

# Why Christian Doctrine Matters

*By Kathy McReynolds, Ph.D.*

I must preface this essay by stating that very few of the arguments presented on the following pages are original. To the extent that I am able to elucidate them, I owe their clarity and genius to many great Christian thinkers who have gone before me.<sup>1</sup> What I do believe I contribute to this important discussion concerning Christian doctrine is its application to disability. The use of the word *disability* in this particular context is not a reference to certain people with disabilities per se; but rather, *disability* is used broadly in order to describe what I believe is the current state of the evangelical church. In recent years the evangelical church has ignored the source of its divine power: doctrine. In so doing, it has rendered itself disabled, incapable in many ways of carrying out its mission to reach the most vulnerable (Luke 14). I was struck by this notion when I read Dorothy Sayers' poignant book *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine*. With extraordinary wit and charm, Sayers forcefully argues that the Church has become diminished, incapacitated, disabled if you will, because it has forsaken vital Christian doctrine which communicates the essence of Christianity; that is, the character of Christ who is "energetic, dramatic, and utterly alive." According to Sayers, Christian doctrine tells us the truth about God, ourselves, and our world. To forsake Christian doctrine, then, is not only perilous for the Church, but it can also mean the unraveling of the very fabric of our society. When this happens, the most vulnerable in society are always at greater risk. I owe the structure of this essay to Sayers' many insights. I seek to advance her argument by emphasizing that when believers forsake Christian doctrine, they not only neglect their high calling to minister to and protect the most vulnerable, but they fail to make use of the divine tools God gave them to engage culture: essential Christian doctrine. It is doctrine which distinguishes the Church from any other institution. If we do not take our own doctrine seriously, how can we expect our culture to?

## **Christian Doctrine: Has It Become a "Dirty" Word?**

In the summer of 2006, Biola Connections ran a front-page article entitled, "The "D" Word: Has Doctrine Become the New Dirty Word?"<sup>2</sup> Several professors from Talbot and Biola were interviewed for the article and together they gave some solid evidence concerning the diminishing role of doctrine in the evangelical church today. For example, a doctrine that the historic Christian Church has embraced from its very inception is the Trinity. It is a crucial doctrine which gives explanation and insight into the nature of the Godhead. But as relationships take precedence over essential doctrines in the church, these explanations and insights seem less important. There are even some evangelical leaders who no longer think the doctrine of the Trinity is essential.

The Trinity is not the only doctrine to be challenged in recent years. Leaders in the emerging church

movement are calling into question the doctrine of Hell and the exclusive nature of Christ's claim to be the only way of salvation. Open theists dispute God's omniscience, claiming that he cannot possibly know in advance human actions freely chosen. Recent studies indicate that many young evangelicals are also unsure about several essential doctrines. The National Study of Youth and Religion, for example, found that nearly half of Protestant youth believe many religions may be true, and 36 percent of them think it is alright to pick and choose some aspects of the faith and leave the rest.

Dennis Dirks, the dean of Talbot Theological Seminary, believes that today's church has strayed far from its predecessors who vigorously defended doctrine. In fact, Dirks points out, "Doctrine was so important that entire books of the Bible were written about it, councils met to defend it, and early converts to Christianity had two to three years of training in it, known as the catechumenate." The early Reformers also encouraged this level of training. Today, some people may simply sign a doctrinal statement (which they may or may not read) or maybe take a few membership classes.

According to Alan Gomes, professor of historical theology at Talbot, the church's move away from doctrine began with the teachings of Frederick Schleiermacher (1768–1834), who taught that the goal of religion was to have a feeling of total dependence upon God. Doctrines which did not address feelings were considered unnecessary for the Christian life. But, as Sayers asks, if doctrine is irrelevant for the Christian life, to what indeed is it relevant? Christian doctrine matters intensely. After all, it concerns the true nature of the universe and the meaning of human life. These are hardly "trivial" matters.

## Christian Doctrine: Our Ignorance

Based upon many believers' description of their own faith, and also upon what several of the new atheists are writing in their latest books, ignorance of the true nature of Christianity runs deep. Consider for example some of the following questions and answers concerning the Christian faith:

1. Who is God the Father?—He is the Creator, the One who set everything in motion. He is angry most of the time and makes impossible demands on his people.
2. Who is God the Son?—He is somehow associated with Jesus of Nazareth. He was a good man and a good teacher. He has a lot of influence with God the Father. He seems to understand human beings and did his best while he was here to reconcile us to God. It was not his fault that things were as bad as they were.
3. Who is the Holy Spirit?—He is the one who came at Pentecost, but we are not entirely sure what he is supposed to do on a daily basis. I believe he is supposed to play a role in helping Christians to feel good about themselves by doing good things for themselves and others.
4. What is the Trinity?—Totally incomprehensible and irrelevant to daily life. All we know is that the Bible does not mention "Trinity" so it probably isn't important anyway.
5. What is Faith?—Believing something one cannot see without any real evidence whatsoever. Feeling good about oneself. Ignoring all scientific fact.
6. What is Sin?—Abortion. Homosexuality.
7. What is Christian Virtue?—Refraining from dancing, drinking, and thinking.
8. What is Reason?—An obstacle to faith.

