

The Pros and Cons of a Dogmatic System¹

*Herman Bavinck, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman
(ndkloosterman@gmail.com), Worldview Resources International*

[57] The esteemed secretary of the Committee for the Central Pastoral Conference has requested and instructed me to introduce to you the subject of the pros and cons of a dogmatic system. The subject itself proceeds from the assumption, which is certainly universally acknowledged, that any dogmatic system has such pros and cons, and that, just as we see with everything here on earth, so too with a system of the church's faith-truths, we can see two sides, the one shedding light, the other shadowy.

A proper treatment requires, first, that we consider what we are to understand by a system. For many people the term itself has a bad odor. Among some, especially in the discipline of dogmatics, the portrait immediately comes to mind of narrow-minded rigidity; of a methodological suspicion and denunciation of others; and especially of a cold and formalistic faith that lacks any life and animus. I think that the word itself is not culpable, and should not provide any warrant for these prejudices.

After all, everything that exists is systematic. The entire cosmos was created and arranged according to a fixed plan. It is not an aggregate of materials and forces that were accidentally merged. If it were, it would not constitute a cosmos, a unity. But all things are oriented toward each other, exist together in an unbreakable connection, together constitute a system, an organism. The Mosaic creation story provides us a glorious insight into the systematic, ordered, and teleological nature of the creation; and Paul teaches us

1. Address to the Central Pastoral Conference held at Utrecht 16–17 August 1881. Published in *De Vrije Kerk. Vereeniging van Christelijke Gereformeerde Stemmen* 10 (1881): 449–64. Included in H. Bavinck, *Kennis en Leven* (Kampen: Kok, 1922), 57–67. Pagination from *Kennis en Leven* is provided in brackets.

that [58] same truth when he writes to the church in Corinth: everything is yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's (1 Cor. 3:22–23).

When, in order to be able better to oversee and comprehend creation, we now classify the whole of the creation into groups of similar phenomena, then too we can observe a system within those distinct classes. Still, they do have significant differences. In connection with the inorganic creation we actually cannot speak of any system. It is dominated and designed entirely in terms of the physical laws of attraction, cohesion, weight, temperature, electricity, magnetism, by the chemical laws of bonding and composition, and by fixed relationships of material substances with each other. In itself, the inorganic creation has no purpose and thus no explanation; as pure aggregate, it lacks a unique principle and thus also a unique system. It is purely a product of those physical and chemical forces, is wholly passive with respect to them, and has nothing within itself that can either withstand or propel it.

But the matter is different within organic nature. There as well, to a certain degree we find the same physical and chemical laws. However, they no longer govern everything, but serve everything; they are still the *conditio* but not the *causa* of things. Organic life cannot be explained by the laws of mechanisms. Every attempt devoted to doing so has been fruitless to this point. As soon as we come into contact with an organism, we see at work a force, a principle, a *vis vitalis* or whatever people may term it, which, rather than being explicable by physical and chemical laws, instead governs them, stands above them, not destroying and suspending them in any way, but putting them in service and directing them. That mysterious, hidden power is exactly what comprises the organic, and is the constitutive and supportive principle of the organic. Within inorganic nature, everything is aggregate, with things appended to each other from the outside; so there is no real whole, no genuine unity, and thus no diversity. But within organisms, each small part is governed, formed, and predisposed by the whole. Thus, the whole precedes the parts, and supplies each part with its own function within the whole. Within the organic for the first time we encounter a whole in terms of its parts, unity in diversity, principle within the system. Nevertheless, we can still discern great difference here. In the lowest organisms, unity and diversity are very limited. Many plants and animals possess a unity so minuscule that

parts of them continue living and grow again. But the more developed the organism, the more its system increases; continually richer diversity is accompanied by a unity that increasingly binds and governs all the parts. The animal is more [59] developed, and thus better systematized than the plant. And humans are far superior to animals, and show us the most glorious and complete system here on earth. For the human being is a personality, and this is the most developed and rich and glorious system there is. Within this system, the Ego is the principle, the root, the life force; through the Ego, the human spirit and soul and body, with all their capacities and powers, are governed, shaped, directed.

