Stellenbosch Theological Journal 2015, Vol 1, No 1, 99–123
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2015.v1n1.a5
Online ISSN 2413-9467 | Print ISSN 2413-9459

Hermeneutics of creeds and confessions: The question of continuity and change

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Abstract

Modern culture has not really rendered creeds and confessions untrue; far less has it rendered them unbiblical. But it has rendered them implausible and distasteful. They are implausible because they are built on old-fashioned notions of truth and language. They make the claim that a linguistic formulation of a state of affairs can have a binding authority beyond the mere text on the page that creeds actually refer to something and that that something has significance for all of humanity.[1]

Keywords

History, Truth, Fallibilism Truth and its formulations, Propositional revelation.

1. The creedal and confessional imperative

The Apostle Paul calls us to believe with one's heart and to confess what one believes (Rom 10:9). This is a twofold Christian imperative – the creedal and confessional imperative – that is at the root of creeds and confessions of faith.[2] Faith involves both the *fides qua creditor* – the faith *with which* one believes – and the *fides quae creditur* – the faith *which* one believes.[3] Maximally, a biblical account of faith involves knowledge (*notitia*), assent (*assensus*), and trust (*fiducia*); indeed, these are three elements of a single

1 Trueman, Carl R, The Creedal Imperative (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2012), 48.

2 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo, Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2003), 35.

3 Aidan Nichols, OP, *The Shape of Catholic Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 15-16.

act of faith involving the whole person who commits himself to God.[4] Minimally, therefore, faith involves belief, and to have a belief means that one is intellectually committed to the whole truth that God has revealed.[5] Furthermore, faith involves holding certain beliefs to be true, explains Thomas Aquinas, because "belief is called assent, and it can only be about a proposition, in which truth or falsity is found."[6] Thus, reality is what is known by a true affirmation.[7] Moreover, the *fides quae creditur* is the objective content of truth that has been unpacked and developed in the creeds and confessions of the Church, dogmas, doctrinal definitions, and canons.

In modern Christianity, the normativity of creeds and confessions, not to mention doctrinal definitions and canons, as expressive of authoritative dogma is a problematic one. In the above epigraph, Orthodox Presbyterian theology Carl Trueman suggests a possible reason for why they have become problematic, namely, a rejection of "old-fashioned notions of truth and language." It is clear from Trueman's description of these notions that he means a view of language that has a proper function of referring to reality by virtue of assertions that express propositions, which, if true, correspond to reality. Significantly, then, behind the stance that some take towards creeds and confessions is a rejection of realism and its corollary a correspondence view of truth.

On a realist view of truth, a proposition is true if and only if what that proposition asserts is in fact the case about objective reality; otherwise, the proposition is false. Bernard Lonergan helpfully draws out the implication of excluding propositional truth and its corollary the correspondence view of truth. "To deny correspondence is to deny a relation between meaning

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4 John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio,* Encyclical Letter, 1998, §13.

5 I say minimally because "The creed does not only involve giving one's assent to a body of abstract truths; rather, when it is recited the whole of life is drawn into a journey toward full communion with the living God. We can say that in the creed believers are invited to enter into the mystery which they profess and to be transformed by it" (Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei,* Encyclical Letter, June 29, 2013, no. 45). See also, *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* §§ 150-151, and §§§1814-1816.

6 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae,* II-II, q. 1, a.2, ad. 2.

7 Bernard JF Lonergan, SJ, "The Origins of Christian Realism (1961)," in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, Philosophical and Theological Papers 1958-1964,* edited by RC Croken, et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 80-93.

and meant. To deny the correspondence view of truth is to deny that, when meaning is true, the meant is what is so [is the case]. If there were no correspondence between meaning and meant, then […] it would be a great mistake to read the dogmas as if they were saying something [about objective reality]. Either denial is destructive of the dogmas… If one denies that, when the meaning is true, then the meant is what is so, one rejects propositional truth."[8] The rejection of propositional truth is destructive of dogmas for the following reason. If there are no true propositions, then there are no false ones either; there are just differences of opinion and no one is wrong. For instance, the affirmation regarding the Incarnation – "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14) – excludes a state of affairs in which the proposition is false. But if the belief in the Incarnation were just a matter of opinion, it would exclude nothing because it asserts or affirms nothing. This is just a roundabout way of saying that "all truth-claims are necessarily exclusive."[9] So this statement about the Incarnation is true if and only the Word, the Son of God, became man, fully human.

The denial of propositional truth is applied also to faith and revelation, eliminating the mediating role of propositions "both from God's revelation to man and man's faith in God."[10] The rejection of propositional revelation, which follows from the rejection of propositional truth, has resulted in a doctrinal relativism.

Relativism denies the enduring validity of the true judgments of creedal and confessional affirmations – if true, always true, permanently true, and true today and tomorrow, forever true – which would impact the epistemic presupposition that reality is known through truth judgments, and hence it would question their objectivity, universality, material identity, and constancy across time.

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8 Bernard JF, Lonergan, SJ, "The Dehellenization of Dogma," in *A Second Collection,* edited by WFJ Ryan, SJ and BJ Tyrrell, SJ (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 11-32, and at 16.

9 Keith Ward, "Truth and the Diversity of Religions," in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity,* edited by Philip L Quinn and Kevin Meeker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 109-125, and for this point, 110.

10 Lonergan, "Dehellenization of Dogma," 18.

An example of a theologian who seems to slouch toward doctrinal relativism is found in a recent article of South African theologian, Dirkie Smit, in his description of the characteristic reformed convictions regarding confessions.[11] Briefly, these convictions are, first, that the confessions of the Reformed tradition have relative authority, meaning thereby that "they carry no authority in and from themselves," and hence their authority is derivative, being ultimately subject to the ultimate authority of God's Word. Second, these documents are "historical and contextual by nature." Having this nature requires, says Smit, that responsible interpretation show "respect for their historical context and social and cultural background, sensitivity for the grammatical and conceptual instrumentation, careful insights into the specific controversies in which and the positions again which they were written in the first place," and so forth. These first two points are, arguably, important aspects of confessions from both a Reformed and Catholic perspective.