These answers to important questions hardly do justice to the historic Christian faith. But I fear that this is an accurate reflection of what many people inside and outside of the church think of such doctrines. At the risk of sounding critical, these answers reflect an elementary Sunday school version of Christianity, one which enemies set up in order to attack as too simplistic and irrational, and one which many adult Christians display as something to hold dear. After all, if some Christian leaders believe that doctrine has

little importance and little to do with daily life, no wonder a vast majority of congregations and indeed much of society thinks that way as well!

### Christian Doctrine: Why It Matters

In her penetrating and deeply insightful essay “Creed or Chaos,” Dorothy Sayers minces no words as she puts her finger on the fundamental problem of trying to practice the Christian faith without knowing what it is actually all about:

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 vitally 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. And it is fatal to imagine that everybody knows quite well what Christianity is and needs only a little encouragement to practice it. The brutal fact is that in this nation not one person in a hundred has the faintest notion what the Church teaches about God or man or society or the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Sayers wrote these words in the mid-twentieth century and they were directed toward the Church of England. I think her words are even more relevant for us today. We have much to lose if we continue to ignore doctrine, not only in the Church but in society as well. For if Christian doctrine communicates what is true about all reality: God, the universe, humanity, and society, then to forsake Christian doctrine is to invite world chaos on a grand scale. This is serious, and if the Church wants to be taken seriously, it must take its doctrine seriously.

In other words, if we are to have any influence in our culture, if we are to carry out our mission to reach all people, especially those who are most vulnerable, then we must preach Jesus Christ and not simply Jesus. We have become very good in the church today at preaching Jesus, a good and kind man who loves us just the way we are. Yes, this makes us feel good; but with this half-truth consistently before the modern mind, it has difficulty equating this Jesus with the One who creates and sustains the universe: Jesus the Christ.

In her masterful work on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Sayers discusses in a rather unique way just how important Christology is to daily life. She begins by distinguishing between a natural symbol and a conventional symbol. A natural symbol is a thing that really exists, which by its own nature represents some greater thing of which itself is an instance. Sayers points out that the Incarnation, because it is a historic fact, is the ultimate example—the unique natural symbol of the whole history of humanity and the whole nature of God and the relationship between the two. This truth also demonstrates the difference between a natural and conventional symbol. A conventional symbol is something arbitrarily chosen and can stand for something in which it has little in common. For instance, in pop culture, X can stand for a kiss, or for any unknown thing (X factor).

When people say today that the Incarnation is merely “symbolic,” what they usually mean is that it is not a historical fact. But if it is not historic, then it is not a natural symbol, but merely conventional. In other words, as a conventional symbol, Jesus is not really both God and Man; he is just so good and moral that he was simply more “like God” than anyone else. But, if the Incarnation is indeed a historic fact, then it is a natural symbol, and by reflecting on it we can really learn something about both God and man. This is the distinctive mark of a natural symbol. By being simply what it is, it tells us something about the thing it represents.

This point about the true nature of the Son of God and the doctrine of the Incarnation is crucial because

it alone reveals the structure of all reality. God is real. Evil and suffering are real. Judgment is real and is coming. Heaven is a real place. As Sayers puts it, God will “wrench a real good out of a real evil. The doctrines of the reality of evil and the value of suffering should be kept in the very front line of Christian affirmation. I mean, it is not enough to say that religion produces virtues and personal consolations side by side with the very obvious evils and pains that afflict mankind, but that God is alive and at work within the evil and suffering, perpetually transforming them.”<sup>4</sup>

By reaching out to people with disabilities, who are most vulnerable in our society, and to those who have been afflicted with various kinds of evil and suffering, we can demonstrate to the unbelieving world that Christian doctrine is vitally important, and is anything but boring and irrelevant. To the contrary, it is “energetic, dramatic, and utterly alive.” As Sayers so eloquently puts it,

“Somehow or other, and with the best intentions, we have shown the world the typical Christian in the likeness of a crashing and rather ill-natured bore—and this in the name of One who assuredly never bored a soul in those thirty-three years during which he passed through the world like a flame.

Let us, in heaven’s name, drag out the divine drama from under the dreadful accumulation of slipshod thinking and trashy sentiment heaped upon it, and set it on an open stage to startle the world into some sort of vigorous reaction. If the pious are the first to be shocked, so much worse for the pious—others will pass into the kingdom of heaven before them. If all men are offended because of Christ, let them be offended; but where is the sense of their being offended at something that is not Christ and is nothing like him? We do him little honor by watering down his personality till it could not offend a fly. Surely it is not the business of the Church to adapt Christ to men, but to adapt men to Christ.

It is the doctrine that is the drama—not beautiful phrases, nor comforting sentiment, nor vague aspirations to loving-kindness and uplift, nor the promise of something nice after death—but the terrifying assertion that the same God who made the world, lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death. Show that to the heathen, and they may not believe it; but at least they may realize that here is something a man might be glad to believe.”<sup>5</sup>

## References

Wolfe, Alan, *The Transformation of American Religion* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

## Notes

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1. St. Augustine, C.S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, J.P. Moreland, Dallas Willard, and many others.
2. Holly Pivec, “Has Doctrine Become the New Dirty Word?” *Biola Connections*, Summer 2006, 12–17.
3. Dorothy Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2004).
4. *Ibid.* p 61.
5. *Ibid.*

## About the Author

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