George Lindbeck and the Christological Nature of Doctrine

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Introduction

Twenty years ago, in a conference paper comparing the theological approaches of Hans Frei (1922–1988) and George Lindbeck (1923–), I argued that "where Lindbeck had a cultural-linguistic theory Frei had Christology."[1] I noted that both theologians regarded theology as a "second-order" reflection upon church practices, but argued that whilst in Frei's hands this was justified by "a Christological insight into the nature of the Church," for Lindbeck it was justified by a general cultural-linguistic theory of religion. I noted that the two men shared the conviction that church practice is properly regulated by attention to scriptural narrative, but argued that whilst for Frei this was prompted by his insight into the Christological subject-matter of the Gospels, for Lindbeck it was grounded in a general account of the nature of religions of the book, which was simply an extension of his general cultural-linguistic theory. And, finally, I claimed that, unlike Frei, "Lindbeck manages to present the whole of his cultural-linguistic theory without Christology appearing as anything other than an illustration."[2]

In this article, I will argue that all of these claims about Lindbeck were wholly mistaken. I will argue, instead, that Lindbeck's account of the nature of doctrine is part of an account of the church led by the Spirit into a Christ-centered reading of the scriptures, and so formed as an embodied witness to Jesus as Lord. I will argue that, in Lindbeck's account, doctrine properly acts to keep the church to a pattern of life in which the full humanity of Jesus of Nazareth is acknowledged *as* the humanity of God. And I will argue that Lindbeck's most distinctive Christological contribution, in the years after the publication of *The Nature of Doctrine* in 1984, was to insist that this Jesus who is the humanity of God is and remains the messiah of Israel.

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[1] Published as Mike Higton, "Frei's Christology and Lindbeck's Cultural-Linguistic Theory," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50.1 (1997), pp. 83–95; the quote is from p. 95.

[2] Ibid. pp. 93–94.

Lindbeck's Ecumenical Construal of Doctrine

When I returned to Lindbeck recently, after a gap of many years, I found a very different theologian from the one whom I had portrayed in the mid-90s. The first steps in my revaluation of his work are covered in an article published in *Modern Theology* in 2014, the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of Lindbeck's most famous work, *The Nature of Doctrine.*[3] That article covers many aspects of Lindbeck's work up to and including 1984, but for my present purposes two of the points made in it are particularly salient.

First, Lindbeck's main purpose in *The Nature of Doctrine* is to make sense of, and provide guidance for, ecumenical reasoning. In a 2005 article, he described *The Nature of Doctrine* as "a less-than-necessary offshoot of the ecumenical practice of 'doctrinal reconciliation without capitulation'," which "is misinterpreted when its purpose of supplying theoretical warrants for ecumenical practice is disregarded, as has often been done."[4] It is best read as a reflection upon the practices of reasoning that had been driving major ecumenical dialogues in the 60s and 70s, which Lindbeck thought were not well captured or supported by existing accounts of the nature of doctrine. His account is an attempt, by means of a better account of the nature of doctrine, to steady and direct ecumenical reasoning, in service of the basic ecumenical imperative: the attempt to read the various Christian denominations as diverse forms of faithfulness to the same God.

Second, the particular form that Lindbeck's account of doctrine takes is dictated by a basic theological conviction with deep foundations in his thinking: the apophatic conviction that we can trust *that* our words apply to God, but that we cannot know *how* they apply.[5] Even when doctrine speaks the truth about God, Lindbeck says, it does not bear information in the same way as ordinary propositions. Rather, doctrines work by shaping the life of the church as a response to God. That lived response to God can itself, however, correspond to God's being and will; it can tell the truth about God

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[3] Mike Higton, "Reconstructing *The Nature of Doctrine*," *Modern Theology* 30.1 (2014), pp. 1–31.

[4] "Ecumenisms in Conflict: Where does Hauerwas Stand?" in *God, Truth and Witness: Engaging Stanley Hauerwas*, ed. L. Gregory Jones, Reinhard Hütter and C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005), pp. 212–28: p. 214 n. 4 and pp. 212–13, n. 1.

[5] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1984), p. 66. Lindbeck did not think this a particularly controversial position: see his review of Gordon Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method*, by Gordon Kaufmann, in *Religious Studies Review* 5.4 (October 1979), pp. 262–4: p. 264. See also the works cited in n. 27 below.