Our God himself provides us with an even infinitely higher and richer and more glorious system, to behold and admire, he who is one in essence, in three persons, in whom the one identically complete essence dwells hypostatically in a threefold manner. He, the Triune One, shows us in himself the entirely perfect system: origin, type, model, and image of all other systems. For this reason, it is an altogether remarkable and glorious idea with which Dr. Kuyper concludes his explanation of the Antirevolutionary Program, namely, that life in theological, moral, juridical, social, and political arenas will never be plumbed as long as the investigation does not come to rest in God himself, that is, in the confession of his Sacred Trinity.

I have attempted to show you—without losing ourselves in philosophical distractions and without patterning reality according to our notions—from the life and essence of things what it is that we must understand by a system. What has been said will preserve us, I hope, from ever talking about the systematic in a derogatory way. To cultivate a mortal aversion to this notion and attach to it the association of narrowness and bigotry is simply the proof of ignorance.

The initial opportunity for doing so can be provided by means of a scientific system. A person is not simply alive, but is also aware that he is alive. Within him all of nature, as it were, including himself, attains consciousness. Within him, it seeks its explanation, attempts to discern and behold itself in him. The person sees and thinks and knows. In that endless series of phenomena, he attempts to discern order and connection. Therefore, he begins to arrange, to

group, and to classify nature. If everything were chaos, a motley mass, that activity would be impossible; science would then not be able to exist. But the person who pursues knowledge proceeds on the basis of the assumption that systems exist everywhere, that what exists can be known, that an idea, a word, lies at the foundation of everything. Without that presupposition, science would destroy itself; and the suicide of science may not be demanded, either. Without Reason existing outside of us, Reason within us is a purposeless enigma. To practice science [60] is to seek for the Word that has made all things, without which nothing was made.

All science is one, just as the creation is one, and science searches for the principle and the system that connects and supports all things. Because of the limits of our view and of our understanding, however, the scientific enterprise is divided up into many kinds of science, each of which chooses its own group of phenomena as the object of investigation. Even those specialty sciences search for the principle and the system that must lie at the foundation of those special kinds of phenomena as well. They attempt, as it were, to uncover the basic idea, the life force of those phenomena, in order from that point of view to describe and illuminate everything belonging to a particular field, in order to know each thing not only in itself but also—and this too is required for genuine science—in the light of, and in connection with, and from the standpoint of, the whole.

Thus, a scientific system may be nothing other than a reproduction in words, a translation into language, a description, a reflection in our consciousness, of the system present in things themselves. Science does not have to create and to fantasize, but only to describe what exists. We contemplate what God has thought eternally beforehand and has given embodied form in the creation.

So then, no one can speak evil of seeking a system. To describe all things systematically, to search for the system of things, is rather a calling and a duty and a yearning placed in the human heart by God himself.

To forbid that is to slap science itself in the face, and to despise God's gift.

What, then, is a dogmatic system?

To answer this question, it is necessary to know what Dogmatics is. In any case, this is, as the term says, a scientific explanation of dogmas. With the term *dogma*, however, we come to stand immediately in the arena of the church. After all, a dogma is not a private opinion or an individual sentiment, but the faith-truth declared and confessed by the Christian Church as a whole or by one of its branches. Thus, Dogmatics is always ecclesiastical. A Biblical Dogmatics does not exist, and a Christian Dogmatics does not *yet* exist. Dogmatics is nothing other than the scientific description of the confession of the church.

The need for a dogmatic system in the true sense of the word began to be sensed slowly at first. The “unitary insight” (einheitliche Einsicht) into the truth of Christianity was obtained gradually at first. Church fathers and Scholastics sufficed with grouping the material of dogmatics as well as possible according to a practical standard, or to summarize it in a *Summa*.