But the remainder of what Smit says regarding confessions sets up an opposition between historical conditioning and permanent truth, and this opposition is problematic. A corollary of the historical and contextual nature of confessions, Smit concludes, is that therefore "they are not a-historical documents with timeless and eternal propositions." Why this opposition between history and permanent truth? Smit implies here that the truth of p depends upon when it was uttered or asserted in a particular confession. Of course he is right that, say, the Heidelberg Catechism is a historical document that was written in an original historical setting. These matters are undeniable. The question is, however, whether the theological truth-content of what is asserted in the Catechism is exclusively tied to that setting. For instance, Question and Answer 1 of Lord's Day 1 asserts truth about Jesus Christ that is indifferent to time, and hence one may that such truth is timeless because the same truth is stated when asserted time and again.

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11 Dirkie Smit, "Trends and Directions in Reformed Theology," in *The Expository Times* 122 (7,), 2011:313-326. The same reformed convictions about confessions are identified by Smit in an earlier article, "Confessing as gathering the fragments? On the Reformed way of dealing with plurality and ambiguity," in *Essays on Being Reformed,* Collected Essays 3, edited by Robert Vosloo (Stellenbosch: SUN MeDIA, 2009), 295-306, and at 398-300.

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death? **A.** That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.[12]

Surely the truth of the statements asserted in this passage does not depend on when they were uttered or asserted. Thus, one should say "it is equally true for men and women living at any time, and in any place."[13]

In the past, according to Smit, thinking of the confessions as creedal statements asserting *p* has led to embracing the idea that "truth is the accuracy of propositions." It isn't clear at all why Smit is cautioning us about taking truth to be a matter of the accuracy of propositions. What is wrong with asserting accurate propositions? Is he confusing exactness of statement with accuracy? Consider the assertion "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself" (2 Cor 5:19). Paul Helm rightly remarks, "The statement is true if there is a God who did just that. So we might say, 'God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself' is true if and only if God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. Such sentences, if true, do not tell us the whole truth about what they refer to and characterize, of course. Who Christ, how he reconciled, what the reconciliation is, require many more sentences, and even then such a fuller account would not exhaustively describe or provide a fully comprehensive description of these matters. There's always more that could be said."[14] In other words, St. Paul's assertion is no less accurate a proposition corresponding to truth even without being exhaustively true.

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12 Heidelberg Catechism, online: http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg-catechism.

13 Paul Helm, *Faith, Form, and Fashion: Classical Reformed Theology and its Postmodern Critics* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 174.

14 Helm, *Faith, Form, and Fashion,* 42.

Smit also cautions us against a propositional view of truth because then, he claims, "faith becomes [1] intellectual obedience to authoritative documents." In addition, he claims that this view of truth leads us to think, "the knowledge of faith becomes [2] intellectual information about historical facts and [3] correct formulations." Rather than examine each of these points, let me put my response to Smit as follows. Although authentic Christian faith isn't merely "intellectual obedience to authoritative documents," given its creedal and confessional expressions, faith surely involves the assent of the mind to the communication of truths about objective reality in these documents. Furthermore, authentic Christian faith surely involves affirming the fundamental significance of history for faith. For instance, the truth of what the Heidelberg Catechism asserts about how the resurrection of Christ benefits us presupposes that the resurrection actually happened in space and time.[15] Regarding the truth status of dogmatic formulations, I think essentialism is correct. Characteristic of essentialism is the claim that there is a "dogmatic conceptual hard-core"[16] of Catholic dogmas, such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, whose meaning does not change precisely because it is true to reality. The content of the concepts informing the propositions that God is Triune, and that the Second Person of the Trinity is God Incarnate, is meaning invariant, is fixed and hence determinate. Essentialism as such is, however, not incompatible with the claim, as Thomas Guarino notes, "that every statement requires further thought and elucidation, that every assertion is open to reconceptualization and reformulation, and that no statement comprehensively exhausts truth, much less divine truth."[17] But the linguistic formulation or expression can vary, as long as they mediate the same judgment. *Pace* Smit, there is no reason to think that the acceptance of truth as propositional leads to absolutising "correct formulations."

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15 *Heidelberg Catechism,* Lord's Day 17, Question & Answer 45.

16 I borrow this phrase from the British philosophical theologian Oliver Crisp who defends a version of essentialism in his article, "*Ad* Hector," *Journal of Analytic Theology,* Vol. 1, No. 1, May 2013, 133-139, and at 138.

17 Thomas G Guarino, *Foundations of Systematic Theology* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 139n59; see also, 100n20. I have learned much from Fr. Guarino's magisterial study. Crisp also argues that essentialism is compatible with the view "that our *understanding* of the concept might develop, becoming conceptually richer, being developed along the lines of a particular model of the Trinity, and so on" ("*Ad* Hector," 138).

Third, Smit holds that the "Reformed confessions are the products of fallible human activity, which implies that they may need correction, revision, and even replacement."[18] Of course they are fallible human achievements, but there still remains to ask the question as to which aspects of the confessions need correction, revision, and even replacement. Do Articles 8-9 of the Belgic Confession of Faith on the Trinity and the Incarnation require correction? Is the theological truth-content of either one or the other of these articles false? Do they require revision, and hence replacement? To deny any that they need correction; revision or replacement does not mean that Articles 8-9 exhaustively express the truth. These truths may be open to reconceptualization and reformulation. This openness is not incompatible with propositionalism.

Now, Smit holds that the creeds and confessions do not contain "timeless and acontextual systems of propositional truth."[19] So, is Smit saying that the creeds, the ecumenical creeds of historic Christianity, and the confessions, say, the Three Forms of Unity of the Reformed Tradition – the Canons of Dort, the Belgic Confession of Faith, and the Heidelberg Catechism – do not contain permanently true statements, the same truths that are equally true for all people at any time and place, down through the ages? If so, I can only conclude that he espouses the view of unqualified fallibilism[20] – linguistically articulated dogmas, and the understanding of truth expressed by these propositions, are always in principle reversible and capable of being otherwise. Fallibilism is "the conviction that knowledge claims are always open to further rational criticism and revision. Fallibilism does not challenge the claim that we can know the truth, but rather the belief that we can know that we have attained the final truth with absolute certainty."[21]

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18 Smit, "Trends and Directions in Reformed Theology," 317-318.