– and Lindbeck means "truth" here in as realist a sense as one could wish. The speech that is the church's life bears real ontological commitments, and is made true or false by its correspondence to a God whose existence and nature are in no way dependent upon the church. Yet this truth is spoken most directly by the life, the practice of the church, including in its praise and prayer, rather than in theological propositions considered in abstraction. The theologian who has mastered the statements of technical doctrinal theology does not thereby know God better than the saints, because those doctrinal statements, if they are doing their job well, do no more than capture something of what is known and proclaimed already in the lives of the saints, and help to pass on the pattern of such lives.

So, Lindbeck said in 1967 that "Those who learn to speak of God rightly may not know what they are saying in any cognitively significant sense, but yet their very beings may be transformed into conformity with him who alone is the high and mighty One."[6] In 1971, he wrote that

> The fundamental way in which we come to know the essential, the infallible, truths of the faith, whether these be changeable or unchangeable, is by learning how to use ordinary Christian language correctly and effectively in prayer, praise, admonition and teaching. This is the fundamental, primary, knowledge of the faith. It constitutes that *sensus fidelium* of which the theologians speak. It is more like a skill than it is like explicit, reflective theological learning.[7]

This practice is sustained not primarily by individuals but by Christian communities, indeed by the whole Body of Christ. For Lindbeck, Christianity as actually lived can therefore be thought of as "a single gigantic proposition" corresponding to God's being and will.[8]

In other words, Lindbeck's claim is that doctrine functions to regulate the life of the Christian church, and that this life can be thought of as embodied

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[6] "Discovering Thomas (1): The Classical Statement of Christian Theism," *Una Sancta* 24.1 (1967), pp. 45–52: p. 51. See also Gilles Emery, "Thomas d'Aquin postlibéral? La lecture de saint Thomas par George Lindbeck," in *Postlibéralisme? La théologie de George Lindbeck et sa réception*, ed. Marc Boss, Gilles Emery and Pierre Gisel (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2004), pp. 85–111, translated by Matthew Levering as "Thomas Aquinas, Postliberal? George Lindbeck's Reading of St. Thomas," in *Trinity, Church, and the Human Person: Thomistic Essays* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2007), pp. 263–90: p. 287.

[7] "The Infallibility Debate," in *The Infallibility Debate*, ed. John J. Kirvan (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1971), pp. 107–52: p. 126.

[8] *Nature*, p. 51.

speech about God. Different doctrinal traditions regulate this embodied speech in different ways, but the ecumenist's conviction is that these different forms of embodied speech should nevertheless to be read (insofar as it turns out to be possible) as speaking faithfully of the same God.

The pertinence of both these points to the question of Christology becomes clear only when we see that what these diverse forms of embodied speech say when they speak about God is, most fundamentally, "Jesus is Lord". A pattern of Christian life is, precisely to the extent that it is Christian, a way of proclaiming the lordship of Christ. A system of doctrine, to the extent that it is true doctrine, is a way of keeping that life proclaiming Christ's lordship faithfully. The whole task of ecumenical inquiry into doctrine is, for Lindbeck, the attempt to read the doctrinal traditions of differing Christian denominations as diverse ways of regulating shared lives of devotion and witness to the same Lord Jesus Christ.

Embodied Christocentric Reading

Lindbeck's work as ecumenist and as theorist of doctrine is, then, utterly Christocentric. This was true well before *The Nature of Doctrine*: in 1970, for instance, Lindbeck described "Jesus is Lord" as a "meta-doctrinal statement" "because it defines the rules by which all Christian games of interpretation should be played rather than itself being part of a game."[9] In the 1980s, however, and especially in the years immediately after the publication of *The Nature of Doctrine*, the Christocentric shape of Lindbeck's thought became visible in a new way, as he turned his attention more fully to scriptural hermeneutics.

The hermeneutical material in *The Nature of Doctrine* itself is quite slight, largely confined to the section "Faithfulness as Intratextuality" in chapter 6, Lindbeck's sketch "Toward a Postliberal Theology." There, Lindbeck describes the general idea of intratextuality – that is, of learning to inhabit the strange new world within the scriptures, "the semiotic universe paradigmatically encoded in holy writ"[10] which "supplies the interpretive framework within which believers seek to live their lives and understand

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[9] "The Future of the Dialogue: Pluralism or an Eventual Synthesis of Doctrine," in *Christian Action and Openness to the World*, ed. Joseph Papin (Villanova, VA: Villanova University Press, 1970), pp. 37–51: p. 48. See also "The Infallibility Debate," pp. 110–11.

