

# Theology Matters

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## Doctrine and Ethics

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A story is told about Kenneth Kirk, sometime professor of moral theology at Oxford University. His wife was once asked what she felt about her husband's work. "Kenneth," she said, "spends a lot of time thinking up very complicated and sophisticated reasons for doing things we all know perfectly well to be wrong." This illustrates neatly the way in which moral theology is viewed by many people these days. I want to suggest that a recovery of Christian doctrine is fundamental to a recovery of Christian ethics. In other words, Christian doctrine is what sets Christian ethics apart from the ethics of the world around us. It defines what is distinctive, what is Christian, about Christian ethics. To lose sight of the importance of doctrine is to lose the backbone of faith and to open the way to a spineless ethic. I hope that the following observations will explain why I believe this to be the case.(1)

### **A recovery of Christian doctrine is fundamental to a recovery of Christian ethics**

Commitment is fundamental to any but the most superficial forms of human existence. In his famous essay "The Will to Believe," psychologist William James makes it clear that there are some choices in life that cannot be avoided. To be human is to make decisions. We are all obliged to choose between options that are, in James' words, "living, forced and momentous." In matters of morality, politics and

religion we must make conscious choices—and, as James stresses, our whole life hangs upon the choices made.

Every movement that has ever competed for the loyalty of human beings has done so on the basis of a set of beliefs. Whether the movement is religious or political, philosophical or artistic, the same pattern emerges: A group of ideas, of beliefs, is affirmed to be in the first place true and in the second important. It is impossible to live life to its fullness and avoid encountering claims for our loyalty of one kind or another. Marxism, socialism, atheism—all alike demand that we consider their claims. The same is true of liberalism, whether in its religious or political forms. As Alasdair MacIntyre demonstrates so persuasively, liberalism is committed to a definite set of beliefs and hence to certain values. It is one of the many virtues of MacIntyre's important work that it mounts a devastating critique of the idea that liberalism represents some kind of privileged and neutral vantage point from which other doctrinal traditions (such as evangelicalism) may be evaluated. Rather, liberalism entails precommitment to liberal beliefs and values. Liberal beliefs (and thus values) affect liberal decisions—in ethics, religion and politics. The following quotation illustrates the general tenor of MacIntyre's work:

To the readership of the *New York Times*, or at least to that part of it which shares the presuppositions of those who write that parish magazine of affluent and self-congratulatory liberal enlightenment, the congregations of evangelical fundamentalism appear unfashionably unenlightened. But to the members of those congregations that readership appears to be just as much a community of prerational faith as they themselves are but one whose members, unlike themselves, fail to recognize themselves for what they are, and hence are in

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no position to level charges of irrationality at them or anyone else.(2)

Time and time again, life-changing decisions are demanded of us. How shall I vote at the next election? What do I think about the riddle of human destiny? What form of educational system do I consider to be best? Is the use of deadly force justifiable to defend democracy? What rights do animals have? All these questions force us to think about our beliefs and to make choices. You cannot sit on the fence throughout life, as William James demonstrated with such remarkable clarity. To suspend judgment on every question that life raises is to be trapped in an insipid agnosticism, where all the great questions arising out of human experience receive the same shallow response: "I don't know—and I don't care."

Thinking people need to construct and inhabit mental worlds. They need to be able to discern some degree of ordering within their experience to make sense of its riddles and enigmas. They need to be able to structure human existence in the world, to allow it to possess meaning and purpose, to allow decisions to be made concerning the future of that existence. In order for anyone—Christian, atheist, Marxist, Muslim—to make informed moral decisions, it is necessary to have a set of values concerning human life. Those values are determined by beliefs, and those beliefs are stated as doctrines. Christian doctrine thus provides a fundamental framework for Christian living.

### **Christian doctrine provides a fundamental framework for Christian living**

A common complaint about doctrine runs along the following lines: "Doctrine is outdated and irrelevant. What really matters is our attitudes toward other people, and our morality. Doctrine does not matter." Dorothy L. Sayers reacted as follows to this suggestion:

The one thing I am here to say to you is this: that it is worse than useless for Christians to talk about the importance of Christian morality, unless they are prepared to take their stand upon the fundamentals of Christian theology. It is a lie to say that dogma does not matter; it matters enormously. It is fatal to let people suppose that Christianity is only a mode of feeling; it is virtually necessary to insist that it is first and foremost a rational explanation of the universe. It is hopeless to offer Christianity as a vaguely idealistic aspiration of a simple and consoling kind; it is, on the contrary, a hard tough, exacting and complex doctrine, steeped in a drastic and uncompromising realism.(3)

Not so long ago there was a movement within liberal theology arguing that there existed a universal morality that Christianity reflected. It was not necessary to know anything

about Christian theology to make ethical judgments. This universal morality, it was argued, was adequate in itself. The Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, humanist and atheist were all, it was argued, committed to much the same set of moral principles (with unimportant local variations). In *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis described these as "the ultimate platitudes of Practical Reason." That view is now regarded as so seriously vulnerable as to be virtually defunct. Works such as Jeffrey Stout's *Ethics after Babel* destroyed the credibility of the idea of a "universal morality." Like every other form of morality, Christian morality is something special and distinct, not just a subspecies of some nonexistent universal morality. With the passing of the myth of a universal morality, Christian writers have begun to write with much greater confidence on the theme "Christian morality" in the knowledge that there is a distinctly Christian outlook on many matters. And this outlook, it is increasingly being stressed, is based upon Christian doctrine.