19 Smit, "Confessing as gathering the fragments?", 299.

20 "Fallibilism," in this connection, is not about the ability of the Church under very specific conditions to teach infallibly that p. Rather, it is about the truth status of the dogmatic formulation.

21 This definition of fallibilism is by Richard Bernstein, "Philosophers respond to [John Paul II's] *Fides et ratio,*" *Books and Culture* 5 (July/August 1999):30-32, as cited in Guarino, *Foundations,* 81. The two other philosophers reviewing the philosopher-pope's 1998 encyclical are Nicholas Wolterstorff and Alvin Plantinga.

Smit's apparent rejection, in his second point, of propositional truth is troublesome not only because it will leave us unable to explain the material identity of Christian truth over time, but also because "God's revelation … includes propositions as an essential element, and Christian faith in God includes assent to them."[22] I shall return to these points in the next section. For now, I want to consider whether Smit's rejection of propositional truth suggests that he is proposing a relativistic view of doctrinal truth? If not, what, then, is truth, according to Smit? And what is the relationship between truth, dogma and reality?

Regarding relativism, I think we can say that he nowhere proposes a relativistic view of truth. Rather, arguably, it is more the trajectory of his thought that moves in that direction. In particular, I will now argue that there is a tension in Smit's view of the nature of confessional truth. On the one hand, he says that what the authors of these documents confess is not mere opinion, whether personal opinion or the perspective of an ecclesial community. "Reformed piety," he urges, "is not concerned only with its own opinions, or seeing these historical and contextual documents as the perspective of those involved." Without pausing to reflect on the epistemic status of the claims of these confessions, however, he continues by saying that their authors, even given their awareness of "their own human limitations and perspectives, they still claim to confess the gospel, the truth of the gospel and the biblical message, for their own particular context."[23] This is "catholic" truth, "ecumenical" truth, adds Smit, and hence that biblical truth which is confessed is not just true for the Reformed tradition. So far so good.

But if they are not "mere opinion," as Smit claims, that can only be because they are exclusive beliefs, propositional truths; the latter are such that because they assert truth, excluding some things as false, those who deny the truth of these propositions must be regarded as mistaken. Given Smit's rejection of propositional truth, however, it isn't obvious that he can justify his claim that these confessions are not mere opinion.

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22 Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus,* Vol. 2, *Living a Christian Life* (Quincy, Ill.: Franciscan Press, 1993), 4.

23 Smit, "Confessing as gathering the fragments?", 300.

Furthermore, we must ask here, what is the nature of truth, according to Smit? Given his emphasis on the historical and contextual nature of these documents, and his apparent rejection of propositional truth and all that this rejection entails (see above), is the truth of the central affirmations of those confessions affected in any way by the context in which they were asserted? Yes, of course, as Smit rightly notes, since they are historical documents written in light of a specific controversy, they are polemical and antithetical, and hence as such all truth formulated for polemical reasons is partial – albeit true. I shall return to the importance of this point below. For now, let me stress that however incompletely and inadequately creeds and confessions may express the truth of revelation, and however important understanding the extra-linguistic context is for understanding the asserted propositions understood within that context, they are nevertheless true insofar as they state absolutely nothing that is false. Pace Smit, must we not say of the truth-content of such assertions that if true, always true, permanently true, unalterably true, and hence in that sense "acontextually" true? In other words, historical conditioning and permanent truth are not incompatible.

For Smit, It would seem not since he denies, on the other hand, that there are "infallible doctrines," "final interpretations of the Bible," that is, permanently true judgments expressing the central creedal affirmations of the Christian faith that are determinative, unquestionable, and yes, infallible, meaning thereby that they are irreversible. There are, he says, only "*open,* declarative affirmations of what these churches believe to be the truth claims of this message and of how they currently understand themselves to be bound by the church's earliest confession that Jesus Christ is Lord."[24] What does Smith mean by *open* here?

He doesn't say, but I think we can surmise that given his apparent rejection of permanently true judgments that are determinative of the faith, it would seem that he endorses an unqualified fallibilism. An unqualified fallibilism thinks that linguistically articulated doctrines are always open to what Thomas Guarino calls "fallibilistic reversibility." In other words, every proposition seems open to denial. But is reversibility possible, for instance,

24 Smit, "Confessing as gathering the fragments?", 305-306, 297, respectively; italics added.

with respect to the creedal statement that "Jesus Christ is Lord?" How could it be? Guarino rightly answers: "Fallibilistic 'reversibility' is not possible here because the denial of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word of God is not admissible." This dogmatic truth is determinative for faith. Smit's thought is driven to unqualified fallibilism because he rejects propositional truth and thus lacks the ability to distinguish between propositions and sentences, truth-content and context, in short, truth and its formulations. Given the distinction between truth and its formulations, and its corollary that truths of faith are more than their linguistic expression, a qualified fallibilism, by contrast, can hold on to a dogmatic truth's unchangeableness and still give an account of the need for new expressions. As Guarino explains, "a qualified fallibilism is always endorsable if one means by this that every statement requires further thought and elucidation, that every assertion is open to reconceptualization and reformulation, and that no statement comprehensively exhausts truth, much less divine truth."[25] Furthermore, a qualified fallibilism can express truth determinatively in theological formulations and not as a mere approximation of the truth. Again, Smit's rejection of propositional truth and hence propositional revelation leads us to ask him whether nothing that is affirmed in those confessions is permanent, irrevocable, irreformable, and unchangeable truth, no not even the assertion "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil 2:11)?