[10] *Nature*, p. 116.

reality."[11] He states that the Christian form of intratextuality will be Christ-centered (such that "the story of Jesus is the key to the understanding of reality"),[12] and that typology will play a role in the process by which the reader's world is re-read in the light of Jesus' story,[13] but the discussion is brief, and its content is largely borrowed from Hans Frei and David Kelsey.[14]

In a series of articles in the late 80s, however, Lindbeck turned to make this hermeneutical material the focus of his attention, and in the process made clearer than before the way in which the task of ecumenical inquiry into doctrine is essentially a hermeneutical task.[15]

According to Lindbeck, Christians in all their present diversity are heirs to a hermeneutical tradition in which the scriptures are read as "a canonically and narrationally unified and internally glossed … whole centered on Jesus Christ, and telling the story of the dealings of the Triune God with his people and his world in ways which are typologically … applicable to the present."[16]

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[11] Ibid., p. 117.

[12] Ibid., p. 119.

[13] Ibid., p. 118.

[14] Lindbeck developed some of this material while writing *The Nature of Doctrine*, in "The Bible as Realistic Narrative," in *Consensus in Theology? A Dialogue with Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx*, ed. Leonard Swidler (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1980), p. 81–5. He drew on Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1974) and *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975), and David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975).

[15] "Barth and Textuality," *Theology Today* 43.3 (October 1986), pp. 361–76 is a promissory note for this recasting; the crucial pieces are "The Story-shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation," in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 161–78; "The Church," in *Keeping the Faith: Essays to Mark the Centenary of Lux Mundi*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright (London: SPCK, 1989), pp. 179–208, reprinted in George Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. James J. Buckley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 145–65; "The Church's Mission to a Postmodern Culture," in *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World*, ed. Frederic B. Burnham (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1989), pp. 37–55; and "Scripture, Consensus and Community," in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 74–101, reprinted in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, pp. 201–222. It is also worth including "Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment," *Pro Ecclesia* 5.2 (Spring 1996), pp. 144–60, which appeared in a revised form as "Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Intertextual Social Embodiment," in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996), pp. 221–40.

[16] "Scripture, Consensus and Community," p. 203.

Christians are called to continue this tradition, by reading their scriptures, Old and New Testaments together, as presenting an overarching narrative of "God's dealings with the world and his people."[17] They are called to construe that whole story around its pivot in the "history-like" narratives about Jesus of Nazareth, which render him as a particular, unsubstitutable character,[18] and they are called to the task of "imaginatively inscribing the world in the biblical text and troping all that we are, do, and encounter in biblical terms."[19]

In line with his prioritization of practice over propositions, Lindbeck insists that such reading is completed in Christian practice.

> To interpret the Bible is to use it to interpret other things. The strictly intratextual meaning of the cross, for example, is indefinite or vague (in Charles Pierce's sense of the term) until it is completed by such social-ritual-experimental enactments as taking up the cross, or bearing the cross, or being crucified with Christ so that we may rise with him.[20]

Christian patterns of life are properly understood, therefore, as lived interpretations of scripture, declaring in some specific practical form the lordship of Christ.

The Role of Doctrine

Doctrine, in Lindbeck's mature construal, guides participation in this ongoing tradition of Christian reading, and thereby guides the ways in which Christians live the proclamation that the Jesus of scripture is Lord.[21] Because

[17] "Postcritical Canonical Interpretation," in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 26–51: p. 29.

[18] "Story-shaped Church," p. 164; "Dulles on Method," *Pro Ecclesia* 1 (1992) pp. 53–60: pp. 58–59. The term "history-like" is borrowed from Frei.

[19] That is, as the specific person he is, rather than as a cypher demanding to be decoded as a representative of some more general reality. See "Barth and Textuality," 371.

[20] "Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment," p. 151.

[21] I developed an earlier version of the material in this section and in the section on "Jesus as Messiah" in a piece entitled "Lindbeck, Doctrine, and Reading" for a forthcoming festschrift. That piece was written in dialogue with the chapter on Lindbeck in Peter Ochs, *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

Christians live (or should live) by inhabiting the scriptures, doctrines are (inseparably) rules for reading and rules for living. Doctrine provides a grammar of Christian exegesis, as a grammar of Christian practice.

