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CRITICAL DOGMATICS AND THE GOD OF EASTER

Paul Hinlicky's *Beloved Community*

Mickey L. Mattox

Readers who think the wind has gone out of the sails of the Barthian-Lutheran tradition will likely be surprised by the vigor and intellectual heft of Paul Hinlicky's massive new work *Beloved Community: Critical Dogmatics After Christendom*. The subtitle is noteworthy. While Hinlicky clearly intends his work to be an exercise in ecclesial theology, on the model of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, the term "critical" suggests from the outset a somewhat different perspective on the churchliness of the enterprise. As someone has said (in a phrase I learned from Hinlicky), "Lutheranism is a theology, not a church." The Lutheran movement, in other words, was born in a moment of crisis that was focused upon problems related to grace, faith, and meritorious good works; ecclesiology was an afterthought, occasioned by the refusal of the German bishops to break with Rome and identify with the Reformation, and the consequent necessity for the movement of ordaining its own priests and bishops to serve the needs of the churches that had adopted Luther's Reformation. This historical situation meant that the Lutheran faith tradition took as its starting point the question of the sinner's justification before God, including the sinner's inability to save herself and the centrality of faith as a fully reorienting event, a *metanoia* that defines the new life of the believer.

Hinlicky's work comes out of this tradition. The book proceeds innovatively in its three main sections from Spirit to Son to Father, presenting a Trinitarian theology that reflects Luther's own catechetical teaching that the Spirit places us on the lap of Mother Church, where through the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments we are

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led to the Son, who reveals to us the heart of the Father, so that per Luther we know the very essence of God, "sheer, unutterable love." There is much in this reverse retelling of the story of the Holy Trinity to admire. Not that Hinlicky means to offer a Hegelian processual reading of theology such that an agonistic history is leading God to become Father. To the contrary, the one God is the source of the creation, but in Hinlicky's narration of dogmatics the experience of faith leads through the Spirit to the Son and thus to the Father. The work is therefore oriented toward the eschatological; indeed, Hinlicky regularly refers to the work of creation itself as "eschatological creation," by which he means to present a better alternative to protological readings of Christian theology that lean too heavily upon a "lost inheritance." *Beloved Community*, by contrast, sees the eschatological horizon as the proper point of orientation for the dogmatic task as a whole, a move that renders the act of creation and subsequent history as the foreground of the creation proper, that is, the eschatological fulfillment toward which the creation is aimed and oriented by the Creator.

This is a dense and long book that ranges widely across philosophical, exegetical, and more properly theological issues. At the same time, it is also an accessible work, one that reflects the author's lifelong commitment to the vocation of a Lutheran pastor and preacher, a man concerned to read and interpret theologically all things in service to the life and the nascent beloved community of faith in which the Gospel and the Sacraments have their home. It is nevertheless a very difficult work to summarize without doing considerable injustice to Hinlicky's subtle and extraordinarily wide-ranging work. With that caveat in mind, my attention turns in what follows to what was traditionally known as the Prolegomena, "things that must be said beforehand," to works of doctrine or dogmatics in the Lutheran tradition. Although the three main sections of the work proceed in the reverse of the traditional order, in part I Hinlicky does provide a Prolegomena, one that lays the groundwork and answers fundamental questions raised on the path toward a comprehensive narration of God the Holy Trinity as known to faith.

Theology is on Hinlicky's reading a self-justifying enterprise, not in the theological sense of the sinner's self-justification, but in the intellectual sense that it rests on something given, not derivative from another science. The single thesis, per Hinlicky, on which the Christian truth claim rests is this one: "'God' is the self-surpassing Father who is determined to redeem the creation and brings it to fulfillment in the Beloved Community by the missions in the world of His Son and Spirit." "Critical dogmatics" thus denotes the status of theology itself as the *Nachdenken* of faith, a critical intellectual enterprise that gladly submits to reason and the claims of other disciplines, so long as theology's founding upon its own first principles is not compromised. This "theologic" cannot be

understood along Bultmannian lines as a demythologization. Instead it is a “deliteralization,” one that attends not to what texts like, say, Leviticus meant in their own time and context, but instead to how they function to reveal the Creator God, Who is moving the world toward its eschatological fulfillment. The Bible is therefore to be understood by means of critical investigation, so long as one recognizes that the *res Scripturae sacrae*, the reality to which Scripture refers, is itself the unassailable presupposition of any properly Christian reading of the text. This reality is, so Hinlicky, the “Gospels’ claim about God.” To put this in somewhat more traditional Lutheran terms, the Scriptures “promote Christ” and can only be rightly understood when interpreted in light of that purpose.