Why can't these confessional documents be "historical and contextual by nature" and at the same time make assertions that if true, always true, such as *Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, Jesus suffered, died, and was buried?* If these assertions, as Colin Gunton correctly notes, "were once true, they are always true."[26] In other words, these statements never stopped being true, even after Jesus stopped suffering, and so on, and hence are now forever true. Consider, for example, the assertion expressing the proposition, *Jesus came into the world to save sinners* (1 Tim 1:15). Yes, we are focusing here on propositional truth, on the truth of what St. Paul asserted, the theological truth-content, rather than on the fact that he asserted it in a particular context, and so forth. Indeed, this is the case *"even though we may need*

25 Guarino, *Foundations,* 139n59.

26 Colin E Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation,* The 1993 Warfield Lectures (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 13-14.

to explain, gloss and expand them in all kinds of ways."[27] In other words the claim that once something is true it is always true, forever true, and unchangeably true, is not inconsistent with finding new ways of expressing the truth of dogmas when the need arises. Smit rightly sees the need for new expressions when it is necessary "to confess this same faith if possible clearer than before and to articulate possible misunderstandings, confusion and mistaken opinions more accurately than before."[28] But Smit's rejection of propositional truth and hence of propositional revelation leaves unclear the determinate truth-content of the Christian faith and hence leaves unclear how he would explain the material identify of Christian truth over time. That leaves unanswered the question of the nature of the *continuity* of the *same* faith – it is just the *idem sensus,* the same meaning, which must be protected from age to age – and hence his position leaves the creeds, confessions, dogmas of faith, indeed, Christian orthodoxy defenceless against relativism.

This is a troubling implication of Smit's view because, as Pelikan rightly sees, "underlying the creedal and conciliar definitions of orthodoxy from the beginning have been three shared presuppositions: first, that there is a straight line . . . from the Gospels to the creed; consequently, second, that the true doctrine being confessed by the councils and creeds of the church is identical with what the New Testament calls the 'faith which was once for all delivered to the saints' [Jude 3]; and therefore, third, that continuity with that faith is the essence of orthodoxy, and discontinuity with it the essence of heresy."[29] Although Pelikan does not develop the points he rightly makes here with respect to the question of the nature of continuity that binds together the revealed Word of God to the true doctrines asserted by the creeds and confessions and hence to the essence of orthodoxy, that question has to be faced. But not here.[30] Here, I will simply presuppose the traditional notions of truth and language because, arguably, it best explains the material identity of Christian truth over the course of time. In

27 Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation,* 14, italics added.

28 Smit, "Confessing as gathering the fragments?", 301.

29 Pelikan, *Credo,* 9.

30 I have dealt in-depth with this question regarding the nature of continuity in my book, *Berkouwer and Catholicism, Disputed Questions* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013), 20-109.

other words, it explains the nature of continuity presupposed by Pelikan's presuppositions. Lonergan explains:

> Dogma emerges from the revealed Word of God, carried forward by the tradition of the Church; it does so, however, only to the extent that, prescinding from all other riches [of language] contained in that word of God, one concentrates on it precisely *as true*… Secondly, if one separates the word from the truth, if one rejects propositional truth in favour of some other kind of truth, then one is not attending to the Word of God as true… [Thirdly,] it is not enough to attend to the Word of God as true, if one has a false conception of the relationship between truth and reality. Reality is known through true judgment. …What in fact corresponds to the word as true is that which is [the case]. [Fourthly,] it was the word of God, considered precisely as true, that led from the gospels to the dogmas. …There is a bond that unites them [and] that bond is the word as true.[31]

Lonergan is aware that Sacred Scripture conveys much more than asserted propositions, namely, the word as true. In addition to expressing propositions in making assertions, Sacred Scripture uses language in a rich variety of ways of communicating: asking questions, making requests, giving commands, expressing emotions, exclamations, and much else. There are also genres of all sorts: law codes, poetry, parables, songs, history, didactic, apocalyptic, and many others. Still, God reveals himself, in part, by asserted propositions. Paul Helm is, then, right that "since Scripture is taken to be a revelation, with a unique cognitive value, assertions have primacy because its other speech forms – exclamations, questions, etc. – logically depend for their own force and intelligibility on a bedrock of assertions. The exclamation 'How good is the Lord!' implies the truth of the assertion 'The Lord is good'. Those who uphold the propositional character of divine revelation … have nothing more or less in mind than the central

31 Bernard JF, Lonergan, SJ, *The Way to Nicea*, translated by Conn O'Donovan (Phailadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976 [1964]), 8-10.

importance of assertions, especially God's assertions about himself, in Scripture."[32]

Given, then, the central importance of assertions – and hence propositional revelation – in Sacred Scripture, I think we can say – along with John Henry Neman – that revealed truths have been "irrevocably committed to human language." This propositional revelation in verbalized form, or what Newman called the "dogmatical principle" is at once *true* though not *exhaustive,*[33] "imperfect because it is human," adds Newman, "but definitive and necessary because given from above."[34] I turn now to give a sketch of a doctrine of special revelation.

2. Sketch of a doctrine of special revelation

A comprehensive doctrine of God's special revelation should include the origin, content, manner, and purpose of God's special revelation. Pared down for my purpose here, I will concentrate on the content and manner of his revelation. What is, then, the content of revelation? Put differently, what is it that is revealed? In a fundamental sense, God reveals *himself,* and so we may say that the content of revelation is God's own proper reality, his own self, and the gift of himself "as a communion of persons inviting human

32 Paul Helm, "Propositions and Speech Acts," online: http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/2007/05/analysis-2–propositions-and-speech-acts.html.

33 John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio,* 1998 Encyclical Letter: For faith clearly requires that human speech should in some universal way give expression – even though voiced analogically, but no less meaningfully – to divine, transcendent reality. Deprived of this assumption, the Word of God, which despite its use of human language remains divine, *could signify nothing of God.* The interpretation of this Word cannot merely keep tossing us from one interpretation to another, never directing us to a statement that is simple and true: were that the case there could be no revelation of God, but instead only the expression of human concepts about God and of the things it is presumed he thinks about us (no. 84; italics added). The former Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, remarks on John Paul II's very point: "man is not caught in a hall of mirrors of interpretation; he can and must look for the way out to reality that stands behind the words and manifests itself to him in and through the words" (*Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions,* translated by Henry Taylor [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003], 189).

34 John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine,* 6th ed. (1845; repr., Notre Dane: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), chapt. 7, sec. 5, par. 3, and sec. 1, par. 4, 348, and 325, respectively.

persons to enter into communion."[35] In the words of *Dei Verbum,* "His will was that men should have access to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature (cf. Eph 2:18; 2 Pet 1:4). By this revelation, then, the invisible God (cf. Col 1:15; 1 Tim 1:17), from the fullness of his love, addresses men as his friends (cf. Ex 33:11; Jn 15:14-15), and moves among them (cf. Bar. 3:38), in order to invite and receive them into his own company."[36] Indeed, *Dei Verbum* discloses that the purpose of God's self-revelation is coming to know him.