[61] Nor did the Reformation in its day bring to life the need for a dogmatic system. Only Calvin provided us, in his *Institutes*, with a methodically organized, architectonic, and systematic whole. But by the remaining theologians, the content of dogmatics was arranged as well as possible into an order that hardly changed, and was discussed in terms of a sequence of *loci*. In the Lutheran church we find the first theologians who worked in dogmatics in a more systematic way—Calixtus, Calovius, and especially Quenstedt. In the Reformed churches after Calvin, it was especially Cocceius who followed the lead of others in making the idea of covenant to be the principium of his entire dogmatic system. In our present century it was especially Schleiermacher who pressed for a system, and in his own *Glaubenslehre* chose as the principium “salvation by Jesus of Nazareth.” After him there has been a universal impulse to work strictly systematically in dogmatics. People are no longer satisfied with discussing doctrinal content simply in terms of certain rubrics of theology, anthropology, Christology, etc. Nowadays people want to set forth the church’s faith-truths in the context of the church’s organic unity and diversity.

That this insight was obtained gradually, and that the need for a dogmatic system has been awakened, are surely to be seen as good steps forward in the science of dogmatics.

Christianity has to satisfy our religious and moral needs first of all, to be sure, and therefore must prove itself to our heart and our conscience as being truth. But this is not enough. It should prove itself as truth to our understanding as well. Although a dualism of heart and mind may be maintained for a short time, it will not last long. “A Christian at heart and a pagan in mind” is a saying that either rests upon self-deception or leads to the rejection of the one or the other. What satisfies our heart, with its hidden and deeply internal needs, must satisfy our mind as well. Unless people want to believe that God has fixed an eternal chasm between mind and heart.

Now, it is the difficult but nonetheless glorious task of dogmatics to prove to the mind that the confession of the church is reasonable in the highest sense of the word. But then the primary requirement for our thinking mind is that the church’s dogmas do not stand disconnected alongside one another, but they must be contained within one another; that together they constitute an unbreakable whole, an organic unity, a true and complete system. If the confession of the church is not merely a fruit of the imagination and a mythological “gimmick” (*Spielerei*), but a description of real acts of God, of a unique life, and if dogmatics still deserves to be called a science, then that strict requirement cannot [62] be avoided. A dogmatic system is the requirement that science places upon theology, and it is the proof of the reasonableness, of the genuinely scientific nature, of Christianity.

In order, then, to obtain a dogmatic system, before everything else the principium must be uncovered (not introduced to or forced upon dogmatics), from which the entire system as it were is constructed and can without violence and force be deduced. In this respect, as proof that we still know only in part, as yet very little agreement prevails among dogmaticians. One adopts as principium the person of Christ, another takes salvation, a third uses love, a fourth the Kingdom of heaven, and so on.

Perhaps there are others as well who say that it does not matter what principle people use for organizing the content of dogmatics. Whether one draws it from theology proper [the doctrine of God] or from soteriology or from another *locus*, one is nonetheless constantly dealing with the same truths. To a certain extent, this is true, and this already proves that all truths stand in unbreakable relationship with each other, and that no single truth can be examined

without requiring the examination of the others. But this does not therefore mean that the principle from which one proceeds in describing faith-truths is unimportant. The truly pure principium of the dogmatic system is but one and can be only one. With every principium one particular truth comes to stand in the light more than another. The only true principle of the dogmatic system is the one that appoints to every single truth its unique place within the organic whole, the one that places clearly in the light the relation of every truth with the principium and with all other particular truths, and in that manner unfolds organically on all sides in the multiplicity of truths in order again to be brought together organically into the truth itself. Seeking that principle, and from it to draw forth the entire edifice of the truths of dogmatics, is the postulate of the science of theology.²

At this point it has become clear what, in my view, should be understood by a dogmatic system. If I am not mistaken, this has helped to weaken much antipathy toward everything that hints of a system. After all, many appear to have so much resistance against a system of truths because they are entirely unfamiliar with, or have formed a false notion about, what science is and what a scientific system is. People think that a system is fatal [63] for living life, whereas we saw that a system is precisely the description and explanation of life, and that with the abundance and fullness of life the organic and the systematic constantly increased.

