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Role and Importance of Doctrine in the Parish

There is a role and importance of doctrine in the parish. You will be able to see that doctrine plays a vital role in the culture of the parish. First, let's define the word "doctrine". Doctrine means teaching. For the sake of this paper, doctrine means the teachings of the church, found in Holy Scripture. As we look at the role and importance of doctrine, this brief paper will look at basic issues to which lay people, as well as pastors, can succumb when there is a lack of doctrine, along with the importance of getting back to the basics, and then how doctrine in parish life relates to the outside world.

There are three basic problems that can develop when doctrine is pushed to the side in the parish. Both pastors and laity can struggle with nihilism, moral therapeutic deism, and some sort of law/gospel reductionism (whether it be Gnosticism or Antinomianism). Following are descriptions of all three of these.

James C. Edwards is a sociologist in training and sees religion in four epochs. Currently we are living in the "age of transvalued values". The age of transvalued values comes from Nietzsche. Nietzsche explains that truth is relative and that there is no ultimate truth. The premise of this is that what one believes as truth is only your set of values and each person can have their own set of values. Edwards in his book compares life to that of a shopping mall. He writes: "In the culture of the mall, our highest values—even truth—have certainly devaluated themselves; they have become the playthings of an impersonal and endless economic ordering...They have become

things to be peddled and traded as one sees fit.”¹ When people fall into seeing the church as something else in the shopping mall of the world, they fall into this nihilism. In nihilism nothing is sacred anymore, even the church. In the lives of the people sitting in the pews, this can clearly be seen as they run from activity to activity without stopping, going from one set of values to the next, and the church is just seen as one more activity competing for their time. When doctrine is not in the lives of the people in the pews (and the pastors in the pulpit), nihilism can and does play its game in the church.

Nihilism is not the only problem that creeps into the church; another is Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD). MTD was defined in 2009 by Christian Smith. He defined it with five statements:

- 1) God exists - holds us accountable
- 2) God wants people to be good, nice, and moral people
- 3) God wants you to be happy
- 4) God's available when you need him; otherwise, he's not involved
- 5) People who try hard and are good go to heaven²

This unfortunately is where many people are living. We live in an age of therapy and other therapeutic offerings for improving one's life. The church has turned into another one of those "things" offering therapy, offering a chance for people to be happy. Being happy is a good thing, but providing people with Christ and what He has done brings a whole new sense of meaning to the person.

Pastors even fall into this category as they try to compete with secular "counselors" so that they can offer their people Christian hope. Going to the pastor's

¹ James C. Edwards, "The City in a Dome," in *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism*. (University Park, Penn.: Penn State Press, 1997), 50

² June 17, 2015, "Systematic Theology for Today"

office, or even Sunday Morning service, isn't only about making you feel happy; it's about the forgiveness of sins. When people don't hear the teachings, the doctrine of the church, in a clear way, they can fall into MTD. They can buy into the fact that God is just a divine vending machine that's there when we need something from him; otherwise, he stays out of our business.

Law/Gospel reductionism that goes along with Gnosticism and Antinomianism is another tragedy of not seeing the importance of teaching doctrine in the parish. A couple of definitions: Gnosticism rejects the biblical doctrine of sin. Gnosticism also claims that material things aren't really real. Antinomianism is the rejection of the law. It's downplaying the importance of the law in the lives of people. Actually, it says that there is no place for the law. These are both tragic beliefs that people fall into when one reduces doctrine in the life of the parish. Without the doctrine of sin, there is no need for the gospel. Without the gospel, there is no need for the law. One cannot reduce either the law or the gospel. They both need to be standing true to form as Scripture clearly shows us.

These three tragic problems come to the forefront of parish life when doctrine is not seen as important in the lives of the people. These problems are what the culture around the church is teaching and what some denominations and individual congregations are even teaching.

With this in mind, it's time to get back to the basics in our congregations. It's time to teach the basics of the Christian Doctrine which will then, by the Holy Spirit, be lived out in the lives of the people in the pews. Losing the doctrine is devastating; losing the teachings of the church is detrimental. Catechesis in its most basic form is the oral

teaching of the doctrines of the church. Catechesis needs to be at the core of Christian Church, not just for two or three years during a person's Jr. High years, but from birth until grave.

