of making a claim to divine truth that ought to be binding

upon the conscience also of *Christian* opponents, states: "In this way, by correcting whatever has been treated differently in the writings of both parties, everything could be brought together in return to one simple truth and to Christian Concord. Moreover, we may thus honor and serve one, pure, and true religion. For just as we exist and fight under one Christ, so we may also be able to live in one Christian church in unity and concord" (BOC, 31).

To be sure, the Augsburg Confession does not raise the issue of inadequate Trinitarianism on both sides of the Reformation dispute, as this editorial essay is suggesting. However, in attempting to resolve the disputed issues surrounding the doctrine of justification solely on the plane of immanence, i.e. anthropologically, it could not persuade opponents with deep reasoning about the eternally self-giving God in favor of the Lutheran proposal for gracious justification by faith alone in Christ alone. As such, it was not regional pride nor schismatic self-justification but a correct intuition of deep underlying continuity in theological purpose when the Formula of Concord called the Augsburg Confession "the Nicene Creed of our times." This invocation of precedent in the unitive ecumenical intention of the Creed of Nicaea in affirmation of the generosity of God was retrieved in that signature confession of the Lutheran Reformation that Christians together in common confession unite to fight the devil rather than one another. It was in addition an implicit recognition of the historicity of the confessing church, not the stingy stasis of a confessionalized church claiming to have achieved orthodoxy once and for all. Why is this so difficult?

David Bentley Hart, in his recent *Tradition and Apocalypse*, puts his finger on this endemic difficulty of Christian creedalism in the "apocalyptic ferment" of the gospel. Genuine faith, he writes,

is not the assurance that one possesses the fullness of truth but is rather a fidelity to the future disclosure of the full meaning of what little one already knows. The venture of belief is, before all else, a trust in the reality of a vital and essential truth that transcends the forms it animates. Otherwise, every historical transition would constitute a defeat. This is the greatest folly of traditionalism: when a believer abandons faith's preoccupation with the invisible and instead adopts traditionalism's desperate adherence to the beguiling contingencies peculiar to some particular epoch or school, he or she has effectively forsaken the venture of faith altogether and sought shelter instead in blissful memories (or, more likely, fantasies) (104-105).

For Hart, that ferment was carried forward in the empirical Christian tradition in spite of everything obscuring it to burst upon a confused scene to enunciate with renewed clarity the divine purpose in the great and saving exchange taking place in the event of Jesus Christ. For Hart, this event was formulated in Johannine idiom: "the Logos became flesh in order that human beings become divine." Arguably, the same apocalyptic ferment burst out in Luther's "joyful exchange," with its more Pauline-forensic rendering of the saving exchange: "For our sake he made him to be sin who

knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). The Lutheran Reformation thusly sought to re-conceive Christian concord by foregrounding this decluttering by "one simple truth" of the saving exchange of the generous God giving Himself for others, clearing away accumulated theological detritus to enunciate with fresh force the saving import of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus who was "put to death for our sins but raised for our justification."

The apocalyptic ferment carried forward in the empirical Christian tradition (however obscured) told forth the promised divine redemption of the frustrated creation with the reconciliation of its sinfully complicit creatures and their liberation from the tyranny of the devil to live already now in newness of life. Little wonder that Luther admired Athanasius, a child of the last great Decian persecution, as one who also grasped the saving import of the great exchange that conferred courage upon the martyrs to stand defiantly (as Luther stood in Worms), confessing the Name of the divine Logos who became human in order that humans receive eternal life, if only per Matthew 10:32; they persevered in confessing this Jesus as Lord.

The Confessing Future

Similarly to the post-Nicene decline, however, we could now rehearse a sad story of the breakdown of the Reformation confession into contending confessions of divided Christendom in the following so-called "age of confessionalization." It suffices to say here that in large part, the Enlightenment arose in protest against a divided Christendom of warring confessions, each maintained by non-adjudicable appeals to authority backing mutually exclusive claims to be the true visible church of Christ on earth. Creedal Christianity consequently collapsed in the next two centuries into a sterile antithesis between authoritarian dogmatisms encamped in ever shrinking and mutually anathematizing ecclesiastical fortresses and, on the other side, the freethinking deism spreading through secularizing culture. The *freed* thinking of those liberated from the idolatries of this present age and therewith bound to the liberating Lord Jesus to confess him boldly before the world as the inbreaking truth of the self-giving God transmuted into the captivating thinking of ecclesiastical ideologies contending for this-worldly recognition. How profoundly modern Christianity has since succumbed to the status markers of secularism, i.e. *as if* this present age is all there is! *As if* being on the "right side of history" were the same as being right in the eyes of God! Luther's "temporal kingdom," ordered to the "eternal kingdom," is now disjointed, severed from divine purpose. In dogmatic secularism, the present becomes the only real, the ultimately real, and with that the demonic lie about attaining sovereignty in a godless world is readmitted to cultural plausibility. That threat makes answering our question urgent.