A system as system, including a dogmatic system, has no cons, but only pros. It obtains a shadowy side, occasionally even a very dark side, only when and to the extent that it corresponds decreasingly to its unique idea, and thereby is less of a system.

A system with its own unique principium may never be adopted apart from, or forced upon, the material that one wants to set forth systematically. For then it would be nothing more than a Procrustean bed, where one adapts and fits the truths, as good and as bad as they were. That would indeed be fatal for living. But such a system with its own principium must always be derived from the

2. In connection with this entire subject, compare L. Shoeberlein, *Das Princip und System der Dogmatik: Einleitung in die Christliche Glaubenslehre* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1881).

material itself. The dogmatician does not have to invent or devise the system and the principium; but by means of serious research, by means of living into what he wants to study and describe, let him attempt to arrive at the discovery of what, out of all those truths, comprises the constitutive, governing basic idea, the innermost driving force, the hidden stirrings, the deepest root.

In this way, he is bound most strictly to his material, to the object of his investigation. If we know from where the dogmatician draws his material and what kind of material it is, we can very easily identify the shadowy sides that, due to the neglect of one thing or another, will be observable in his dogmatic system.

The source from which all dogmatic truth has sprung forth and continues to spring forth is only Holy Scripture alone. The dogmatician does not, however, draw his material directly from Scripture. How could he do that, and from where would he derive the standard that stipulated which truth he would have to include in his dogmatics, and which truth he should omit? That has occurred long before he came on the scene, throughout the course of the centuries, under the leading of the Spirit, through the church. He finds his material given to him in the confession of the church of which he is a member, which material itself, however, establishes the requirement of scripturality. Both of these—Scripture and confession—are objective and exist independently of the dogmatician. In order that they receive subjective force for him as well, and can be reproduced, he must also sense within himself the testimony of the Holy Spirit—that testimony, however, as discerned not only in his heart but as discerned in the whole church that is now living, of which he is but one individual member.

The requirements fixed for the principium and system of dogmatics are therefore three: (1) that it be Scriptural, of divine origin; (2) that it be Ecclesiastical, bearing a churchly character, not despising the lessons of history, [64] possessing a conservative and simultaneously antievolutionary element, in its essence the fruit of its own time; and (3) that it be relevant, taking into consideration and corresponding to the needs of this generation, being progressive and striving for perfection.

Neglecting one or more of these three requirements can cause nothing but damage and increase resistance toward the dogmatic system.

If the dogmatic system seeks to be exclusively Biblical, it runs the risk of being neither truly dogmatic nor a genuine system. But precisely for that reason, that is what many want. In order to avoid all that is dogmatic and systematic, people make a colossal leap back over eighteen centuries of the Christian Church and land, so they think, on the unadulterated and secure ground of Scripture. There, neither with Jesus nor with all the prophets and apostles, we find no system at all. If by that is meant that Scripture never employs abstract concepts, is always graphic, picturesque, lively, and concrete, and describes everything in terms of the fresh awareness of life, then such a claim is undoubtedly true. But Scripture is not for that reason unsystematic. Is not Scripture itself one entity, an organism, where one single basic idea animates all its parts? And do not the thoughts of Jesus and of the prophets and apostles, of each individually and of all together, constitute an inner unity and a comprehensive entity that agrees internally and in all its parts, even though none of them has attempted to communicate their thoughts systematically, and even though the one was given a deeper glimpse and much broader view than another? Every more penetrating investigation of Scripture must proceed and does proceed from that presupposition.

But properly speaking, a dogmatic system can never be obtained from Scripture. One would get at most a kind of Biblical Theology, or whatever else one might call this discipline. Such a system has this defect: first, it is non-ecclesiastical in nature, often born of anti-ecclesiastical impulses, existing outside the church, not advancing the church, and would almost compel the church to reduce all ecclesiastical differences to the same level, committing an offense against its own existence and history. Secondly, it is foreign to the spiritual life and the spiritual experience of the church, lacks all life and animus, being fervently zealous in opposing everything it considers narrow, including even aversion to any intolerance, seeking refuge behind universal-Christian, often vague and undefined, concepts. The well-known “Biblical Theologians” of the first half of this century can provide us with ample proof of this. Thirdly, under the slogan [65] of *sola Scriptura*, by reducing Scripture virtually to a codebook, denigrating it to something like a *codex Justinianus* from which one plucks the *articula fidei*, this approach usually risks becoming very unscriptural and losing its function of serving the church. Given that approach, we can expect to receive

criticism, as published recently by Professor Doedes against our confessions.