To make this point we may consider two highly-acclaimed recent works on the theme of Christian ethics: Oliver O'Donovan's *Resurrection and Moral Order*, and John Mahoney's *The Making of Moral Theology*. Despite differences between the two authors, one theme emerges as of major importance: Ethics rests upon doctrine. To give but one example: For O'Donovan, Christian ethics rests upon a proper understanding of the objective order imposed upon creation by God. To act in a Christian manner rests upon thinking in a Christian manner.(4)

Let us explore this briefly by considering the ethical authority of Jesus Christ. To allow that Jesus is a religious teacher is to raise the question of his authority. Why should we take him seriously? Although we have been fortunate enough to have had the advice of countless moral and religious teachers in human history, what makes Jesus different? What singles him out as commanding attention? It is untenable to suggest that Jesus' authority rests upon the excellence of his moral or religious teaching. To make this suggestion is to imply that Jesus has authority only when he happens to agree with us. We thus would have authority over Jesus.(5)

### **The identity and significance of Jesus can only be spelled out in doctrinal terms**

In fact, however, the teaching of Jesus has authority on account of who Jesus is—and the identity and significance of Jesus can only be spelled out in doctrinal terms. "We cannot go on treating and believing in Jesus Christ in a way in which it would be wrong to treat and believe in another man, without a theory of his person that explains that he is something more than man." (6) It is doctrine that explains why and how Jesus' words and deeds have divine rather than purely human authority. It is doctrine that singles out Jesus

Christ, and none other, as being God incarnate. To pay attention to Christ reflects our fundamental conviction that God speaks through this man as through no other. Here is no prophet, speaking on God's behalf at second hand; here is God himself, speaking to us. "We have to do with God himself as we have to do with this man. God himself speaks when this man speaks in human speech" (Karl Barth). Quite contrary to the Broad Church liberals of the nineteenth century (who believed it was possible to uphold the religious and ethical aspects of Christianity while discarding its doctrines), the authority of Jesus' moral and religious teaching thus rests firmly upon a doctrinal foundation.

This point is made with care and persuasion by philosopher of religion Basil Mitchell, who stresses that ethics depends upon worldviews and that worldviews in turn depend upon doctrine:

Any world-view which carries with it important implications for our understanding of man and his place in the universe would yield its own distinctive insights into the scope, character and content of morality. To answer the further question, "What *is* the distinctive Christian ethic?", is inevitably to be involved to some extent in controversial questions of Christian doctrine.(7)

The liberal Christianity-without-doctrine school thus finds itself in some thing of a quandary. If Christianity is primarily about certain religious or moral attitudes, it seems that those attitudes rest upon doctrinal presuppositions. Doctrine determines attitudes. It is utterly pointless to argue that we all ought to imitate the religious and moral attitudes of Jesus. That is a demand for blind and unthinking obedience. The question of why we should regard these attitudes as being authoritative demands to be considered. And that means explaining what it is about Jesus Christ that demands singling him out as authoritative—in short, developing doctrines about Jesus.

This point was made clearly and prophetically by William Temple. Writing against the "religion without dogma" movement in 1942, he declared:

You would hardly find any theologian now who supposes that Christian ethics can survive for half a century in detachment from Christian doctrine and this is the very last moment when the church itself can come forward with outlines of Christian ethics in the absence of the theological foundation which alone makes them really tenable. Our people have grown up in a generally Christian atmosphere, and take it for granted that all people who are not actually perverted hold what are essentially Christian notions about human conduct. But this is not true. (8)

He then goes on to illustrate this point tellingly with reference to the rise of Hitler and Stalin in the 1930s. Although many liberal and radical writers of the 1960s suggested that Christian ethics could be divorced from doctrine and maintain an independent existence, the wisdom of Temple's words is once more apparent. Distinctive ethics (whether Marxist, Christian or Buddhist) are dependent upon

worldviews, which are in turn shaped by doctrines, by understandings of human nature and destiny.

Beliefs are important because they claim to describe the way things are. They assert that they declare the truth about reality. But beliefs are not just ideas that are absorbed by our minds and that have no further effect upon us. They affect what we do and what we feel. They influence our hopes and fears. They determine the way we behave. A Japanese fighter pilot of the second world war might believe that destroying the enemies of his emperor ensured his immediate entry into paradise—and, as many American navy personnel discovered to their cost, this belief expressed itself in quite definite actions. Such pilots had no hesitation in launching suicide attacks on American warships. Doctrines are ideas—but they are more than mere ideas. They are the foundation of our understanding of the world and our place within it.

### **Beliefs are important because ...they declare the truth about reality ...they determine the way we behave**

What we might call the "common-sense-Christianity" school will probably continue to insist that faith is a "practical and down-to-earth matter," having nothing to do with "airy-fairy theories" (if I might use phrases I was fond of myself at one time). Economist John Maynard Keynes came across similar attitudes among industrialists and politicians. "We are practical people," they declared, "who have no need for abstract theories about economics." Yet these people, Keynes scathingly remarked, were little more than the unwitting slaves of some defunct economist. Their allegedly practical outlook actually rested upon unacknowledged economic theories. They lacked the insight to see that what they regarded as obvious was actually based upon the theories of some long-dead economist. Without knowing it "common-sense-Christianity" rests upon quite definite doctrinal foundations. The man who declares in the name of common sense that Jesus was simply a good man may genuinely believe that he has avoided matters of doctrine, whereas he has actually echoed the doctrines of the Enlightenment. The study of Christian doctrine is thus profoundly liberating, since it exposes these hidden doctrinal assumptions. Every version of Christianity that has ever existed rests upon doctrinal foundations, but not every version of Christianity has grasped this fact. The genuine question of importance is quite simple: Which of those doctrinal foundations are the most authentic and reliable?

This is to raise the question of truth in Christian doctrine and ethics. To some modern religious writers it may seem slightly quaint and old fashioned to talk about "truth." "Relevance" and "meaningfulness" were words that captured the imagination of a recent generation. Unless something was relevant or meaningful there was no point in bothering with it. Christian doctrine, many suggested, was outdated

and irrelevant. The brave new world that was dawning could manage very well without such relics of the past.

The danger of all this is clear. Beneath all the rhetoric about relevance lies a profoundly disturbing possibility: that people may base their lives upon an illusion, upon a blatant lie. The attractiveness of a belief is all too often inversely proportional to its truth. In the sixteenth century, the radical writer and preacher Thomas Muntzer led a revolt of German peasants against their political masters. On the morning of the decisive encounter between the peasants and the armies of the German princes, Muntzer promised that those who followed him would be unscathed by the weapons of their enemies. Encouraged by this attractive and meaningful belief, the peasants stiffened their resolve.