Yet, there is also the manner or means of revelation to consider: God reveals himself in the economy of special revelation in his words and actions, and there is an inner unity between these two. As Edward Schillebeeckx pointedly states, "Christ himself, both in His actions and in His words, is revelation. 'Etiam factum Verbi verbum nobis est' [St. Augustine] – the acts of the word speak to us and, on the other hand, the revelation-in-word is only one aspect of the total appearance of the mystery of Christ."[37] Similarly, *Dei Verbum* holds that the economy of special revelation consists of a pattern of deeds of God in history and words, of divine actions and divinely given interpretations of those actions, that are inextricably bound together in that revelation. God's redemptive revelation of himself is accomplished through historical events as well as through written words. Thus: "the works performed by God in the history of salvation show forth and bear out the doctrine and realities signified by the words; the words, for their part, proclaim the works, and bring to light the mystery they contain." In sum, revelation is intrinsically a word-and-deed revelation, and hence "propositions are not the whole of revelation, for God also enters into human history and acts in it."[38]

Furthermore, God not only reveals himself, giving us himself in Trinitarian communion. Rather, at one and the same time, Holy Scripture is not only God's gift of himself, inviting humanity to share in his life, but

35 Germain Grisez, "On Interpreting Dogmas," in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 17 (1990):120-126, and at 120.

36 *Dei Verbum,* Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, November 18, 1965, no. 2.

37 Schillebeeckx, "De Ontwikkeling van het Apostolisch Geloof tot Kerkelijk Dogma," in *Openbaring en Theologie* (Bilthoven: H Nelissen, 1964), 50-67, and at 61.

38 Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus,* Vol. 2, 4.

also a disclosure of *revealed truths* that are determinative for faith. The idea that God's self-revelation is a word-revelation, although significantly true, forming an essential element of God's revelation, entails the idea of propositional revelation, of revealed *truth,* namely, that "propositions are part of the way God reveals himself." How so?

Given the claim that the verbal revelation of God's Word contains a realism in the sense that "it is to be believed and not contradicted," and also that "it is a true word, telling of things as in fact they are," as Lonergan puts it,[39] we can easily understand that this revelation presupposes an objective referent for the truth of the judgments made throughout this Word. Therefore, the truth-bearers of those objective realities, that is, a certain state of affairs that exist in reality, must be propositions, and not merely words. "Propositions express or describe possible realities, true propositions express actualities, what is the case. These propositions are expressed in words, but they are not just words."[40] In sum, then, following Grisez, I would say that linguistic expressions or conceptual formulations are not just formulations, just thoughts, or just words; they are what the words convey and the thoughts grasp of reality. The true propositions asserted in Scripture, then, are about objective realities.

Moreover, that assent to some definite propositions is essential to or determinative for faith is clear from the New Testament itself (see Acts 2:41; Rom 10:9-17; 1 Cor 15:1-8; 1 Tim 46; 2 Tim 3:14, 4:1-5, and many other places). Thus, *pace* Smit, Christian faith "includes assenting to the truth of propositions," expressed in creeds or confessions.[41] Grisez right notes that "One cannot give God the submission of faith without assenting to the truth he has revealed." Accordingly, it is a false dilemma to suggest, "Christian faith is believing in God rather than believing these propositional truths." "Since God reveals these propositional truths and believing them belongs to faith, to refuse to believe the truths of faith would be to refuse to believe

39 Lonergan, *The Way to Nicea,* 128.

40 Helm, *Divine Revelation* (London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1982), 25.

41 Smit seems to deny that certain propositions are determinative for faith. He rejects propositional truth and hence rejects both the idea that "faith [involves] intellectual obedience to authoritative documents," and "the knowledge of faith [involves] intellectual information about historical facts and correct formulations."

God himself."[42] We may put this last point by stating that the Gospel, then, is also a teaching, meaning thereby "an *instructive* communicating of facts and events of salvation, or an instructive interpretation of the Holy Scripture of the Old Testament."[43] In this connection, Josef Rupert Geiselmann correctly states that the "New Testament itself calls the gospel a doctrine, *didachē* (Rom 16:17, Acts 2:42), *didaschalia* (Rom 12:7; pastoral letters, *passim*). To preach the word of God is also paraphrased with *didaschein* (2 Thes 2:15; Col 2:7; Eph 4:21; 1 Tim 4:11; Acts 5:42, 18:11, 28:31). The announcer of the word of God may also be honoured by the title of teacher (*didaschalos*) (1 Ti 2:7; 2 Ti 1:11)."[44]

I turn to consider the question of continuity and discontinuity in the hermeneutics of creeds and confessions, in short, of ecclesial texts. What hermeneutical principle should guide our handling of ecclesial texts?

3. Hermeneutical principle for interpreting ecclesial texts

The brief answer to the concluding question of the last section is this: we should not make judgments about, say, the Councils of Trent and Vatican I without understanding the integral totality of Catholicism because the statements of these councils were polemical and antithetical. This observation is of course consistent with Smit's position that confessions are historical documents and all that this entails, as he described it, for the responsible interpreter. Characterizing these councils in this way provides openness to seeing that all truth formulated for polemical reasons is partial

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42 Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus,* Vol. 2, 5.

43 Heinrich Schlier, *Wort Gottes. Eine neutestamentliche Besinnung,* 39, as cited by JR Geiselmann in "Scripture, Tradition, and the Church: An Ecumenical Problem," in *Christianity Divided, Protestant and Roman Catholic Theological Issues,* edited by Daniel J Callahan, et al. (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961), 39-72, at 53-54. Schlier adds, "The notion of 'teaching' points out that the gospel may be present in a fixed tradition, as the expression *hygiainousa didaschalion* (2 Tim 4:5, et al.) already suggests."

44 Geiselmann, "Scripture, Tradition, and the Church," 53. Elsewhere Geiselmann writes, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ of necessity assumes in the Church's paradosis the form of *didaskalia,* of doctrine, just as, of course, [St] Paul himself in his writings was conscious, in view of the false teachings arising in the Church, and in view of the false gnosis invading it (1 Tim 6:20), that he was no longer solely an apostle and herald of the message of Christ, but also a teacher of the gentiles (2 Tim 4:17)" (*The Meaning of Tradition,* Translated by WJ O'Hara [London/Freiburg: Burns & Oates/Herder, 1966], 31).