In doing this, one can look at the narrative of scripture, law and gospel, and how that all relates to the use of the catechism and how one can teach it in a way that relates to our people today - namely, how to use the doctrines intra-textually. In this next section of the paper I will discuss how all these things are related to getting back to the basics of scripture.

Dorothy Sayers, a lay person and an active author of fiction novels, talks about how the Dogma is the Drama. Sayers emphasizes the need to be involved in the divine narrative. The Divine Narrative is the narrative of the world from pre-creation to new creation. The central part – rather, person – of this narrative is Jesus Christ. As Sayers talks about how the Dogma is the Drama, she means that the teachings of the church are the drama. She emphasizes that the teachings of the church are tied to the history and person of Christ (and to the rest of the divine narrative). In the church, when we focus on our doctrines not being able to be separated from the divine drama, we will be back to the basics. Studying the divine narrative of pre-creation to new creation is important; it brings us back to who we are as God's people and where we fit with Christ as our center.

The narrative fits perfectly with the discussion of law and gospel. As pastors teaching God's people that narrative, when we teach and preach it, we also share with God's people the law and gospel. Law and gospel are important in the fact that they are two doctrines that shape our narrative. Most people will see the law as the Ten

Commandments; while that's only part of it, it still needs to be taught as part of the narrative that points to Christ fulfilling the law. The law needs to be taught in all truth and purity as well as the gospel, while having the gospel predominate, as Walther writes in his theses on Law and Gospel. They need to be held together and not separate. They need to be taught well for the sake of doctrine and the narrative to avoid the risks of Gnosticism, Antinomianism, and Law/Gospel reductionism. When the law kills and the gospel makes alive, it does its proper work.

The narrative goes hand-in-hand with law and gospel, since at the center of both is Christ. With that in mind, we are further along in the divine narrative as we move closer to the new creation. Christ is still at the center of it all. Teaching the doctrine of the church plays the role of keeping Christ at the center. Since Christ is the center of everything, "the church's dogma is her confessing response to the self-giving and self-identification of God in Jesus Christ."³ Knowing who Jesus is is central in keeping law and gospel straight, and central in the importance of doctrine in the church.

In teaching doctrine and its importance in the parish, George Lindbeck shows us that one view is that the point of doctrine is to convey truth. This is exactly right, but yet there is the way to convey truth that connects the text to the culture (intra-textuality). When one connects the text to the culture, it shows that you and I are in this narrative together in community. It's not just looking and proofing the texts; it's about living the texts out in your life for the sake of community. Lindbeck says, "Churches have become purveyors of this commodity rather than communities that socialize their members into

³ David Yeago, "Gnosticism, Antinomianism, and Reformation Theology: Reflections on the Costs of a Construal." *Pro Ecclesia* 2,1 (winter 1993), 43.

coherent and comprehensive religious outlooks and forms of life.”⁴ It’s what churches have been doing today. Churches have been involved in being another store in the mall, but this is not where we are supposed to stay. In placing doctrine in the life of the parish, it means to be the church. What does being part of the church look like in your own life, in the life of the community, in your vocations?

Lindbeck also tells us that we are born into communities and that churches are their own communities. He is pleading with the church to stop trying to be part of the culture, but rather to be countercultural. The church needs to go back to the basics to see that they are, in fact, countercultural. The church needs to be teaching the narrative in not just cognitive ways, but in real life situations. Doctrine is important so that the people in the pews can see where they fit in the narrative and how it all fits together. Lindbeck notes that good catechesis will form and nurture disciples.

As we get back to the basics, the basic narrative of pre-creation to new creation, with Christ at the center, law and gospel will clear up, and we will be able to speak intra-textually. As we do this, catechesis will only continue to improve, for when, in the life of the parish, doctrine is seen as important, disciples will be formed and nurtured; this starts with the main spiritual leader of the parish, the pastor.