Participation in this tradition is, however, a dynamic affair. "The only rationally productive procedure," Lindbeck says, "is to trust the tradition of which one is a part until anomalies arise, that is, until there is good evidence in terms of the criteria internal to the tradition that this or that strand in the web of belief which sustains the inquiry is untenable"[22] – but such difficulties are bound to arise. After all, "the worlds in which we live change. They need to be inscribed anew into the world of the text. It is only by constant reexplication, remediation, and reapplication that this can be done."[23] When they arise, some kind of change is called for, and whilst, for Lindbeck, such change should always be a matter of digging deeper into the tradition, it can nevertheless take the form of real discovery and surprise. The church is driven by some new rupture or failure or encounter to discover more of the deep structure of what they have been given, uncovering truths not yet grasped, or being brought face to face with errors not yet recognized.

To inhabit scripture in the way that Lindbeck describes is to enact a lived construal of it. Such construals have a structure to them: in practice, they take certain claims about the proper meaning of scripture to be more central, and others to be more peripheral. In Lindbeck's account, the claim that Jesus is Lord (that scripture is to be read around the stories of Jesus as their center) is the deepest claim embodied in faithful Christian practice, but that practice will also embody many other subordinate claims. When uncertainty or disagreement arises, Christians are forced to articulate this structure, and to identify how to reorder the shallower parts of their construal so as to remain faithful (or so as to become *more* faithful) to what is deeper. In some situations, where the problem turns out to run especially deep, doctrinal definition may be called for: the development of a new explicit rule which will determine some major pattern of the church's reading.[24]

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[22] "Dulles on Method," p. 56.

[23] "Barth and Textuality," p. 375. For explication, meditation and application as phases of the interpretation of scripture, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2: *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, tr. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), pp. 722–40.

[24] See also my account of Lindbeck's "decision theory" of doctrinal development in "Reconstructing *The Nature of Doctrine*," pp. 19–20.

I will turn to a concrete example of this otherwise intolerably abstract description towards the end of this article, but it is important at this stage to pause in order to note what is being said here about the nature of doctrine. It should be clear by now that, far from being the offshoot of a generic cultural-linguistic theory of religion, Lindbeck's account of doctrine is in fact deeply theological. According to him, God is forming a people whose life together, as a reading of scripture, declares the Lordship of Christ. But God's formation of this people is an ongoing matter, and the community is being formed to speak of God only as it lives under a discipline of on-going reformation, dependent upon the ever-renewed gift of God's grace for any truthfulness that it displays. Doctrine is one of the gifts that God gives to the church in this process. To an external observer, a moment of doctrinal definition may well look like the arbitrary selection of one possible direction of development within an evolving tradition of reasoning. To a participant, it may instead be read in the light of a "confidence that the Holy Spirit guides the church into the truth."[25] The Spirit brings the church up against the scriptures again and again, to discover in disciplined attention to the text, and as an incoercible gift of God, something new about what is demanded of those who would read them as a narrationally unified whole centered on Jesus Christ, telling the story of God's ways with God's people and God's world, in ways that are typologically applicable to the present.[26] Doctrine guides the reading by which God is forming a people to say "Jesus is Lord" truly. That is its nature and function, and any claims about the truth of doctrine, or about its relation to experience, must ultimately flow from this.[27]

In a sense, then, *all* doctrine is Christology. It is an expression of decisions or clarifications that have emerged in the history of Christian discipleship concerning the boundaries of that discipleship – about what we must do and say, and must not do and not say, in order to embody in our lives together the proclamation that Jesus is Lord.

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[25] "Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment," p. 146.

[26] See the quotation above from "Scripture, Consensus, Community," p. 203.

[27] For Lindbeck's clarification of his ideas about truth, see "Response to Bruce Marshall," *The Thomist* 53.3 (1989) pp. 403–6 and "Reply to Avery Cardinal Dulles," *First Things* 139 (2004) pp. 13–15.

Lindbeck on Christology

It is possible to take this claim further, however, and to connect this account of doctrine more closely to the formulae of classical Christology. In *The Nature of Doctrine*, Lindbeck proposes in passing a regulative reading of the major Christological claims of the patristic period, trying to say what rules for practice are encoded in the ancient creeds.