The outcome was a catastrophe. Six thousand peasants were slaughtered in the ensuing battle, and six hundred were captured. Barely a handful escaped. Their belief in invulnerability was relevant. It was attractive. It was meaningful. It was also a crude and cruel lie, without any foundation in truth. The last hours of that pathetic group of trusting men rested on an utter illusion. It was only when the first salvos cut some of their number to ribbons that they realized they had been deceived.

## **Christian doctrine is concerned to declare that Christian morality rests upon a secure foundation**

To allow relevance to be given greater weight than truth is a mark of intellectual shallowness and moral irresponsibility. The first and most fundamental of all questions must be this: Is it true? Is it worthy of belief and trust? Truth is certainly no guarantee of relevance, but no one can build his personal life around a lie. Christian doctrine is concerned to declare that Christian morality rests upon a secure foundation. An obedient response to truth is a mark of intellectual integrity. It marks a willingness to hear what purports to be the truth, to judge it, and—if it is found to be true—to accept it willingly. Truth demands to be accepted because it inherently deserves to be accepted and acted upon. Christianity recognizes a close link between faith and obedience—witness Paul's profound phrase "the obedience of faith" (Rom 1:5)—making it imperative that the ideas underlying and giving rise to attitudes and actions should be judged and found to be right.

Christian doctrine aims to describe the ways things are. It is concerned to tell the truth in order that we may enter into and act upon that truth. It is an expression of a responsible and caring faith, a faith prepared to give an account of itself and to give careful consideration to its implications for the way we live. To care about doctrines is to care about the reliability of the foundations of the Christian life. It is to be passionately concerned that our actions and attitudes, our

hopes and our fears, are a response to God and not to something or someone making claims to deity, which collapse upon closer inspection.

Perhaps the German Church struggle of the 1930s highlights the importance of doctrine in the modern world. When Adolf Hitler came to power he demanded that he and the Nazi government of the Third Reich should have authority over the Church and its preaching. The German Church polarized into two factions: (1) the "German Christians," who believed the Church should respond positively to National Socialist culture (following the general liberal tendency to put culture above doctrine), and (2) the "Confessing Church"—including such writers as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer—who believed that the Church was answerable to Jesus Christ, as we know him through Scripture, and to him alone. Representatives of the Confessing Church met at Barmen in 1934 where they issued the famous *Barmen Declaration*, perhaps one of the finest statements of the Lordship of Jesus Christ over his Church and its implications:

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). "I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in some other way, is a thief and a robber....I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved" (10:1, 9).

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We reject the false doctrine, that the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.

In other words, the Church cannot and must not substitute anything (for example, the state government or German culture) or anyone (such as Adolf Hitler) for Jesus Christ. If the Church ever loses her faithful obedience to her Lord, she has lost her life and her soul.

Thus far I have spoken in general terms about doctrine and ethics. But how do specific doctrines affect Christian morality? To illustrate the importance of doctrine I wish to consider the way in which two major Christian doctrines have a direct impact upon the way we think ethically in a Christian manner.

### **1. The doctrine of justification by faith.**

What is the motivation for ethics? Why should we want to do good works of any sort? The doctrine of justification by faith makes two central points of relevance here. First, it stresses that there is no way that our moral actions can earn our salvation. They have no purchasing power in respect to salvation. Second, works are done as a response to our justification. They are a natural expression of thankfulness to God. The gift of our justification lays upon us the obligation to live in accordance with our new status. We are made children of God through our justification as an act of free

grace, and now we must act in accordance with this transformation. The slogan "Become what you are!" neatly summarizes this situation and encapsulates the essence of Pauline ethics with some brilliance. In justification we are made to be the light of the world (Matt 5:15-16), and therefore we must shine out as lights in a dark world, as a city on a hill (5:14; Phil 2:15). We are the light of the world, and therefore we must become the light of the world. Our justification brings about a new obedience, an obedience that would not be conceivable before our justification and that ultimately rests upon the grace of God.

There is thus an automatic or natural connection between the justification of the sinner and his or her desire and ability to perform good works. The NT analogy of the tree and its fruit expresses the fundamental idea that the radical transformation of individuals (and it is worth remembering that the English word "radical" comes from Latin *radix*, "root") is prior to their ability to produce good works. In the sermon on the mount, Jesus points out that a good tree bears good fruit and a bad tree bad fruit (Matt 7:16-18). The nature of the fruit is biologically determined by the plant itself. Thus grapes do not grow on thornbushes, nor do figs grow on thistles. These are just the biological facts of life. If you want to get figs, you have to establish a fig tree and get it to fruit.

Underlying these remarkably simple analogies is profound theological insight. The transformation of humanity is a prerequisite for its reformation. Or, as Martin Luther put it: "It is not good works that makes an individual good, but a good individual who does good works." The NT, particular the Pauline writings, emphasizes that this transformation is to be understood as God's transformation of us rather than our own attempt to transform us. Thus Paul speaks of the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal 5:22), drawing attention to the fact that this fruit is the result of God's action within us rather than of our action independent of God. Whereas secular ethical systems tend to discuss moral acts in terms of their goal (in other words, what they achieve or are intended to achieve), a theological ethical system based upon the doctrine of justification by faith will therefore discuss moral acts in terms of what they presuppose or are intended to express (in other words, the individual's radical transformation through his conversion). The starting point of an authentically Christian ethics is the recognition that the conversion of the individual leads to a new obedience, a new lifestyle and a new ethic.

