

CHURCH DOGMATICS

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CHAPTER IV

THE PROCLAMATION OF THE CHURCH

§ 22

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The Word of God is God Himself in the proclamation of the Church of Jesus Christ. In so far as God gives the Church the commission to speak about Him, and the Church discharges this commission, it is God Himself who declares His revelation in His witnesses. The proclamation of the Church is pure doctrine when the human word spoken in it in confirmation of the biblical witness to revelation offers and creates obedience to the Word of God. Because this is its essential character, function and duty, the word of the Church preacher is the special and immediate object of dogmatic activity.

I. THE WORD OF GOD AND THE WORD OF MAN IN CHRISTIAN PREACHING

We have reached the final and really critical point in the doctrine of the Word of God, that which is both its starting point and its end: the Word of God as the preaching of the Church. Must the same serious meaning be attributed to this as to the first two aspects, "The Word as God's revelation" and "The Word as Holy Scripture"? Must this third aspect, the preaching of the Church in the whole sphere of humanity in which it is actualised here and now, be included in the indirect identity between revelation and Scripture? Is the Church's preaching also God's Word, and to what extent? Is God's Word also the preaching of the Church, and if so to what extent? The task of theology and of dogmatics in particular consists in the attempt to answer this question. For the sake of this question, so vital for the life of the Church, it was necessary first to ask about the Word of God as revelation and the Word of God as Holy Scripture. In face of these questions, we now have to establish conclusively the task and limitation of dogmatics. Again, we must begin by stating the problem involved.

What we have to say should first be related to the results attained in the previous chapter on Holy Scripture. The existence of Holy Scripture means that as the Word of God has been spoken once for all in His revelation in Jesus Christ through the Holy Ghost, it is not

only distant from, but also near the Church, in the witness of the prophets and apostles. It does not only confront it, but is given to it; and it is given to it, not only as something perpetually alien, but as its own commission and authority. In the form of Holy Scripture it has and retains its own incomparable authority and freedom, which is as superior to all human authority and freedom as the heavens are higher than the earth. But in the same form, it becomes the foundation in the Church of the human authority and freedom that is legitimate and necessary. In the human authority and freedom thus founded by it and in it, it becomes the object of the Church's preaching, and men, who as such are identical neither with Jesus Christ nor with the prophets and apostles, become indirectly and by faith (upon the sole ground that they are baptised members of the Church and therefore participants in its commission and its authority) the bearers and speakers of the Word of God as it becomes a word spoken by them in the form of their human word. We know that in Holy Scripture the Word of God is the Word of God in a different but no less real sense than it is in revelation. The same is true of the witness of the prophets and apostles as compared with the original witness of the Son of God Himself. However sharply the difference between the Lord and the servants must be stressed, the very solemnity of this relationship, founded and formed as it is by the resurrection of Jesus, forbids us to entertain the notion that, with the transference of the Word of God to its biblical witnesses and the self-communication of Jesus Christ to His followers, anything in the nature of a weakening or dilution, or even a disturbance or distortion of the Word of God has taken place. The same thing is fundamentally true of the relationship of Holy Scripture with revelation on the one hand, and with the preaching of the Church on the other. Once again in a different form, but here too neither diminished nor weakened, we have to do really and truly with the one integral Word of God, with God Himself, with Jesus Christ through the Holy Ghost, just as certainly as Holy Scripture, and in and through it God's self-revelation, is given to the Church. In this case the Word of God is preached only indirectly, formally and relatively in the authority and freedom of Jesus Christ Himself and the authority and freedom of the prophets and apostles, that is, in the authority and freedom accorded to the Church as instituted under the Word and assembled by the Word. But this does not alter in the very least the fact that in this case, too, it is really and truly the one integral Word of God to be believed as such by those who speak and those who hear it. The Church exists as the earthly body of the heavenly Lord and as the community built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets; and the connexion between these two things is not torn by the subordination of the first witnesses to Him of whom they bear witness, nor again by the subordination of those who receive this witness to those from whom they receive it. On the contrary, in the