Still more could perhaps be said against a dogmatic system that, as it misunderstands Scripture and the continuing testimony of the Holy Spirit, seeks to be drawn only from what the Church has declared. Such a system runs the serious risk, as we see in the Roman Catholic Church, of abandoning the divine source, giving honor to human authority, culminating in deifying people, that is to say, in idolatry. We see that all too clearly in the Roman Catholic Church. But among Protestants as well, the very same dangers accompany such a system, though in another manner. For people end up, not in theory but certainly in practice, declaring the Church to be infallible, considering the constant testing of its pronouncements by means of Scripture to be unnecessary, even going as far as swearing by every word and every formulation of the confession. Such a system is, first of all, very unscriptural. Secondly, by misunderstanding the continuing testimony of the Holy Spirit and thus the progressive character that Dogmatics must have, the system becomes barren, lifeless, deadly, and destructive, a petrification, making those who advocate it either in theory or in practice to be petty, narrow-minded, and parochial. In Protestant circles we then find legalistic formalism, that rigid, ice-cold conservatism, that miserable hunting for heretics, features that, because the Protestant spirit seeks the freedom that gave it birth, leads it on a quest that ends up in the perpetually open arms of unbelief. Thirdly, under the slogan of being genuinely ecclesiastical, such a system threatens to destroy the essence of the Church. For it causes the Church either—as we see in Rome—to transition gradually into becoming a false Church, gradually removing from it the marks of a true Church, or—as is the case within Protestantism—to denounce as heretics all other Christian church denominations, elevating one's own church denomination to the one true Church, and when that one does not pass the test, to seek one's salvation and consolation in conventicles, societies, and evangelism groups, in order there to discuss the great apostasy of our day.

The third requirement that must be met in connection with forming a dogmatic system was the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the dogmatician himself and of the church from which he draws life. Great emphasis has been placed on this Christian consciousness, more now than formerly, ever since Schleiermacher,

who declared this to be the only [66] source. To a certain extent, this was correct. Thereby the progressive character of the church, of its confession, and thus of dogmatics as well, was being maintained, and the error was prevented of people thinking that at a particular moment in the past, with this or that Synod, the Holy Spirit had caused the full light to shine in the church upon all the truths of salvation. But if that Christian consciousness is seen to be the only source of the dogmatic system, then very serious dangers arise. First, by setting aside Scripture, the divine origin and Scriptural character of the material for dogmatics are lost. Secondly, by rejecting the confession of the Church, history is misunderstood, the leading of the Spirit in the past is denied, the truth now lies embedded in conservatism, and is entirely surrendered. But then, thirdly, the modern era can never be understood properly. No longer normed by Scripture, severed from the past, the Christian consciousness will gradually lose its Christian character; what the Holy Spirit testifies to within the church can at that point simply be invented, but can be evaluated only according to a subjective standard. At that point, the system thereby becomes subjective, individualistic, fashionable in the modern sense of that word.

Those, in short, are the disadvantages that can be bound up with a dogmatic system. Taken by itself, it has no cons, only pros. The extent to which it corresponds to its own idea depends entirely on what kind of system it is. It becomes more damaging, and causes more injury, to the degree that it misunderstands or fails to fulfill the requirements that, in my view, must be assigned to it. To spurn one of those requirements is fundamentally to misunderstand all three. A dogmatic system must be Scriptural, historical-ecclesiastical, and at the same time progressive. A dogmatic system can be each of these three only when it is all three simultaneously. For this reason it will have more advantages, and will spread blessing more abundantly, to the degree that it fulfills these three requirements.