– albeit true. GC Berkouwer recognizes this point: "One-sidedness does not make the decision of 1870 [Vatican I on the primacy and infallibility of the pope] a false one, but it does have the marks of incompletion, of needing the complement of other facets of the episcopacy."[45] In explaining the hermeneutical principle operative here, Berkouwer draws on Hans Urs von Balthasar's understanding of this principle.[46] Balthasar explains, "Even though, of course, the truth of the Councils of Trent and Vatican I will never be overtaken or even relativized, nonetheless there are still other views and aspects of revelation than those expressed there. This has always happened throughout church history, when new statements are brought forth to complete earlier insights in order to do justice to the inexhaustible riches of divine revelation even in the earthen vessel of human language."[47] A corollary of this hermeneutical principle is the distinction between the truth and its formulations, between form and content, context and content. The import of this distinction is that it "implies that the Church's *formulation* of the truth could have, for various reasons, actually occasioned *misunderstandings* of the truth itself."[48] In other words, the formulation or expression itself of the truth could be characterized by one-sidedness, and hence the doctrinal formulations have not said everything that should be said.

Following Congar, we may distinguish two types of one-sidedness. "First, there is the possibility that this formulation, made in reaction to an error characterized by unilateralism, should itself become unilateral in its expression. Next, there is the possibility that the condemnation might include in its condemnation of the erroneous reactive element the seeds of

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45 GC Berkouwer, *Vatikaans Concilie en Nieuwe Theologie* (Kampen: JH Kok, 1964; ET: *The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism,* Translated by Lewis Smedes [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965] 148), 179.

46 Berkouwer, *Nieuwe Perspectieven in De Controvers: Rome-Reformatie,* Mededelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afd. Letterkunde, Nieuwe Reeks, Deel 20, No. 1 (Amsterdam: NV Noord-Hollandsche UitgeversMaatschappij, 1957), 4-5.

47 Balthasar, *Theology of Karl Barth,* Translated by Edward T Oakes, SJ (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992 [1951]), 11–12.

48 Berkouwer, *Vatikaans Concilie en Nieuwe Theologie,* 20; ET:23–24.

truth as well, whose original ambivalence unfortunately became deviant."[49] An example of the first type of one-sidedness we may turn briefly to the beginning of Chapter 2 of the *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica* where, in opposition to fideism and rationalism, it is affirmed that man's reason has the natural ability to grasp with certainty truths about God in and through the things that were created. In other words, the emphasis here is on "the subjective, creaturely presupposition for perceiving it." Given this concern, it is understandable why, as Balthasar also remarks, "this [creation] revelation is not at all named or described as such." Still, he adds:

> The passage from Paul (Rom 1:20) cited by the Council frequently speaks in this context – from which it cannot be disengaged – of an act of revelation. …Certainly it was not part of the intention of the Council to thematize this side of the problem. But the *Acta* [*et decreta sacrorum Conciliorum recentiorum*] speak nonetheless of an act of revelation by God. Catholic dogmatics recognizes this. …Thus we may say that the 'inferential' ascent of thought to the Creator [that is, natural theology] is always borne by the Creator's prior decision to reveal himself in this nature itself.[50]

Balthasar is not alone in his view that Vatican I presupposes that God made himself known to us in creation as the basis for the natural knowledge of God. Berkouwer also agrees that, in Roman Catholic theology, "It is true that … we often do find the conception of revelation expressed in relation to nature."[51] Wolfhart Pannenberg, too, is in agreement with Balthasar's point: "Unlike Paul, the council did not in fact expressly present the knowledge of God from the works of creation as a result of divine self-declaration. On the other hand it was obviously not the intention of the

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49 Yves Congar, OP, *True and False Reform in the Church,* Translated and with an Introduction by Paul Philibert, OP (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011 [1968]), 205–208.

50 Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth,* 309-310. The *Acta et decreta sacrorum Conciliorum recentiorum* (1789-1870) are found in the Collectio Lacensis (1870), edited by Theodor Granderath, SJ (1839-1902), expositor of Vatican I proceedings containing the drafts, minutes of the speeches, the responses by the steering committee (*deputation de fide*) to additions and amendments proposed by the bishops at Vatican I.

51 Berkouwer, *Algemene Openbaring,* 66; ET:80.

council to rule out this basis of the knowledge."[52] Nevertheless, Berkouwer adds, "It is certainly true that in Roman Catholic theology (here natural theology) God's revelation in nature does *not* function as such." [53] And yet, given the polemical and antithetical doctrinal pronouncements of Vatican I against fideism and rationalism, it is easy to see why, unfortunately, it is unilateral in its expression of the mind's truth attaining capacity.

Let us now consider, as an example of the second type of one-sidedness, Pius XI's negative attitude toward the ecumenical movement[54] because of its denial of the visible unity of the Church of Christ, appearing as "one body of faithful, agreeing in one and the same doctrine under one teaching authority and government." On the contrary, some in the ecumenical movement "understand a visible Church as nothing else than a Federation, composed of various communities of Christians, even though they adhere to different doctrines, which may even be incompatible one with another."[55] The pope rejected these views because they were based on an ecclesiological relativism, fostering a false irenicism and religious indifferentism. In light of Vatican II's *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964) and John Paul II's *Ut unum Sint* (1995), however, we can say that Pius XI was right in rejecting these views as false, but incorrect in his analysis that the rejected errors where inherent to ecumenism, with the latter jeopardizing the dogma that the Catholic Church is in some fundamental sense the one visible Church of God.

The distinction, then, rightly understood, between truth and its formulations or expressions need not bring the truth of the Church's dogmas into uncertainty. Berkouwer understands the types of one-sidedness we have been briefly examining. He writes, "The Church has been constant in *truth at its deepest intent,* even though it [the Church] has not been elevated above historical relativity in its *analysis of the rejected errors.*"[56] Here lies a

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52 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie,* Band I (Göttingen: GooVandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988, 86; ET: *Systematic Theology,* Vol. I [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans], 75).