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## **2. The doctrine of original sin.**

A central insight of an authentically Christian morality is its realism concerning the limitations of human nature. Where some secular moral thinking degenerates into little more than a blind utopianism, Christian morality addresses the human situation with an informed realism about its strictly limited possibilities. Reinhold Niebuhr, perhaps one of the greatest Christian ethical thinkers of the twentieth century, poured scorn on the "perfectionist illusions" that so confused and misled many liberal Christian thinkers in the 1930s. The doctrine of original sin destroys naive views of human perfectibility. There is, according to this doctrine, something inherently wrong with human nature, something that makes it self-centered, rebellious and disobedient. There is simply no point in informing sinful humanity that the world would be a better place if everyone stopped doing things that are wrong. What is required is a transformation of the human situation so that the motivation for doing wrong is eliminated or reduced. Underlying both the view that the human predicament arises from ignorance and the view that Jesus Christ is nothing more than a good teacher is a remarkably shallow understanding of the nature of humanity itself. As Niebuhr emphasized, all too many modern thinkers tend to work with a remarkably naive view of human nature, probably reflecting the fact that their middle-class intellectual backgrounds tend to inhibit them from encountering and experiencing the darker side of human nature.

The radical realism of the Christian view of sin, and its devastating consequences for our understanding of human beings as moral agents, is captured in the words of Robert Browning in *Gold Hair*: " Tis the faith that launched point-blank her dart / At the head of a lie—taught Original Sin, / The Corruption of Man's Heart." The bland assumption of the natural goodness of human nature, so characteristic of much western liberal thought, is called into question by this doctrine. The myth of human perfectibility and inevitable progress has been shown up for what it is by the savagery and cruelty of the twentieth century. If ever there was a period in human history when human evil was evident, it has been the twentieth century. How many outrages such as Auschwitz must we experience before the naive assumption that all human beings act out of the best of intentions is exposed for what it is—a cruel and seductive lie? Even those who are reluctant to call this inborn and inbuilt discord "sin" are prepared to recognize its reality. Witness the famous words of the atheist poet A. E. Housman: "The troubles of our proud and angry dust / Are from eternity, and shall not fail."

The doctrine of original sin brings a breath of refreshing realism to Christian ethics. It allows us to understand that human beings are fallen, with an alarming degree of ability to do evil while knowing that it is evil. The implications of human self-centeredness for political institutions (for example, evident in the way in which they can be manipulated and exploited) and moral action will be obvious. Sin is not just something personal; it is something structural, affecting institutions and societies as well as individuals. Niebuhr's argument for democracy—an excellent example of the political application of a Christian

doctrine—was quite simple: It was just about the only way of controlling human self-centeredness and forcing national leaders to respect the needs of others. Put very simply, the doctrine of original sin tells us that morality concerns weak, self-centered and exploitative human beings—in other words, real humans, not the perfectible angels of wishful liberal thinking. Power, capital, force—all can be and will be abused and exploited for personal ends unless the political and moral will exists to control them

Let me also make a more controversial point. Roman Catholic moral theologian Charles Curran also pointed out some central ethical consequences of the Christian doctrine of original sin. Even human reason, the central resource upon which so much secular ethical theory rests, must be regarded as compromised by sin: "In the total Christian horizon the disrupting influence of sin colours all human reality.... Sin affects reason itself." Furthermore, sin is so deeply embedded in human nature and society that there are points at which it is impossible to adopt a course of action that avoids sin. The Christian is obliged to choose between two decisions, each of which is sinful, "In some circumstances the Christian is forced to do something sinful. The sinner reluctantly performs the deed and asks God for forgiveness and mercy." As Helmut Thielicke argued in his *Theological Ethics*, human society is so thoroughly saturated with sin that Christian ethical decision-making must learn to come to terms with compromise, adjusting to the sinful realities of the world rather than pretending that an ideal situation exists in which it is possible to draw a clear-cut decision between "right" and "wrong." To pretend that it is possible to make ethical decisions without coming to terms with the severe limitations placed upon human reason and will by sin is to live in a Walter Mitty world of unreality and dreams. This ethic of compromise is clearly controversial because it suggests what in certain situations one has to speak of "sinful" and "more sinful" choices. But in a fallen world it may well be that we cannot avoid getting our hands dirty.

Curran and Thielicke are excellent examples of Christian writers on ethics who are concerned to develop genuinely Christian approaches to ethical questions rather than just rehashing secular ideas and values. Time and time again these writers show the importance of doctrine to ethics. Christian ethics is simply too important to be left to those whose values are determined by the world rather than by the gospel.(9) To quote once more from the *Barmen Declaration*:

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We reject the false doctrine, that the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.

The Church cannot and must not substitute anything (for example, modern American liberal middle-class culture and its values) or anyone (such as the latest liberal cult figure) for Jesus Christ. If the Church ever loses her faithful obedience to her Lord, she has lost her life and her soul.

## **A Church that takes doctrine seriously is a Church that is obedient to and responsible for what God has entrusted to it**

Doctrine thus defines who we are to obey. It draws a firm line of demarcation between a false Church, which answers to the pressures of the age, and a true Church, which is obedient and responsible to God as he has revealed himself in Christ. "True knowledge of God is born out of obedience" (John Calvin). Inattention to doctrine robs the Church of her reason for existence and opens the way to enslavement and oppression by the world. The German Christians, through well-intentioned but muddled attitudes toward the world, allowed that world to conquer them. A Church that takes doctrine seriously is a Church that is obedient to and responsible for what God has entrusted to it. Doctrine gives substance and weight to what the Christian Church has to offer to the world. A Church that despises or neglects doctrine comes perilously close to losing its reason for existence and may simply lapse into a comfortable conformity with the world—or whatever part of the world it happens to feel most at home with. Its agenda is set by the world; its presuppositions are influenced by the world; its outlook mirrors that of the world. There are few more pathetic sights than a Church wandering aimlessly from one "meaningful" issue to another in a desperate search for relevance in the eyes of the world.

Why, then, are such considerations important? I would like to reflect on their importance to the modern American situation, using Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* and Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* as dialogue partners. Bellah and his coauthors, surveying individualism and commitment in modern American life, concluded that morality was in a state of chaos. There is no longer any consensus. There is no common language of morality. There is no moral Esperanto, which can be abstracted from the moral traditions of humanity. Bellah quotes Livy's reflection on ancient Rome: "We have reached the point where we cannot tolerate either our vices or their cure." And MacIntyre, pursuing the analogy with ancient Rome a little further, declares that "the New Dark Ages are already upon us." I would like to add to this that the so-called new-age movement is simply a new dark age, a new age of distortion and darkness in which the light of faith came dangerously close to extinction.