So then, the advantages are many, three of which are especially noteworthy.

1. It maintains Christianity as being true for our mind, and shows us the reasonableness of our faith. A dogmatic system is not an apologetics, but nonetheless has an apologetic nature. That too is needed, namely, that Christianity prove itself to our mind, as something that is neither fable nor fiction, but real truth and life. That

comes fully to light only in the dogmatic system where for the first time theology comes to its own completely independent existence and is sustained with its own faculty.

[67] 2. It brings the life of the church to clear awareness. Not merely being alive, but knowing that one is alive, knowing oneself, one's own life in its origin and abundance, is the highest benefit.

The spiritual life of the church must be a clearheaded, conscious life. That is expressed already in the confessions of the Church, where the church gives consideration to itself. But this is only partial. The church strives for constantly more light and does not court the darkness. The Church requires theology, presses for theology, cries out for theology, without which the church would languish—even as theology would die without the church. Theology, and especially dogmatics whose essence must be systematic, has a glorious task; namely, to lead the church in understanding and knowing itself, in order to bring the church to awareness of its own life and treasures. That will contribute significantly to keeping the church on the right road, to protecting the church from missteps and errors, and thereby making the church's life healthy once again or continuing the church's health, and promoting the church's flourishing and growth and development.

3. Thirdly, the dogmatic system will supply us with a correct insight into the organism of Holy Scripture. Thereby the true unity within those many and various revealed truths will become visible to us for the first time. Order will be provided in that apparent confusion, unity and system among that colorful variety. A light will arise in our soul to shine upon all those wonderful ways of God. His redemptive acts, all of them and each of them in its own way, will radiate with luster and glory. And the blessed discovery that with the dogmatic system we are dealing not with a chaos wherein our spirit can find no order, but with an artifact of the Triune God, all of whose works comprise artistry and beauty, will fill our souls with joy and inexpressible gratitude. The dogmatic system leads us to know God and to revere God.

If that is for it, what then will be against it?

A Note on the Ensuing Discussion³

In response to the address, a lively discussion ensued. There were three questions in particular that came up for discussion. First, regarding the notion of Dogmatics. It appeared that many could not agree entirely with the presentation of the speaker. People did not want to be bound by the strict definition of the term *dogma* as an ecclesiastical faith-truth, but wanted to interpret the word in a broader sense so that one could speak of a Biblical Dogmatics as well. But then people get confused with regard to the existing distinction between Biblical Theology and Ecclesiastical Dogmatics.

Regarding the meaning of the term *dogma*, see Rother, *Zur Dogmatik*; Schoeberlein, *Princip und System der Dogmatik*; as well as Hagenbach, *Encyclopaëdie*, 10th edition; etc.

A second question involved the mutual connection of the three requirements for a dogmatic system as set forth by the speaker: that it must be scriptural, ecclesiastical, and progressive. It was evident which one everybody thought was most important, and should weigh the heaviest. The scriptural character of Dogmatics is primary; Scripture binds and is authoritative; where conflict exists between Scripture and the confession, the latter must yield; in fact, this is a requirement that the confession itself imposes. By letting Scripture speak in such cases, Dogmatics does not become un-ecclesiastical but fulfills the requirement that the church assigned to itself and to its confession. But caution must be the preeminent recommendation at this point; no dogmatician has the right to prescribe for the church its own confession.

The third question was difficult; namely, how is the progressive character of Dogmatics to be maintained? May the dogmatician express himself beyond what the church says, and can he do that without coming into conflict with the church and its confession? Surely the dogmatician may not elevate to the status of dogma what is not confessed by the Church. Not the individual, not even the scholar, but only the Church establishes dogmas. Nevertheless, the dogmatician's ecclesiastical position does not prevent him from

3. This appendix is Dr. Kloosterman's translation of H. Beuker's brief report on the discussion that followed Bavinck's address. It was published in the same edition of *De Vrije Kerk* 10 (1881): 488–90.—Ed.

harboring sentiments and opinions that, though not in conflict with the confession, nonetheless are not being taught by the Church and its members.