53 Berkouwer, *Algemene Openbaring,* 66; ET:80.

54 Pius XI, *Mortalium Animos,* January 6, 1928, no. 9. Online: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19280106_mortalium-animos_en.html.

55 Pius XI, *Mortalium Animos,* no. 6.

56 Berkouwer, *Vatikaans Concilie en Nieuwe Theologie,* 52; ET:49.

source of the Church's one-sidedness. He elaborates this point in a passage worth quoting in full:

> An unmistakable limitation and even, in a sense, an overshadowing of the fullness of truth is created by the defensive and polemical character of dogmatic pronouncements. Thus, Trent judged the Reformation *sola fide* as a vain confidence, but failed to 'delineate what could rightfully have been intended by the phrase *sola fide*'. The historical and polemical conditionedness of Church pronouncements must be respected. It seems both necessary and almost self-evident that previous pronouncements of dogma must be interpreted in this light. *The interpretation need not bear the character of a revision that gives a new and different meaning to the dogma in order to make it acceptable to a new era.* But dogma must be understood in the light of revelation and of the intention of the Church as that intention came to expression in a given period of history.[57]

Significantly, Berkouwer correctly affirms in the italicized sentence of the above quotation that interpretations of previous dogmatic pronouncements may not be revisionist. He clearly defines what he means by the latter: "giving a new and different meaning to the dogma in order to make it acceptable to a new era." In this connection, I think we can justifiably hold that Berkouwer's point here is, arguably, based on the distinction between truth and its historically conditioned formulations, between form and content, propositions and sentences, which was invoked by John XXIII in his opening address at Vatican II, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*.[58]

The pope made this distinction between truth and its formulations in a famous statement at the beginning of Vatican II: 'The deposit or the truths of faith, contained in our sacred teaching, are one thing, while the mode in which they are enunciated, keeping the same meaning and the same judgment [*eodem sensu eademque sententia*], is another'. The

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57 Berkouwer, *Vatikaans Concilie en Nieuwe Theologie,* 77; ET:69 (italics added).

58 Berkouwer devotes the entirety of chapter III in *Vatikaans Concilie en Nieuwe Theologie,* "Unchangeability and Changeability of Dogma", 61-104 [ET:57-88], to an analysis of John XXIII's distinction and all that it entails. For an extensive analysis of Berkouwer's interpretation of Vatican II on this question, see Eduardo Echeverria, *Berkouwer and Catholicism,* Disputed Questions (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013), 20-109.

subordinate clause[59] in this passage is part of a larger passage from Vatican Council I, *Dei Filius* (Denzinger 3020), and this passage is itself from the *Commonitorium primum* 23 of the fifth century monk, Vincent of Lérins (died c. 445): "Therefore, let there be growth and abundant progress in understanding, knowledge, and wisdom, in each and all, in individuals and in the whole Church, at all times and in the progress of ages, but only with the proper limits, i.e., within the same dogma, the same meaning, the same judgment." So, we can say with justification that John XXIII framed the question regarding the nature of doctrinal continuity in light of the Lérinian thesis, which was received by Vatican I, namely, that doctrine must progress according to the same meaning and the same judgment (*eodem sensu eademque sententia*), allowing for legitimate pluralism and authentic diversity within a fundamental unity.

Put differently, appreciating the ecumenical significance of the distinction between truth and its formulations, form and truth-content, does not sacrifice the immutability or permanence of dogmatic truth. It simply brings with it the 'immense advantage of dissipating prejudices and correcting false interpretations' presupposed in the Church's analysis of rejected errors.[60] Furthermore, mindful that the expression of the truth itself may be characterized by one-sidedness, that is, "incomplete or unbalanced formulations" – which is different from claiming that the Council "formally committed the Church to doctrinal error"[61] – we can easily understand Aidan Nichols point. He writes:

> [T]he doctrinal statements of a Council (which, obviously, are far more important for the Church of all ages) may be less than balanced or comprehensive and thus, by implication, need supplemen-

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59 In his subsequent book on Vatican II, *Nabetrachting op het Concilie* (Kampen: JH Kok, 1968), Berkouwer claims that the subordinate clause in Pope John's statement ('keeping the same meaning and the same judgment [eodem sensu eademque sententia]' becomes the principal clause in Paul VI's view, and is then linked by the pope, to the doctrinal formulations or expressions of the truth – which leads back to an immobilism. I dispute this interpretation in Echeverria, *Berkouwer and Catholicism,* 65-81.

60 Yves MJ Congar, *Dialogue between Christians, Catholic Contributions to Ecumenism,* Translated by Philip Loretz, SJ (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1965), 129.

61 Aidan Nichols, OP and Moyra Doorly, *The Council in Question, A Dialogue with Catholic Traditionalism* (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2011), 81-83.

> tation, whether from another Council or from other sources. The development of Christological doctrine in the early centuries, from Ephesus to the Third Council of Constantinople, substantiates, I believe, this view. Were the Church to have drawn a line under that development at any point before the last of the four Councils concerned, we should not have had the beautiful equilibrium of our doctrine of the Word incarnate, a pre-existing divine Person now energizing in his two natures, with his twofold divine and human will… We must not ask for perfection from Councils, even in their doctrinal aspect. It is enough to know that, read according to a hermeneutic of continuity they will not lead us astray. An Ecumenical Council will never formally commit the Church to doctrinal error. It is, moreover, unfair to ask of Councils what they have not claimed to provide. [62]

We need now to say, in conclusion, more about ontology of meaning in order to provide the material identity of truth, and hence a hermeneutic of continuity, with a metaphysical buttress. Guarino is right that "the issue of stability within change, unity within multiplicity, perdurance within temporality, inevitably raise questions concerning the metaphysical and ontological dimensions of reality."[63]

4. An ontology of meaning

Briefly, pared down for my purpose here, I shall draw on Hans-Georg Gadamer's ontology of the meaning of the text that he inherited from Frege via Husserl.[64] Nicholas Wolterstorff has recently given the clearest account of this ontology and its bearing on the hermeneutic tradition, especially Gadamer. He explains:

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62 Aidan Nichols, OP and Moyra Doorly, The Council in Question, 29.

63 Thomas G Guarino's review of Anthony C Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine,* in *The Thomist* 73 (2009):344-348, and at 347.