The foundations of secular ethics are in serious disarray. The notion of some universal morality, valid at all places in space and time, has lost credibility. Secular ethics has been fascinated by the notion of moral obligations, based on the Kantian notion of a sense of moral obligation. But, as MacIntyre pointed out with great force, there are alarming parallels between the western appeal to a sense of moral obligation and the eighteenth-century Polynesian idea of taboo. Captain Cook and his sailors were puzzled by the Polynesian concept, which seemed incomprehensible

to them. MacIntyre points out that the liberal notion of moral obligation is just as arbitrary as taboo. The difference is that liberals fail to realize it.

So there is a need to be able to develop a foundation for ethics. No longer need we pay excessive attention to the fictional idea of a universal frame work of morality. Instead we may concentrate upon what ways of thinking and what ways of acting are appropriate to the Christian community of faith. MacIntyre calls for "the construction of local forms of community through which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the New Dark Ages which are already upon us." I would like to suggest that this vision is helpful to us.

It encourages us to see ourselves as a "city upon a hill" (to use a Biblical image) or a "local form of community in the New Dark Ages" (to use MacIntyre's). Within that community a distinctive way of thinking and acting exists, nourished by the gospel, sustained by the grace of God, oriented toward the glory of God. It is a vision that Americans may share with their Puritan forebears who settled Massachusetts Bay with such hope and faith in the seventeenth century. Their vision can be ours. As MacIntyre stresses, it does not matter if those outside this community fail to understand or share this vision; the important thing is that the vision is presented to them, is kept alive. By joining this community of faith they may come to understand its hopes, beliefs and values.

But let me end with a Pauline image, lent new importance by trends in secular moral philosophy. It is the image of Christians as "citizens of heaven," developed with such force in Phil 3:20-21. The model is that of a colony, an image familiar to the Philippians, Philippi then being a Roman colony. It was an outpost of Rome on foreign territory. Its people kept the laws of the homeland, they spoke its language, they longed for the day when they could return home to the *patria*, the motherland.

Let us think of ourselves, our seminaries, our churches and our families as colonies of heaven, as outposts of the real eternal city, who seek to keep its laws in the midst of alien territory. C. S. Lewis gave us many helpful ways of thinking about the Christian life, and one of the most helpful is that of the world as enemy territory, territory occupied by invading forces. In the midst of this territory, as resistance groups, are the communities of faith. We must never be afraid to be different from the world around us. It is very easy for Christians to be depressed by the fact that the world scorns our values and standards. But the image of the colony sets this in its proper context. At Philippi the civilizing laws of Rome contrasted with the anarchy of its hinterland. And so our moral vision—grounded in Scripture, sustained by faith, given intellectual spine by Christian doctrine—stands as a civilizing influence in the midst of a world that seems to have lost its moral way. If a new dark age does indeed lie ahead of us—indeed if it is already upon us—then it is vital that the Christian moral vision, like the torch of liberty, is kept alight. Doctrine, I firmly and passionately believe, gives us the framework for doing precisely that. It can be done—and it must be done.

1. Some of the ideas developed very briefly in this paper are explored at greater length in my book *Understanding Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991).
2. A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1988) 5.
3. D.L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (London: Methuen, 1947) 28.
4. O. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).
5. I explore the manner in which Jesus Christ can be a moral example for us in the essay "In What Way Can Jesus Be a Moral Example for Christians?" (forthcoming in *JETS* 34/3[September 1991]).
6. C. Gore, *The Incarnation of the Son of God* (London: Murray, 1922) 23.
7. B. Mitchell, *How to Play Theological Ping-Pong* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990) 56(italics his).
8. Letter cited in F.A. Iremonger, *William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury: Life and Letters* (London: Oxford University, 1948) 490.
9. See further my article "Sin and Salvation" in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (ed. D. Atkinson and D. Field: Leicester: Intervarsity, forthcoming).

## Some Books by Alister McGrath:

### Baker Publishing:

*A Life of John Calvin;*  
*Luther's Theology of the Cross;*  
*An introduction to Reformation Thought* (available Nov);  
*The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (available Nov);

### Zondervan Publishing:

*A Cloud of Witnesses;*  
*Explaining Your Faith;*  
*Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths;*  
*Justification By Faith;*  
*Spirituality in an Age of Change;*  
*Suffering and God;*  
*The Making of Modern German Christology;*  
*The Mystery of the Cross;*  
*The Sunnier Side of Doubt;*  
*Understanding Doctrine;*  
*Understanding Jesus;*  
*Understanding the Trinity;*  
*What Was God Doing on the Cross?*

## Discussion Questions:

1. Are there Christian doctrines that are more central to Christian faith than others? Which are central? Where are they stated? Which are not as central?
2. According to McGrath, a common complaint is, "Doctrine is outdated and irrelevant." What do you suppose advocates of this position base their thinking on? What do those who disagree with this statement base their position on?
3. McGrath discusses how Christian doctrine concerning Jesus' nature and work directly impacts whether we accept Jesus' statements as authoritative. Discuss.
4. State the doctrines of original sin and justification by faith. Discuss how acceptance or rejection of these doctrines effects our ethical understanding of issues such as homosexual practice, abortion, euthanasia.

## Brief Summary of McGrath's Article

"A recovery of Christian doctrine is fundamental to a recovery of Christian ethics. In other words, Christian doctrine is what sets Christian ethics apart from the ethics of the world around us. It defines what is distinctive, what is Christian, about Christian ethics. To lose sight of the importance of doctrine is to lose the backbone of faith and to open the way to a spineless ethic."

In order for anyone—Christian, atheist, Marxist, Muslim—to make informed moral decisions, it is necessary to have a set of values concerning human life. Those values are determined by beliefs, and those beliefs are stated as doctrines. Christian doctrine thus provides a fundamental framework for Christian living.