> First, there is the monotheistic principle: there is only one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus. Second, there is the principle of historical specificity: the stories of Jesus refer to a genuine human being who was born, lived and died in a particular place. Third, there is the principle of what may be infelicitously called Christological maximalism: every possible importance is to be ascribed to Jesus that is not inconsistent with the first [two] rules.[28]

Lindbeck's discussion at that point is too brief to be wholly convincing. It is not just that he does not explain how the first two of these statements are actually rules for Christian practice (rather than propositional claims independent of Christian practice). More importantly, the third rule as it is formulated here is too weak to justify his claim that "It would not be difficult to analyze four centuries of Trinitarian and Christological development as the product of the joint logical pressure of these three principles."[29] With that weasel phrase "every *possible* importance," it lacks the force required by the more basic affirmation that Jesus is Lord, which insists that a Christian sense of what is possible here *must not* stop short of the affirmation that Jesus is to be regarded as of decisive significance in every area of life. It was that insistence, after all, that transformed the early church's sense of what it was and was not possible to attribute to Jesus. Lindbeck points in this direction by adding that "This last rule, it may be noted, follows from the central Christian conviction that Jesus Christ is the highest possible clue (though an often dim and ambiguous one to creaturely and sinful eyes) within the space-time world of human experience to God, i.e., to what is of maximal importance"[30] – yet this conviction is not obviously well captured by the rule.

Nevertheless, Lindbeck's work elsewhere in *The Nature of Doctrine* and in other writings shows how these three principles might be reformulated more convincingly.

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[28] *Nature*, p. 94.

[29] Ibid., 94–5.

[30] Ibid., p. 94.

The first principle, that there is one God, is more fully the principle that Christians should live in such a way as to take the story of their world to be the story of

> a being who created the cosmos without any humanly fathomable reason, but – simply for his own good pleasure and the pleasure of his goodness – appointed Homo Sapiens steward of one minuscule part of this cosmos, permitted appalling evils, chose Israel and the church as witnessing peoples, and sent Jesus as Messiah and Immanuel, God with us.[31]

To believe in God is to be committed to living within this story, and so to proclaim in one's living that this truly is the story of the world.[32]

The second principle is simply Lindbeck's core hermeneutical rule: Christians should read the scriptures in such a way that Gospels' narrative identification of Jesus of Nazareth remains central. That identification is precisely the kind of identification appropriate to a creaturely identity, indeed a human identity (someone "as entirely and concretely human as you or I".)[33] It is the identification of someone who gains his identity through "the interaction of purpose and circumstance" in the manner of a realistic narrative.[34] This is what we are to take the name "Jesus" to mean, and we are to read the scriptures above all as witness to him – and this principle is Lindbeck's version of the insistence on Jesus' full humanity.

The third principle is that this Jesus is Lord: that he is "the unsurpassable and irreplaceable clue to who and what the God of Israel and the universe is."[35] This Jesus, in all his realistically narrated identity, is God's communication to the world. The second principle (associated with Lindbeck's apophaticism) means that Jesus does not communicate a message separable from himself: the message is communicated in and through his narrated identity, his humanity, and Jesus says what he says of God by his life, not by his words considered in abstraction from that life. But this third principle states that

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[31] Ibid., p. 121.

[32] "[T]he Christian God is defined by the Christian story." (Review of *The Myth of God Incarnate*, *Journal of Religion* 59.2 (1979), pp. 248–50: p. 249.

[33] "Justification and Atonement: An Ecumenical Trajectory," in *By Faith Alone: Essays on Justification in Honor of Gerhard O. Forde*, ed. Joseph A. Burgess and Marc Kolden (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 183–219: p. 213.

[34] *Nature*, p. 120. Lindbeck's debt to Hans Frei here is obvious.

[35] "Story-shaped Church," p. 164.

what is communicated in this life is God. Or rather, this third principle requires that Christians should, in their practice, take Jesus as their Lord and their God. They should show by their action that the question, "How then should we live?," which the first principle has reworded as "How should we live as creatures of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the world this God has created?," finds its deepest form when reworded again as "How then should we follow this Jesus?" Christians should so live as to show that there is no deeper form that this question can take.[36] In so doing their lives will proclaim the truth about God and the world in a way that they otherwise could not, and they will proclaim more clearly and directly the truth encoded in the claim that "the incarnation is the fullest possible eruption into our history of the infinite mystery that surrounds all our beginnings and ends."[37]