64 For a more thorough analysis of Gadamer's hermeneutics, see Eduardo J Echeverria, "Gadamer's Hermeneutics and the Question of Relativism," in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads,* Edited by Kevin J Vanhoozer, et al. (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 51-81.

> Suppose we assume that the right way to analyse belief and judgment is into a content, on the one hand, and the *stance* of belief or the action of judgment, on the other hand. The context of the belief that 2+3=5, is *that* 2+3=5, and the content of the judgment that today is warm and sunny, is *that today is warm and sunny.* Let us further suppose that the content of beliefs and judgments are *entities* of some sort, so that believing something consists of taking up the stance of belief toward that entity which one believes, and judging something consists of performing the action of judging on that entity which one judges to be true. Frege called such entities *Gedanken,* that is, *thoughts … Gedanken* are not states of mind. He argues that whereas you and I can believe and assert the same *Gedanke,* we cannot share the same state of mind. Obviously *Gedanken* are also not physical entities. And neither, so Frege argued, are they to be identified with sentences, for the reason that two distinct sentences may express one and the same *Gedanke. Gedanken* have to be abstract entities – or as the hermeneutic tradition preferred to call them, *ideal* entities. What distinguishes them from such other abstract entities as properties is that they can be believed and asserted, and that they are all either true or false.[65]

Indeed, Gadamer calls the ontological status of the meaning of the text an 'ideal' entity. On this point, we find him saying, "What is stated in the text must be detached from all contingent factors and grasped in its full ideality, in which alone it has validity."[66] Gadamer explains himself more fully in the following often-overlooked passage that Wolterstorff brings to our attention:

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65 Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Promise of Speech-act Theory for Biblical Interpretation," in *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation,* edited by Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, Karl Moeller (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 73-90, and for this quote, 77-78. See also, Wolterstorff, "Resuscitating the Author," in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads,* edited by Kevin J Vanhoozer, et al. (Bloomington and Indianopolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 35-49, especially, 39.

66 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode,* 3., erweiterte Auflage (Tubingen: JCB Mohr, 1972), 372. English translation: *Truth and Method,* Second Revised Edition, Translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1994), 394.

> [The] capacity for being written down is based on the fact that speech itself shares in the pure ideality of the meaning that communicates itself in it. In writing, the meaning of what is spoken exists purely for itself, completely detached from all emotional elements of expression and communication. A text is not to be understood as an expression of life but with respect to what it says. Writing is the abstract ideality of language. Hence the meaning of something written is fundamentally identifiable and repeatable. What is identical in the repetition is only what was actually deposited in the written record. This indicates that "repetition" cannot be meant here in its strict sense. It does not mean referring back to the original source where something is said or written. The understanding of something written is not a repetition of something past but the sharing of a present meaning.[67]

The Fregean-Husserlian ontology of textual meaning then affirms the objectivity of meaning in general and is thus anti-historicist. I join Wolterstorff in siding "with Frege and Husserl that the right analysis of judgment is that, in judgment, there is something that one judges to be true that's to be distinguished from both that particular act and the sentence one uses to make the judgment."[68] What is more, thoughts, meanings, and propositions – what Wolterstorff elsewhere calls noematic content[69] – are true if and only if what they assert is in fact the case, being the way things are; otherwise, they are false. In short, regarding the status of meaning, the way things are, objective reality, is what makes "meanings" true or false. Furthermore, adds Wolterstorff, "readers of texts can often find out the noematic content of the discourse of which the text is the medium – so that, in that sense, noematic content is 'transferable' from one mind to another."[70] One could add here: propositions are transferable as well to different contexts and conceptualities in which we seek to understand and communicate truth, including divine truth.

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67 Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, 370; Truth and Method, 392.

68 Wolterstorff, "The Promise of Speech-act Theory for Biblical Interpretation," 80.

69 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse, Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 138, 155, 157-158.

70 Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse,* 155.

This conclusion brings us back John XXIII's famous Lénerian statement: "the deposit or the truths of faith, contained in our sacred teaching, are one thing, while the mode in which they are enunciated, keeping the same meaning and the same judgment, is another." As I argued earlier, it seems obvious that John is distinguishing here between the propositional truths of faith and their linguistic expressions. This seems even more obvious in light of the point that the linguistic expressions of the truths of faith must keep the same meaning and the same judgment – if one grasps what a proposition means and judges that proposition to be true, one knows what it is asserting to be true about reality itself. The former are, if true, always and everywhere true; the latter, that is, the different way of expressing these truths, may vary in our attempts to more clearly and accurately communicate revealed truths, but do not affect the truth of the propositions. Thus, the distinction between propositions and linguistic expressions is necessary in order to show that the propositional truths of faith establish "the material continuity of the Christian faith from biblical times to our own day."[71] In sum, the position for which I have argued in this article can affirm a propositional view of truth and a corresponding propositional view of revelation while at the same time (a) accounting for the need for new theological formulations; (b) defend the notion that the material continuity of the Christian faith is possible because truth is unchangeable; and (c) that doctrine must progress according to the same meaning and the same judgment (*eodem sensu eademque sententia*), allowing for legitimate pluralism and authentic diversity within a fundamental dogmatic unity.[72]

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71 Guarino's review of Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine,* 348.

72 I am puzzled by the sub-title of Smit's 2009 article: "Confessing as gathering the fragments? On the Reformed way of dealing with plurality and ambiguity." Is he really satisfied to leave us with a plurality of confessions without a fundamental unity? The sub-title is an obvious reference to David Tracy's 1987 book, *Plurality and Ambiguity.* Yet, Tracy is not. He himself in a recent article, "A Hermeneutics of Orthodoxy," in Christian Orthodoxy, edited by Felix Wilfred and Daniel F Pilario (*Concilium* 2014/2), 71-81, takes a position on the question of continuity and discontinuity that is close to the one for which I argued in this article. He says, "Fidelity to orthodox judgment intrinsic to the particular meaning expressed in propositions is what counts, not the language itself" (74). Again, "The judgments endure but always need new cultural and therefore linguistic formulations" (75). And again, "A purely classicist understanding of language believes that a static unchanging, unchangeable, normative language is alone capable of expressing (*semper idem*) the community's *ortho-dox* beliefs" (75).