The Prolegomena also offers Hinlicky’s telling of the story of the “three Lutheranisms”: Lutheran Confessionalism and with it Lutheran “Orthodoxy,” which was founded on a contrastive understanding of Lutheran identity that set it in unalterable opposition to Anabaptists, the Reformed, and Rome. This construct was instrumental to the Wars of Religion in the seventeenth century, but undermined by the rise of rationalism and the Enlightenment, especially biblical criticism. Pietism in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries recovered Luther’s sense of faith as a “living, active, mighty thing” in part as a corrective to the sometimes belligerent intellectualism of Orthodoxy, and it founded the era of Protestant missions. Modern Lutheran liberalism, on the other hand, put Luther’s world-affirming theology—especially, so Hinlicky, his demystification of the cosmos—to the service of the social gospel, and Kant for his part took Luther’s apparent fideism to the rationalist extreme when he destroyed the knowledge of God—through either reason or revelation—in order to make room for faith. Hinlicky reads these historical epochs charitably, attempting to identify within each of them their properly Lutheran and Christian concerns: for right faith, for a living faith, and for a faith that serves the neighbor in love. None of them, however, point the way forward for the Lutheran faith tradition today. Orthodoxy survives in ossified fundamentalism, Pietism in individualistic otherworldliness. And liberalism? It “feeds like a vulture on the decomposing corpse of divided and theologically incoherent Christendom.” Hinlicky’s dogmatics therefore seeks to find the path forward after the collapse not only of Christendom with its union of throne and altar, but also of these three problematic versions of his faith tradition.

But how to find it? Hinlicky critically situates his work alongside that of a series of other pathfinders and interlocutors. He takes up Barth’s claim, for example, that theology means thinking about God on the basis of the Word of God, but recognizes that this stance leaves one struggling to identify the authentic Word among the cacophony of competing claims to revelation found in our intensely pluralistic world. The answer to this problem may be found by attending to the Easter proclamation of the

crucified Christ whom God has vindicated through his resurrection from the dead. This is the “originating event” of faith. But can it be believed critically? Hinlicky humorously notes that “it is surely the case that one does not tastefully speak of ‘resurrection’ in polite circles today.” How then to do it? The answer, it seems, is not to move from the solid ground of theology onto a presumed neutral ground of human reason or common sense from which to examine the “historicity” of the event. Instead one recognizes that like everything else in Scripture the question of what happened in the resurrection must be answered theologically. Jesus’s resurrection is therefore something new, and precisely as such it is intrinsic to the broader theological claim that God in Christ is doing a “new thing,” redeeming and renewing the world on the way to the beloved community, a way that leads through death to resurrection.

Other crucial voices from within Hinlicky’s faith tradition include Eberhard Jüngel, Carl Braaten, Robert Jenson, and Wolfhart Pannenberg. From each of these Hinlicky claims a certain heritage, but he clearly takes that inheritance as task and moves on to develop his own systematic theology, even if the result is a system that bears a strong family resemblance.

The distinctiveness of Hinlicky’s project is helpfully signaled and then developed in a section labeled “odd questions,” and indeed for some readers they will be odd. A first question revolves around the sovereignty and priority of the self, which Hinlicky identifies with Descartes’s *cogito*. Hinlicky brings Augustine to his aid in developing a critique of this modern notion, arguing that Descartes’s journey inward in order to prove first the self and only afterward to demonstrate the existence of God should not be understood as a faithful recapitulation of Augustine’s notion of the journey inward but rather as its profound contradiction. Following Philip Cary, Hinlicky argues that the God who can be known by means of the unassisted human journey inward is but the fleeting memory of a lost happiness. Thus Augustine can be distinguished from Platonic theologies of ascent that do not account for the lostness of the soul apart from its being found by God.

Augustine’s journey of the soul then is not to be understood by reference to the metaphysical ascent of Platonism—where God and the soul are substantially similar so that God is participable—but instead as that of a temporal creature marred by a pride that can only be healed by the gift of humility. Hinlicky draws his Luther close in to the orbit of this less philosophical Augustine, arguing that Luther has been misunderstood in, for example, the work of Henri de Lubac, for Luther himself took the human person as originally created as naturally endowed with the Spirit. But the fallen person is on Luther’s account bereft of the Spirit and wants to be God rather than to let God be God. This inner disorder puts the sinner on the side of the “structures of malice and injustice” that mar this

fallen world, waiting, at the very best, for a Word of God to transform her. Real knowledge of God is therefore that which is given in the event of hearing God's Word and being transformed by it, and for that reason arguments for God's existence apart from this given knowledge produce only the kind of gods over which human reason can exercise control or that tacitly serve to crown a system that perpetuates rather than shatters the structures of malice and injustice.