When filled out like this, I suspect it would indeed begin to be plausible to see "four centuries of Trinitarian and Christological development as the product of the joint logical pressure of these three principles."[38] I also suspect that much of the rest of Lindbeck's work on doctrine, as an ecumenist working primarily on Lutheran–Catholic dialogue, and therefore on theological developments in the sixteenth century and beyond, could equally well be located within this development. This is obvious in the case of his careful work on the relationship between a Lutheran *sola scriptura* and Catholic accounts of infallibility or irreformability.[39] The second Christological

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[36] "[T]he Christian language is the only one which has the words and concepts which can authentically speak of the ground of being, goal of history and true humanity (for one cannot genuinely speak of these apart from telling and re-telling the story of Jesus of Nazareth." ("Unbelievers and the '*Sola Christi*'," *Dialog* 12 (1973), pp. 182–9; reprinted in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, pp. 77–87: p. 85.

[37] "Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Intertextual Social Embodiment," p. 238.

[38] For some hints of how a more detailed Chalcedonian Christology could be developed along similar lines, see David Yeago, "Jesus of Nazareth and Cosmic Redemption: The Relevance of Maximus the Confessor," *Modern Theology* 12.2 (1996), pp. 163–193.

[39] See, for example, "Reform and Infallibility," *Cross Currents* 11.4 (1961), pp. 345–56; "Ecclesiology and Roman Catholic Renewal," *Religion in Life* 33 (1963), pp. 383–94; reprinted in *New Theology 2*, ed. Martin Marty and Dean Peerman (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 183–97; "The Problem of Doctrinal Development and Contemporary Protestant Theology," *Concilium* 3.1 (1967), pp. 64–72; "The Infallibility Debate"; *Infallibility*, the 1972 Pere Marquette Lecture (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1972), reprinted in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, pp. 120–42; "Papacy and *Ius Divinum*: A Lutheran View," in *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue V*, ed. Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974), pp. 193–208; "The Reformation and the Infallibility Debate," in *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VI*, ed. Paul C. Empie, T. Austin Murphy, Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1980), pp. 101–19; "Problems on the Road to Unity: Infallibility," in

principle here could, after all, be thought of as being further secured and specified by a combination of *solus Christus* and *sola scriptura*, which together insist that the Christocentric reading of scripture is the central practice for shaping the theological mind of the church. We could also, however, include Lindbeck's work on the doctrine of justification, *sola gratia* and *sola fide*.[40] The proper purpose of the doctrine of justification is to regulate where Christians place their trust. It calls them to keep trusting in God alone (which is what it means to have one God, rather than following after idols of one kind or another). Together with the *solus Christus* and *sola scriptura*, the *sola gratia* and *sola fide* insist that Christians must "place themselves within the total community of faith and read the authoritative sources as witnesses in their entirety to Jesus Christ who in his very humanity is Immanuel, God with us, and is alone to be trusted and obeyed in life and death."[41] Lindbeck was therefore able to say that the point of all the Reformation *solas* together was "to produce a basic consensus on how to read the Bible"[42] and that "The contribution of the Reformers … was to clarify and intensify the hermeneutical implications of the pre-Reformation conviction that Scripture is primary and is to be Christocentrically interpreted."[43]

It makes sense, then, to claim that Lindbeck gives a Christological account of the nature of doctrine. Doctrine exists to call the church to more faithful following of Jesus as Lord, as the humanity of God. Fundamentally, it clarifies, directs, and protects the practices of the church by which "Jesus" is given its proper, human, meaning, and the practices of the church by which the nature of this Jesus' divine lordship is discovered and displayed.

Unitatis Redintegratio 1964-74: The Impact of the Decree on Ecumenism, ed. Gerard Békés and Vilmos Vajta = *Studia Anselmiana* 71 (1977), pp. 98–109.

[40] See, for example, "The Reformation in an Ecumenical Age," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 61.1 (1967), 21–8; "Article IV and Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue: The Limits of Diversity in the Understanding of Justification," *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 61 (1981), pp. 3–16; reprinted in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, pp. 38–52; "A Question of Compatibility: A Lutheran Reflects on Trent," in *Justification by Faith*, ed. H. George Anderson, T Austin Murphy and Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1985), pp. 230–40.

[41] "The Reformation Heritage and Christian Unity," *Lutheran Quarterly* 2.4 (1988), pp. 477–502; reprinted in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, pp. 53–76: p.73.

[42] Ibid., p. 60.

[43] Ibid., p. 73.