A common complaint about doctrine runs along the following lines: "Doctrine is outdated and irrelevant. What really matters is our attitudes toward other people, and our morality. Doctrine does not matter." Dorothy L. Sayers reacted as follows to this suggestion:

The one thing I am here to say to you is this: that it is worse than useless for Christians to talk about the importance of Christian morality, unless they are prepared to take their stand upon the fundamentals of Christian theology. It is a lie to say that dogma does not matter; it matters enormously. It is fatal to let people suppose that Christianity is only a mode of feeling; it is virtually necessary to insist that it is first and foremost a rational explanation of the universe. It is hopeless to offer Christianity as a vaguely idealistic aspiration of a simple and consoling kind; it is, on the contrary, a hard tough, exacting and complex doctrine, steeped in a drastic and uncompromising realism.(3)

Not so long ago there was a movement within liberal theology arguing that there existed a universal morality that Christianity reflected. It was not necessary to know anything about Christian theology to make ethical judgments. This universal morality, it was argued, was adequate in itself. The Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, humanist and atheist were all, it was argued, committed to much the same set of moral principles (with unimportant local variations). .... [On the contrary] Like every other form of morality, Christian morality is something special and distinct, not just a subspecies of some nonexistent universal morality. With the passing of the myth of a universal morality, Christian writers have begun to write with much greater confidence on the theme "Christian morality" in the knowledge that there is a distinctly Christian outlook on many matters. And this outlook, it is increasingly being stressed, is based upon Christian doctrine.

Let us explore this briefly by considering the ethical authority of Jesus Christ. To allow that Jesus is a religious teacher is to raise the question of his authority. Why should we take him seriously? Although we have been fortunate enough to have had the advice of countless moral and religious teachers in human history, what makes Jesus different? What singles him out as commanding attention? It is untenable to suggest that Jesus' authority rests upon the excellence of his moral or religious teaching. To make this suggestion is to imply that Jesus has authority only when he happens to agree with us. We thus would have authority over Jesus.(5)

In fact, however, the teaching of Jesus has authority on account of who Jesus is—and the identity and significance of Jesus can only be spelled out in doctrinal terms. "We cannot go on treating and believing in Jesus Christ in a way in which it would be wrong to treat and believe in another man, without a theory of his person that explains that he is something more than man." (6) It is doctrine that explains why and how Jesus' words and deeds have divine rather than purely human authority. It is doctrine that singles out Jesus Christ, and none other, as being God incarnate. To pay attention to Christ reflects our fundamental conviction that God speaks through this man as through no other. Here is no prophet, speaking on God's behalf at second hand; here is God himself, speaking to us. "We have to do with God himself as we have to do with this man. God himself speaks when this man speaks in human speech" (Karl Barth).

Beliefs are important because they claim to describe the way things are. They assert that they declare the truth about reality. But beliefs are not just ideas that are absorbed by our minds and that have no further effect upon us. They affect what we do and what we feel. They influence our hopes and fears. They determine the way we behave.

To allow relevance to be given greater weight than truth is a mark of intellectual shallowness and moral irresponsibility. The first and most fundamental of all questions must be this: Is it true? Is it worthy of belief and trust? Truth is certainly no guarantee of relevance, but no one can build his personal life around a lie. Christian doctrine is concerned to declare that Christian morality rests upon a secure foundation. An obedient response to truth is a mark of intellectual integrity. It marks a willingness to hear what purports to be the truth, to judge it, and—if it is found to be true—to accept it willingly. Truth demands to be accepted because it inherently deserves to be accepted and acted upon.

### ***1. The doctrine of justification by faith.***

What is the motivation for ethics? Why should we want to do good works of any sort? The doctrine of justification by faith makes two central points of relevance here. First, it stresses that there is no way that our moral actions can earn our salvation.

They have no purchasing power in respect to salvation. Second, works are done as a response to our justification. They are a natural expression of thankfulness to God.

The transformation of humanity is a prerequisite for its reformation...Whereas secular ethical systems tend to discuss moral acts in terms of their goal (in other words, what they achieve or are intended to achieve), a theological ethical system based upon the doctrine of justification by faith will therefore discuss moral acts in terms of what they presuppose or are intended to express (in other words, the individual's radical transformation through his conversion). The starting point of an authentically Christian ethics is the recognition that the conversion of the individual leads to a new obedience, a new lifestyle and a new ethic.

## **2. The doctrine of original sin.**

A central insight of an authentically Christian morality is its realism concerning the limitations of human nature. Where some secular moral thinking degenerates into little more than a blind utopianism, Christian morality addresses the human situation with an informed realism about its strictly limited possibilities. ...The doctrine of original sin destroys naive views of human perfectibility. There is, according to this doctrine, something inherently wrong with human nature, something that makes it self-centered, rebellious and disobedient. There is simply no point in informing sinful humanity that the world would be a better place if everyone stopped doing things that are wrong. What is required is a transformation of the human situation so that the motivation for doing wrong is eliminated or reduced. Underlying both the view that the human predicament arises from ignorance and the view that Jesus Christ is nothing more than a good teacher is a remarkably shallow understanding of the nature of humanity itself.

### ***Conclusion.***

Doctrine thus defines who we are to obey. It draws a firm line of demarcation between a false Church, which answers to the pressures of the age, and a true Church, which is obedient and responsible to God as he has revealed himself in Christ. "True knowledge of God is born out of obedience" (John Calvin). Inattention to doctrine robs the Church of her reason for existence and opens the way to enslavement and oppression by the world. A Church that takes doctrine seriously is a Church that is obedient to and responsible for what God has entrusted to it. Doctrine gives substance and weight to what the Christian Church has to offer to the world. A Church that despises or neglects doctrine comes perilously close to losing its reason for existence and may simply lapse into a comfortable conformity with the world—or whatever part of the world it happens to feel most at home with. Its agenda is set by the world; its presuppositions are influenced by the world; its outlook mirrors that of the world. There are few more pathetic sights than a Church wandering aimlessly from one "meaningful" issue to another in a desperate search for relevance in the eyes of the world."