Do creeds and confessions have a future? These historic testimonies certainly bore Christian truth against the father of lies and murderer from the beginning which we disregard to our own peril, but we can retrieve creedal truths for ourselves

in the future only if we do not take their formulations idolatrously as a fixed and settled statements of gospel truth, constituting a seamless garment which must be bought whole cloth, as it were, to be defended at all costs against all comers. Truly the historic creeds were *timely* truth but just so not *eternal*. In Lutheran theology, creeds and confessions are *norma normata* to be received appreciatively yet critically, i.e. only in the light of the *norma normans*, which is the word of God spoken on Easter morning to justify the ungodly who entrust themselves to its apocalypse of the divine Sonship of the crucified Jesus.

The deep reason for such critical reception is not the formal inadequacy to its eternal subject matter that attends all human speech about God since the God of the gospel gives Himself to us in scriptural terms of human language sanctified to this communicative purpose. Instead, the reason for the secondary authority of creeds and confessions is the gospel's apocalyptic ferment, the present groaning labor of the Holy Spirit who has not retired and gone out to pasture but ever awakens the sleeping church to the risen Christ's continuing work of salvation. "Orthodoxy" is teaching and living true to the gospel according to the Pauline "canon" in Gal 6:16 (the original articulation of the meta-doctrine of justification as the article on which the church stands and falls). Such *public faith of ecclesial life* under the gracious rule of the living and liberating Lord Jesus is what we should mean by "orthodoxy," as in Gal. 2:14 that points to *both* the claim to truth *and* its orthopraxis, the faithful life together that accords with it. Thanks be to the God who ever gives, orthodoxy is the Holy Spirit's work in progress to which we are summoned as laborers in the vineyard, active coworkers in the *missio Dei* rather than passive consumers who bury their talents.

The future for the creeds and confessions lies in the renewal of such *critical* dogmatics in service of a *confessing* church. The term "critical" is not meant in the Kantian sense, as if to deduce some epistemological foundation on which to erect a human regime of knowledge. Rather, the "critical" in "critical dogmatics" is meant in the strictly theological sense of the Holy Spirit, a prosecuting attorney who convicts the world concerning righteousness, sin, and judgment beginning in the household of God! In view of the reckless revisionism that sells a lot of shallow books in academic theology today, one hesitates here, wishing to avoid even the appearance of fashionable superficiality, not to mention of evil. Dogmatic theology that religiously claims immunity from the precedent of Paul's critique of even so venerable an apostle as Peter for not walking true to the gospel is not theology intending true knowledge of true God but human-all-too-human dogmatism, how so ever liberally and indulgently expressed. Here, the weakest form of an argument—the self-privileging appeal to authority (whether it be "the Pope says" or "Luther says")—becomes a pretext to speak majestically *in place of* God rather than *on behalf of* the speaking and promising God, hence in the vulnerable posture of the witness/martyr who knows above all that all claims to speak the word of God are subject to the scrutiny of the divine Speaker.

The fundamental argument for renewing theology as *critical* dogmatics is rather to articulate the apocalyptic ferment, i.e. the originating word of God spoken in the gospel authoring and authorizing the community of faith with its creeds and confessions. This is the *norma normans*. Theology in this light and by this measure proceeds self-critically all along its way. The mere repetition of past formulas of faith from the creeds and confessions in this light can be a defensive shield against that penetrating divine scrutiny. The painful probing of the Holy Spirit asks theologians for contemporary confessing that unleashes the apocalyptic ferment to bring renewed clarity to bear on divine purpose in the fog and friction of our embattled human reality, including in the confused and discouraged churches. To be sure, one must know deeply with the best resources of scholarship in the hard work of theological research just what those past formulas of faith were saying and doing in their time and place if one, under the same Spirit, is to theologize the same apocalyptic outburst for the present time and place, namely, to articulate concretely belief in the self-giving God and thusly inform a generous orthodoxy in word and deed.

The venerable creeds and confessions, then, are not preserved by rote appeal in a defensive posture within a mausoleum posing as the one true church but by appreciative and critical appropriation for the present context of humanly contested reality by the living church of militant grace. Such militancy will work the realignment of the existing, increasingly post-denominational churches to generate a confessing movement within the dark Egypt of this world. To effectuate this realignment in the ruins of Christendom amid the collapsing institutional forms of denominationalism, this militancy may entail reform of doctrine by the reformulation of historic doctrines. Isn't that exactly what happened in the Lutheran Reformation? Reformulating was required by the assertion of the novel, putatively "chief" doctrine when Luther appended the famous exclusive particle, the little modifier, "alone," to the Pauline text asserting "justification by faith." If so, what worst fate could there be for the Lutheran Reformation of doctrine than to be reduced to a fixed idea deployed as a shield against probing divine scrutiny in the present, asking the theologians, "who do you say that I am?" *here and now* in the ruins of Christendom and the collapsing denominationalism? The church that faces that question today in full consciousness of the "not yet" to repent of Christendom triumphalism and to answer instead "Christ crucified, the best of news in the world not yet transformed by it" awakens from nostalgia and temptations to stinginess to break through decaying institutional forms to become the confessing church of the saving Lord Jesus in the blessed conviction *esse Deum dare est*. —PRH

Paul R. Hinlicky is Distinguished Professor and Research Fellow at the Christ School of Theology of the Institute of Lutheran Theology. His new book, *The Apocalypse of God in Christ: A Theology of Theology*, is issued by Cascade Press in the series Reconstructions in Lutheran Doctrinal Theology of which he is the general editor: phinlicky@ilt.edu

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