Jesus as Messiah

Lindbeck's postliberal proposal, however, does not simply provide this construal of the nature of existing Christian doctrine. At the heart of his late work is a passionate plea for a new moment of doctrinal definition: an insistence that, in order to continue faithfully in this project of Christian reading in the present context, a new specification of the limits upon such reading is now demanded of the church.

He gives this new doctrinal definition in passing in *The Nature of Doctrine*, as an example of the layers of meaning that a doctrinal statement can have. It is "The doctrine that Jesus is the Messiah" which

> functions lexically as the warrant for adding the New Testament literature to the canon, syntactically as a hermeneutical rule that Jesus Christ be interpreted as the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises (and the Old Testament as pointing toward him), and semantically as a rule regarding the referring use of such titles as "Messiah."[44]

Lindbeck's passionate insistence, however, is that this doctrine needs to be held in a particular form. His characteristic way in to this topic is ecclesiological. We have seen that, for Lindbeck, Trinitarian and Christological doctrine regulate the life of the church so that it proclaims the Lordship of Christ. Ecclesiological doctrine does the same job, but with the focus directly on the life of the community: rather than providing an identity description of the one whom people are called to follow, it provides an identity description of the people who have been called together to worship and witness to this God in the world.

To say that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, however, means that the God to whom Christians witness is both the God of the church and the God of Israel. Some account if its relation to Israel is therefore demanded of the church. Such description has been offered in multiple ways in Christian history, but in the present post-Holocaust situation it has become appallingly clear just how deathly some of those descriptions are when they function as rules for socially embodied reading of scripture. In this situation, the church cannot but ask whether continuing to read faithfully as followers of Jesus now demands that a decision be made between these different possible ways of identifying the church. Lindbeck believes that such a decision certainly is needed, and that

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[44] *Nature*, p. 81.

the church must pronounce a new doctrinal prohibition against supersessionism.

This claim has deep roots in Lindbeck's work. As far back as the 1960s, when looking for ways of making sense of the church's post-Christendom, diaspora situation, he had been attracted by the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the church as the people of God, and the idea that "the church is the people of God in the same thoroughly concrete way that Israel is."[45] As his thought became more explicitly scriptural and hermeneutical from the time of *The Nature of Doctrine* onwards, this morphed into an emphasis on "the messianic pilgrim people of God typologically shaped by Israel's story,"[46] and to the insistence that God, in gathering the church, is "doing in this time between the times what he has done before: choosing and guiding a people to be a sign and witness in all that it is and does, whether obediently or disobediently, to who and what he is."[47]

It is impossible to explore those claims in any depth, however, without facing the question of the church's relationship to Judaism before and after Christ. Lindbeck became convinced that two different patterns of response to this question have structured Christian life, and Christian practices of reading. In both patterns, Christians appropriate the story of Israel. In the first pattern, Christians regard themselves as sharing (rather than fulfilling) the story of Israel. Israel and the church are not related as type and antitype, but rather "the kingdom already present in Christ alone is the antitype, and both Israel and the church are types."[48] The creation of the church is "not the formation of a new people but the enlargement of the old."[49] Yes, in this pattern, the Jews are an unfaithful people – but so is the church. Yes, in this pattern, the church is the recipient of God's irrevocable promises, of God's Spirit, of God's gracious acceptance – but so are the Jews.

Lindbeck tells the story, however, of the emergence of a second pattern in place of this first pattern. In this second pattern, the church is the antitype of Israel as type. Israel is faithless, the church faithful; Israel rejects grace, the

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[45] "Ecclesiology and Roman Catholic Renewal," p. 194; cf. "A Protestant View of the Ecclesiological Status of the Roman Church," *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 1 (1964), pp. 243–70: p. 249. See also my discussion of Lindbeck's catholic sectarianism in "Reconstructing *The Nature of Doctrine*," pp. 11–12.

[46] "The Church," p. 146.

[47] Ibid., p. 157.

[48] Ibid., p. 166.

[49] Ibid., p. 168.

church basks in it; Israel lacks the Spirit, the church is the Spirit's community. And whatever the detailed story of the emergence of this construal, it has had "monstrous offspring."[50] It entails the denial that, after the coming of Christ, Jews outside the church are the people of God; the church's *a*ppropriation of the story of Israel as God's people becomes *ex*propriation. And it makes possible "the ecclesiological triumphalism of a *theologiae gloriae*"[51] in which (in more or less subtle forms) the church's purity is defined over against Israel's sinfulness. It allows so close an identification between Christ and the church that Christ's capacity to challenge the church is muted, his lordship over the church undermined.