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## **The Doctrines of the Presbyterian Church(USA)**

*The Book of Order together with the Book of Confessions form the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church(USA)*

*The Book of Order says the following with regard to the Book of Confessions:*

The Presbyterian Church(U.S.A.) states its faith and bears witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ in the creeds and confessions in the *Book of Confessions*. In these confessional statements the Church declares to its members and to the world

Who and what it is,  
What it believes,  
What it resolves to do.

These statements identify the Church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as by its actions. They guide the Church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Christian tradition; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the Church for its work of proclamation.

These confessional statements are subordinate standards in the Church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him. While confessional standards are subordinate to the Scriptures, they are, nonetheless, standards. They are not lightly drawn up or subscribed to, nor may they be ignored or dismissed. The Church is prepared to counsel with or even to discipline one ordained who seriously rejects the faith expressed in the confessions. Moreover, a more exacting amendment process is required to change the confessions of the Church than is required to change the Constitution in matters of government, worship, or discipline. Yet the Church, in obedience to Jesus Christ, is open to the reform of its standards of doctrine as well as of governance. The Church affirms "Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda," that is, "The Church reformed, always reforming," according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.

In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S. A.) gives witness to the faith of the Church catholic. The confessions express the faith of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church in the recognition of canonical Scriptures and the

formulation and adoption of the ecumenical creeds, notably the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds with their definitions of the mystery of the triune God and of the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ. (G-2.0100-G-02.0300)

*The Book of Confessions and The Book of Order may be ordered from the Presbyterian Church (USA), Louisville, KY by calling 1-800-524-2612. The Book of Confessions is OGA-94004, \$3.00; large print is OGA-94005, \$3.00. The Book of Order for 94-95 is OGA-94012, \$3.00; large print is OGA-94002, \$3.00. The Book of Order will be revised after the July General Assembly meeting, the new 95-96 version will be available in August. Add to cost, shipping charges.*

## ***The Great Encourager: A Study of John 14***

Ten lessons on Jesus Christ the Great Encourager! Encouraging facts: God has a plan! God is enough! God enables! God cares! God is faithful! God counsels! God is in control! Results: An active working faith! This study examines Scripture by looking at the text and cross-references and then challenging you to apply the teachings. It is suited to small group study and discussion. Author Marilyn Anderes is a Christian wife and mother of three living in Maryland. Marilyn attends a United Methodist church and has published numerous articles in magazines such as *Decision and Discipleship Journal*. *The Great Encourager* (85 pages) is published by RENEW a United Methodist women's renewal ministry. Copies are available from Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry by writing PFFM, P.O. Box 10249, Blacksburg, VA 24062-0249. Please include a donation to PFFM of: \$5.00 for 1 copy ; 2-10 copies, \$4.50 each; 11-20 copies \$4.25 each.

## **Bible Study of the Gospel of Mark**

### **CHAPTER 4**

(chapter 5 will follow in the next issue)

### **of THE GOSPEL OF MARK**

*Observe the Text to understand the author's meaning:*

**Read 4:1-34. Reread 4:1-20.** This is the only place in Mark where Jesus tells parables. Although we are told in Mark that Jesus speaks to the multitudes, this is the only place we hear the content of Jesus' teaching to the multitudes. Who is Jesus talking to in vs 1-9? Who is he talking to in vs 10-34?

What according to vs 14 do the seeds represent? What happens to the word which corresponds to seeds sown along side the road which the birds eat up? What happens to the word which is sown on rocky ground and does not develop strong roots?

What happens to the word which is sown among the thorns? The thorns are pretty specific, what are they? These are not thorns of illness or suffering but very specific ones. These people do not fall away from the Word, but they bear no fruit. Is Timothy saying the same thing in 2 Tim 3:1-5? Discuss.

What happens to the word which is sown in good soil?

This is the first teaching on the Kingdom of God. What is the teaching here? Will everyone respond to the word? Will everyone be a part of the kingdom?

4:10-12 are hard verses. See the quote from Isaiah 6: 8-10. What do the verses mean?

**Reread 4:21-23.** These verses teach more about the Kingdom of God. What is the teaching in light of the previous verses?

**Reread 4:24-25.** If this again is a parable about the kingdom, what is it saying?

**Reread 4: 26-29.** Another lesson about the kingdom. If Jesus is talking to the disciples who will be the ones to "cast seed upon the soil," what is Jesus telling them? Who sows and who harvests? Who is the one who causes the seed to sprout and grow? Would this be a helpful lesson for a teacher, Jesus, to tell his followers? Why?

**Reread 4: 30-34.** Another lesson about the kingdom. What is the lesson here? How is this an encouragement to disciples whose leader will be crucified before too long? Is this a recurring theme through Scripture, from the weakest, smallest comes the great because of the power of God. Can you think of any other place in Scripture this theme is presented?

In the above lessons about the Kingdom of God, who does the growth in the Kingdom depend on? Explain the difference between what the disciples are called to do and what God does. Calvin says that God deliberately started from weak and lowly beginnings so that the progress which seems impossible would glorify him.

**Read 4:35-41.** Up until now the disciples have been onlookers to Jesus' authority and miracles. Now what happens? Why did the disciples wake up Jesus? Remember four of these men are fisherman and probably accustomed to the storms on the Sea of Galilee and yet this one terrified them. What did they expect Jesus to do? What does he do?

What is their reaction? Read Psalm 107:23-32. Notice Jesus words, “Hush be still” are the words God speaks in Psalm 107. What does this tell us about who Jesus is?

After Jesus calms the sea, instead of rejoicing, the disciples become afraid. Why? The disciples had seen the unclean spirits obey Jesus, and had seen his authority over all kinds of illness, now they see even nature--the wind and the sea, obey him. The final lesson on the kingdom is that the King is here--the one who rules heaven and earth!

