

The constitutive question of theology as a field—and thus of every theological discipline and speciality insofar as it is at all theological—is the question whether the twofold claim of Christian witness to be valid is, in fact, a valid claim.

But just as every theological discipline is constituted as theological by the constitutive question of theology as a field, it is constituted as either historical, systematic, or practical theology by its own constitutive question as a discipline.

Thus systematic theology is constituted by the question of whether the claim of Christian witness to be adequate to its content and, therefore, appropriate to Jesus Christ and credible to human existence is a valid claim. On the other hand, practical theology is constituted by the question of whether the claim of Christian witness to be fitting to its situation is a valid claim.

But what about historical theology? What is its constitutive question? Do not the constitutive questions of the two disciplines of systematic theology and practical theology together exhaust the constitutive question of theology as a field?

To get an answer to these questions, we need to look more closely at the claim of Christian witness to be adequate to its content, and, therefore, appropriate to Jesus Christ as well as credible to human existence. It lies in the nature of the claim that there are two, and only two, conditions under which it could be valid in the case of any particular instance of witness making or implying it: either this instance is itself constitutive Christian witness or else it is in substantial agreement with such constitutive Christian witness as well as with any other instances of witness that likewise substantially agree with that constitutive witness. But both constitutive Christian witness and any other instances of witness that make or imply the claim to be appropriate to Jesus Christ are matters of history, accessible as such only through particular historical experience and inquiry. Therefore, in order to answer the constitutive question of theology as a field as well as the constitutive questions of systematic theology

and practical theology as disciplines, one must answer the historical question of what Christian witness has in fact been, from the earliest Christian witness all the way down through the whole history of Christian witness right up to and including its latest contemporary expressions. And this is the constitutive question of historical theology as the remaining discipline of Christian theology.

To compare this question, however, with the constitutive questions of the other two disciplines is to understand why historical theology is properly regarded as "an auxiliary theological discipline" (Marxsen). Although it is constituted just as surely as either of the other two disciplines by the constitutive question of Christian theology as a field, it is unlike those other disciplines in asking neither part of this constitutive question, but rather a distinct and logically prior question, without asking and answering which this constitutive question cannot be answered in either of its parts. By asking and answering this logically prior question, necessarily implied by asking whether the twofold claim of Christian witness is valid, historical theology contributes toward answering this question of Christian theology as a field by providing indispensable help to its sister theological disciplines in answering their discipline-constituting questions, and thus the respective parts of the same field-constituting question.

A final comment about the question constitutive of historical theology as a discipline: The term "Christian witness," is insofar ambiguous as it can be used in two different senses. On the one hand, it can be used in a descriptive sense in which it refers indiscriminately to all instances of witness that in fact make or imply the claim to be appropriate to Jesus Christ (as well as credible to human existence and fitting to their situations); on the other hand, it can be used in a normative sense in which it refers discriminately only to such instances of witness as make or imply this claim by right, because it is a valid claim. To say, as I have said, that the constitutive question of historical theology as a discipline is what the Christian witness has in fact been employs "Christian witness" solely in the first or descriptive sense of the term. Thus it is no part of the question of

historical theology to ask what the "Christian witness" has been in the second or normative sense of the term, although historical theology certainly may—and should—ask what Christian witness has in fact taken to be normative Christian witness, either expressly or by implication. The question, however, of what "Christian witness" has been in the normative sense of the term belongs entirely to systematic theology, being simply an aspect of its discipline-constituting question of whether the claim of Christian witness to be appropriate to Jesus Christ is a valid claim.

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