This section also addresses these odd questions: "Is God possible?" "Is Christ necessary?" "Does faith justify?" "Are the Scriptures Holy?" Although the questions may seem odd at first glance, in fact these are quite traditional ones in Protestant dogmatics, even if Hinlicky's answers to them are somewhat different. The result is to establish what it means to speak rationally of God, why faith is intrinsic to the theological task, and how the Bible functions within the community of faith to give the knowledge of God.

Stepping outside the Prolegomena, it is instructive to glance briefly at Hinlicky's treatment of the Mother of God, and especially his critique of the Catholic Church's dogmatic definitions regarding her perpetual virginity and Immaculate Conception. This treatment also showcases Hinlicky's appropriation of and engagement with historical-critical exegesis, which he deftly turns to his purposes by focusing on properly theological rather than merely historical questions. Here again, the key to right understanding depends on Hinlicky's account on correctly identifying what the doctrine of the virgin birth is *about*. This notion is to be understood in the context of the Gospel, so the virgin birth signals that God is doing a new thing. Problems arise when the Church makes obligatory the notions of the perpetual virginity and Immaculate Conception, a process Hinlicky reads as the Church's transformation of Mary from a Jew into a "Baroque Catholic." The decrees regarding Mary, moreover, are authoritarian, and the fact that the Church reaches clarity in doctrines through a process of development does not license the Church to "make things up" and so to engage in its own triumphalist fideism, forcing faith to go where reason does not lead.

Hinlicky does not address the question of Mary's agency, a question that lies near the heart of the developmental process that moved Catholic tradition in the direction of the Immaculate Conception. Apart from a gracious preservation from sin, even and especially the disorder of original sin, how could Mary have offered her consent—"fiat mihi"—to the angel Gabriel's proposal? Human agency then is the locus of the problem, and Hinlicky's Mary does not seem to have much of it. Instead she has what all of us have on Hinlicky's Barthian-Lutheran account, that is, a passive capacity to be seized and acted upon by God, to become what we were not through God's Word. Mary seems to have become the virgin mother solely through God's own choice and action, not her own, and in that way

she epitomizes the Augustinian/Lutheran Christian who looks back in wonder at the gift of faith.

The stout criticisms Hinlicky offers of Catholic Mariology remind us how ecumenically divisive these doctrines seem to be because the Immaculate Conception is accepted neither by Protestants nor by the Orthodox. To venture a brief answer to this problem, one could suggest that critics take another look at the impact of this Mariology on Catholic faith and piety and ask whether it has done what Hinlicky thinks such doctrines must do, that is, to bring to living faith the conviction that in Christ God was doing a new thing. Does Catholic Mariology serve the Gospel? Does it, to borrow that phrase from Luther yet again, "promote Christ?"

This is only the beginning of the kinds of issues Catholic readers will find themselves puzzling over when they read this text. The more difficult ones pertain to Hinlicky's determined setting of the tradition of Christian faith and theology outside the traditions of philosophical thought in which they first took shape. This applies not only to the Middle Ages but, as we are increasingly becoming aware, to the patristic period as well. *Beloved Community* might well be set in context by calling to mind the controversies over the integration of Aristotle into the curriculum at Paris in the thirteenth century. Hardly anyone wanted to receive Aristotelian thought without trimming it critically to fit with what was known to faith, including the doctrines of the Holy Trinity and the world's creation in time. Likewise, Hinlicky wants to ratchet back what philosophy dictates to the theologian in favor of the Bible's surprising presentation of a God Who is not simple, but to the contrary "self-surpassing." Perhaps when set in the context of other attempts to appropriate worldly wisdom alongside Christian revelation—to make peace, that is, between faith and reason—this is an extreme position. But it is nevertheless a recognizably Western and to that extent Catholic position, one that lets reason have its say but only within the boundaries marked out by faith in the Word.

A last remark from the standpoint of a Luther scholar. As a work of systematic theology, this book takes the theology of Luther as its point of departure in significant ways. For readers who know only the Luther of Gerhard Ebeling and later twentieth-century predominantly German scholarship, it will be a puzzle meeting this Luther. Hinlicky has kept thoroughly abreast of developments in Luther scholarship that make the old Luther, so familiar to Catholics and Protestants alike, obsolete. As a systematic theology then, this work showcases what can be done when the Luther of more recent research is added to the mix.