As doctrine is shown its importance and role in the life of the parish, one will be able to see how it relates to the people who live in various vocations. God has given each individual many vocations; for example, several of mine include: husband, father, brother, son, pastor, citizen, student, teacher, first responder, and more. In each of our vocations, we live in relationship to one another and in relationship to God. We live in

⁴ George A. Lindbeck, “Toward a Postliberal Theology,” in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002) 186.

relationship with God who gives everything to us, even though we sin against Him. We also live in relationship with others as we respond to them through the Gospel in the way God commands us to live.

As God's people live in the divine narrative, they also live in two realms: the left hand and the right hand realm. In the right hand realm they receive the gospel, as baptized children of God, they are able to proclaim the gospel. In the left hand realm, God's people, both those sitting in the pews and those in pulpits, live out their lives for the sake of their neighbor through the gospel. They also live out their lives as they obey the laws of man, as long as they do not go against the laws of God. In these two realms, the doctrine of vocation is lived out all the more. Here is a location in the lives of God's people that they can embody the doctrine they learn in the parish, through the sermons we hear and the Bible studies we participate in.

There are several other areas in the lives of the people of the parish where doctrine can play an important role. As people live in the divine narrative and embody the doctrines, they will begin to see themselves in the bigger picture of creation/new creation. Many people do not see the importance of new creation talk. When speaking of creation/new creation and how that relates to the divine narrative, as leaders of the church, we can be sharing with the people in the pews that Christ came to be part of the creation and to restore creation. When doctrine is correctly taught in parishes, one will see that this whole divine narrative from pre-creation to new creation is all about Christ, and when Christ is at the center, it begins to make sense. One can clearly begin to see that all of theology flows together.

With Christ embodying creation, one can hopefully see that creation matters to God, even the left hand (temporal) realm. This is when that doctrine of vocation truly comes into play as people live out their lives as God has given them to do. As one takes a systematic approach to this, namely through the Creed, we see that second article completes, fulfills, and restores the first article. First article is rightfully first as we see God bringing creation into sync with His will, which He does through the second article, the work of Jesus Christ. This gospel message is here to do what God says we are to do.

This topic of creation/new creation and the creed flows perfectly into the nature of the family and how we are to live out our vocations in family units. Early in Genesis, God instituted marriage and gave the first command to Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful and multiply.” In essence, God told them to have sex for the procreation of children. God clearly gives specific roles to man and woman through the order of creation. He continues to show us this through scripture, in both the Old and New Testaments.

In this thing called family, of which everyone is a part by the nature of their own birth, one can truly see the importance and role of doctrine in the life of the parish. Each person in the parish is part of a family. They see themselves carrying out quite a few vocations in just the family unit. Many of these responsibilities are given directly to them through the Holy Scriptures, especially in the husband and wife relationship. As they hear the doctrines taught at church and begin to realize how important they truly are, they can embody them and live them out in their families and continue out from there.

As God's people live in the divine narrative with Christ at the center and as pastors and other leaders teach this in a systematic way, God's people, with the help of the Holy Spirit, will be able to see how this all fits together, and how doctrine truly matters in their lives through the work of the parish. Doctrine is a system that flows together and cannot be separated. One can see how the narrative relates to vocation and vocation fits into living in the right hand and left hand realm while they live in relationship with God and others. This then gives us the guidance to live amongst the law and the gospel, which frees us from the law, and frees us to do thing the very things God has intended for us to do as His disciples. As God's people live as disciples, especially in the family unit, they give an image of Christ and His Church.

As God's people begin to grasp doctrine, they will, by the Holy Spirit, yearn for more intentional catechesis and even more in-depth study of teachings of Scripture. Doctrine plays an important role for the parish as it impacts the lives of the laity as well as the clergy in their everyday lives. As God's people live in the divine narrative, they can have an impact on the lives of their neighbors, which can open doors of conversations about Jesus and who is and what He does for their lives. Doctrine truly is important for the mission of the Church of God. The apostles knew this and lived their lives in ways that are recorded in God's Holy Word as an example for us today.

Works Cited

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