very fact of this hierarchy consists the strength of the connecting link by which the Church is held together as a single whole, from Jesus Christ at the right hand of the Father down to the humblest of those who by the word of His witnesses have been called to faith. But this connecting link consists in the one Word of God, which in these three different forms, in none of them less than in the others, in none of them diminished and weakened, but in all three remaining the selfsame Word, constitutes the life and the foundation of the Church. Otherwise how can it be true that in Jesus Christ this Word became incarnate once and for all? How can it be true that the prophets and apostles appointed and equipped by Him have spoken by His Spirit and still speak? If it is true that the Son of God has come in the flesh and has risen in the flesh and that Holy Scripture as the witness of God's revelation is God's Word for the Church, the Church certainly has to be reminded of the fact that the Word is conveyed and given to it only by revelation and its biblical witness. But in this reminder there must be no reduction in the validity or completeness of this mediation and gift; nor must we throw any doubt on the obligation and comfort of realising that in the preaching of the Church as well we have to do with the Word of God in an undiminished meaning of the term and therefore with God Himself. The real problem of God's Word as the preaching of the Church or the preaching of the Church as God's Word can be raised only within the limits of the question put to us by the answer which God has already provided. When we are confronted by the Word of God addressed to the Church as revelation and as Holy Scripture, and therefore giving it its commission and authority, we may well be astonished and terrified, and ask ourselves: Is this so, and how far is it so, and what is going to happen in consequence of the fact that the Church has received this task, and that in and with its fulfilment of this task, God Himself in His Word is involved, and God Himself proclaims His revelation through His witnesses? But if this question is to be meaningful and practical, we can address it only to ourselves. We cannot address it to God, as though He had not spoken to us in His revelation and His witnesses. Again, as a question addressed to ourselves, we can answer it meaningfully and practically only by listening to God's Word, and not out of the resources of our own insights. The real problem raised by this question cannot burst the framework within which the Church exists; nor can it go back behind the decision already made in the glory of the Word of God concerning the Church, and concerning the presence and action of the Word of God in the Church. This decision cannot be disputed. It cannot be treated as the goal of our inquiry. It necessarily has to be treated as its presupposition.

Therefore, to state the problem, we must begin with the affirmation that, by the grace of revelation and its witness, God commits Himself with His eternal Word to the preaching of the Christian Church in

such a way that this preaching is not merely a proclamation of human ideas and convictions, but, like the existence of Jesus Christ Himself, like the testimony of the prophets and apostles on which it is founded and by which it lives, it is God's own proclamation. That it is men who speak here, men who are not themselves Jesus Christ or even prophets and apostles, does not in any way permit them, in an affirmation and assertion of their humanity, arrogantly to try to say something other than the Word of God. On the other hand, it does not permit them to be faint-hearted, as though in their humanity they were not able to speak the Word of God, but only their own human words. Again, it does not permit those who hear them, because of the humanity of those who speak, to adhere to their human word as such, to rejoice or not to rejoice in it, to accept it or to reject it, as though the word spoken was only this human word and not the Word of God. That it is men who speak must, of course, be taken into account with all its consequences. Nothing that this fact implies may be suppressed. But we can think meaningfully and practically about it only when we bear in mind first the prime consideration that these men speak and must be heard as members of the body of Christ and in the name of the Church, and that the Church is the assembly of those to whom, in all their humanity, the Word of God is entrusted. Above all criticism, even above self-criticism, the proclamation of this insight belongs to the Church's proclamation. It is only in the light of it that we can exercise the necessary criticism and self-criticism. This is what decides whether we do it in faith or lack of faith, and therefore profitably or otherwise. If a man has to say No to himself at this point for the sake of the Yes, the No must not try to stand arrogantly or regretfully upon itself—as though the Law precedes the Gospel. It cannot, therefore, be the starting-point of our deliberations. On the contrary, it must derive from the fundamental and original Yes of the grace of God, if it is to be spoken in its right place for the sake of this Yes. In this connexion the authoritative Yes of divine grace is the reality of the divine commission laid upon the Church, and in it and with it the reality of the presence and action of the Word of God in the proclamation of the Church.

Calvin described the proclamation of the Church in this way: *Nous ne pouvons point estre prescheurs pour forger et bastir ce que bon nous semblera et pour abruser le peuple de nos fantasies, mais la parole de vrité nous tient obligez, et celui qui parle et celui qui escoute. Car Dieu veut dominer sur nous, Jésus Christ, luy seul veut avoir toute maistrise (Serm. on 2 Tim. 2¹⁴., C.R. 54, 151). And: Puis qu'ainsi est donc que nostre Seigneur Jésus Christ s'est acquis une telle autorité, quand il a esté eslevé là haut au ciel et qu'il a toute superiorité sur toutes créatures: que nous apprenions de nous ranger sous luy et que cela soit pour nous tenir en bride, que sa Parole soit receue de nous et que nous sachions qu'il nous gouverne, et faut que nous souffrions d'estre enseignez en son nom, et que sa Parole qui nous est preschee, combien qu'elle procede de la bouche des hommes, si est-ce que c'est en l'autorité de Dieu, et que nostre salut doit estre fondé là dessus aussi bien que si le ciel s'ouvroit cent mille fois pour nous manifester la gloire de Dieu (Serm. on. Gal. 1¹¹., C.R. 50,*