This pattern also has hermeneutical consequences. Peter Ochs quotes an interview he conducted, in which Lindbeck said that

> Christian efforts to forget Israel and thus replace Israel's covenant are co-implicated in Christian efforts to read the Gospel narrative of Jesus Christ independently of reading the Old Testament narrative of Israel, and such readings are the foundation of Christian efforts to read the Gospel narrative as [if] it were a collection of determine propositions or determinate rules of behavior rather than as Scripture. The primary goal of postliberal reformation is to help the church recover its practice of reading the Gospel narrative as Scripture.[52]

The doctrinal decision advocated by Lindbeck is the rejection of this second, supersessionist pattern of reading, in favor of a version of the first, in which the church is read *as* Israel, alongside the Jews.

> Israel's Messiah, Jesus the Christ, has made it possible for gentiles while remaining gentiles to become citizens of the enlarged commonwealth of Israel (Eph 2:12) … [O]n this view the chosen people, the whole of Israel, includes non-Christian Jews as well as Gentile and Jewish Christians. Ultimately, however, in what for Judaism will be the First Coming and for Christianity the Second, the church and Israel will in extension coincide … In short, Israel does

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[50] "Story-shaped Church," 171; see also "The Church as Israel: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism," in *Jews and Christians: People of God*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 78–94.

[51] "Ecumenical Directions and Confessional Construals," *Dialog* 30.2 (1991), pp. 118–23: p. 120.

[52] Ochs, *Another Reformation*, p. 48.

not "rise to life in the church" (as Barth supersessionistically puts it), but rather the church of Jews and Gentiles exists as a transforming and serving movement within the messianically enlarged Israel in this time between the times … One might say that the church … exists for Israel, not Israel for the church.[53]

For Lindbeck, we are now in a position to see that such a doctrinal decision is a clarification and securing of the basic affirmation that Jesus is Lord, and of the hermeneutical practice by which that affirmation is embodied in the life of the church. It secures the church's avoidance of a *theologia gloriae* whereby trust in Christ alone is displaced; it supports an approach to scripture in which the narratives of Jesus of Nazareth are read in relation to the narratives of the people of God in the whole Bible; it supports a figural re-reading of present experience in the narrative world of scripture in a continuation of the re-reading of Israel's history that takes place in Jesus. It insists that the God who is forming a people whose life together, as a reading of scripture, proclaims the Lordship of Christ, is none other than the God of Israel – and that this God has not reneged on God's promises.

Conclusion

Contrary to my claim of twenty years ago, Lindbeck's account of doctrine is deeply Christological. Doctrine serves to regulate the lived witness of the church to Jesus of Nazareth as Lord. Its basic structure is Chalcedonian: on the one hand, it holds the church to the reading of the Gospel narration of Jesus' identity – his fully creaturely, fully human existence; on the other, it calls the church to respond to this humanity as the humanity of God, the unsurpassable speaking of God's word to the world.

Doctrine holds in place the practices in which the claim that Jesus is Lord is embodied, and so ensures that the church is capable of truthful worship and faithful witness. Lindbeck's focus on practice, and on doctrine's role in regulating that practice, is joined to his insistence that this practice, so regulated, speaks truly of who God is, and truly of the nature of Christ. Christ is the one to whom it is right and proper to respond in this way, and God is such that this response to Christ *is* response to God.

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[53] "Response to Michael Wyschogrod's 'Letter to a Friend'," *Modern Theology* 11 (1995), pp. 205–10: pp. 206–7.

Furthermore, the doctrinal tradition which Lindbeck reads in this regulative way is not a finished fact, but a living and developing reality – not simply in the sense that Christians go on clarifying (and in some circumstances reconciling) the doctrinal claims of the past, but in the sense that new moments of doctrinal definition may be demanded of the church in the present, such as the affirmation that Jesus Christ is the messiah of Israel. Yet in line with his overarching Christological construal of doctrine, Lindbeck regards any such discovery not simply as an additional point, to be added incrementally to the other things that Christians already believe, but as one more clarification in the history of clarifications of the shape of whole project of living as Christ's witnesses. As such, if it is found to be a necessary doctrinal development, it will be recognized as a gift from the God who is forming in the world diverse witnesses to God's own life, shared with the world in Jesus Christ.