### ***Interpret the text:***

- 1) What does this chapter say about the Kingdom?
- 2) About the King? About authority? Discuss the meaning of the “sovereignty of God” from this chapter.
- 3) Do you see this chapter as an encouragement to the disciples? How?

### ***Application***

- 1) What kind of seed are you? Have you ever been persecuted because of the word? If you have not, why is that? If you were, did you fall away? What helped you not to fall away?
- 2) Are you a person like the seed that fell among the thorns where the “worries of the world and deceitfulness of riches and desires for other things choke out the word and it becomes unfruitful?”
- 3) How is your life a light put on a lampstand? How is it not?
- 4) What is your standard of measure? What should it be?
- 5) What encouragement does it give you that there will be a kingdom of God; that the small mustard seed will grow into a large tree?
- 6) What does it mean in your life and in your relationship with Jesus Christ to know that Christ is all powerful-- that Christ is not bound by the natural world but in fact rules over the natural world?
- 5) How is this chapter an encouragement for your ministry?

### **BIBLE STUDY NOTES**

(Compare these notes to your thoughts after you have looked at the passages and answered the questions yourself)

**4:1-20.** Notice that it is persecution because of the word. There are other kinds of suffering that are not included here.

Notice that the people in whom the seeds are sown are those that appear to hear and accept the word. They are not rebellious people who outright reject God’s Word. These

people are open to the word and receive it on some level. Maybe Jesus is making a distinction between those who in 3:35 come and “sit around” him but who may not “do the will of God.” The seed is sown but then withers or is choked out.

Calvin says of the first group that they come to hear the word but have no understanding because they do not come in humility or meekness. The second group falls away because of temptation and because “they themselves think that they have a true faith.” The third group allows the thorns--pleasures of the world, evil desires, avarice and others anxieties of the flesh --to crowd out the Word of the Lord.

**4:10-12.** This may be a statement of predestination or it may be a statement of the blindness of the scribes and Pharisees who see but do not perceive. Remember Jesus is speaking here to his disciples. Perhaps he is encouraging them that although they are to preach, not everyone to whom they preach will bear fruit. That is not their fault but is the nature of the Kingdom.

Calvin writes, “The Gospel is not the cause of blindness...in itself or in its nature, but only in the event. It is like the dim sighted going out in the sunshine. It only makes their eyes weaker sighted going out in the sunshine....Yet, the fault lies, not in the sun, but in their eyes. When the Word of god blinds and hardens the reprobate, it is through their own native depravity; so far as the Word is concerned, it is accidental.”

Our repentance does not force God to act and forgive us. Rather, God is ready to forgive us but awaits our turning to him and repenting of our sins.

**4:21-23.** Calvin suggests that Jesus is saying that even though not all of the seed will fall on fertile ground, still the kingdom will not remain hidden--it will flourish and come to light. That is an encouragement to the disciples to preach about the kingdom even if much of the seed falls on poor soil--their work will bear fruit. It is also an admonition to us, if we are good soil, we are expected to bear fruit.

**4:24-25.** Mark says to be “careful what you listen to.” Perhaps “your measure” is the pharisaical laws, or the Scripture, or your own heart, or your own god, or TV or books. Whatever you measure life by, you will be measured. Whatever your source of Truth is, that is what you will be measured by. If you seek riches or desires for other things (from vs 19), you will be measured by that and they will be taken away (rust) but if you seek the true things, the light, the Gospel, more will be added--that is, deeper understanding will be given.

**4:35-41.** The same authority that will cause the kingdom to flourish, now is evidenced in Christ’s rule over the natural world.

It is interesting that their question is, “don’t you care that we are perishing?” That is precisely why Jesus came, because he does care that we are perishing!

## News from Around the World

The Rev. Clyde O. Robinson, National Ministries Division associate for higher education and student ministries was PC(USA) staff person for the Ecumenical Youth Gathering in St. Louis, Dec 28-Jan 1, 1995. In his evaluation of the event to Executive Director, James Brown, Robinson wrote concerning Bible study leader Rita Brock, "I don't understand or agree with everything I have read, but I found much of what she said challenging. As we prepare for the theological dialogue called for by the General Assembly, I would suggest that Rita Nakashima Brock be included." Brock in her book, *Journey's By Heart: Christology of Erotic Power*, labels the trinity, the "unholy trinity," refers to our worship of Christ as "androcentric hero worship" and advocates instead "Christa communities." Robinson is staff representative to the Presbyterian Student Strategy Team which is planning youth leadership events including the next Ecumenical Youth Gathering.

The PC(USA) General Assembly will vote on changes to the Book of Order needed to implement our participation in the Churches in Covenant Communion. As a member of the Covenant Communion, the PC(USA) will accord full recognition to the ordained ministers of other participating denominations although we will have no ability to hold those ministers accountable to standards of faith. The

Covenant Communion document reads, "...the ordained ministries of each covenanting church become one ministry of Jesus Christ in relation to all...From the date of inauguration of covenant communion, there will be no more ordinations carried out in denominational isolation from the other covenanting churches."

The United Church of Christ (one of the potential members of the Covenant Communion) renewal publication *The Witness* reports, "Gordon Gibb, pastor of Altadena Congregational United Church of Christ in the Southern California Conference became a Buddhist on January 15, 1995. He and his nine year old daughter, were initiated by the Venerable Hsing Yun, at Hsi Lai Temple in an ancient rite." Gibb told the Pasadena Star-News, "Christianity does not have to be superior to be true...You don't have to be exclusively Buddhist to be Buddhist. My Christianity has not been watered down. If anything it's become stronger. Buddhism has enabled me to better understand my own faith, which is still Christian."

In the same vein, Charles Colson reports in his book, *The Body*, that the UCC ordained a self-professed lesbian and practicing witch in 1991. She said, "I found that some of the same sense of empowerment that I got from the coven, I would get from the church."

### Come Join Us Working for Renewal in the Presbyterian Church (USA)

Join us in being a voice calling the Presbyterian Church(USA) and individual Presbyterians back to Reformed Christian faith rooted in Scripture and our Confessions while also rejecting false gods and their ideologies.

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