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COVER STORY

The Mind Under Grace

Why a heady dose of doctrine is crucial to spiritual formation.

Darren C. Marks | posted 3/12/2010 10:30AM

Jon is a first-year Bachelor of Theology student from a vibrant church. He is active in campus ministry and will likely become a church leader. Like many of his fellow students, he has shown up for Theology 1020E, Introduction to Christian Theology, with a great heart but little understanding of his faith, save some parroting of slogans. The university where I teach, however, is relentless in questioning the world. Jon's cul-de-sac faith is no longer an option; he is now in the secular realm, and his Christianity is under fire.

Like many beginning theology students, Jon feels threatened when he learns that there are many kinds of Christians. Initially, some of the ideas I present in class visibly upset him. But he slowly learns to major in the majors. Hardcore academic and historical theology, in my experience, almost invariably makes a student like Jon a better Christian—not in his heart per se, but in his understanding of God's call for him and his generation.

Jon recently commented in class that "things click now." He is growing up, and the study of Christian doctrine—the mind under grace—helps him to do this.

Doctrine. The word conjures in the modern mind a string of negative images: The Inquisition. Boring professors debating the number of angels on the head of a pin. Bloggers arguing endlessly while the church flags in relevance in the once-Christian West. Doctrine is a bludgeon, a curiosity, a rearranging of the deck chairs while the ship sinks. Vibrant Christians want little to do with it, and instead focus on spiritual disciplines, works of mercy, and authentic Christian living. Doctrine belongs to the past, when it was used mainly to divide believers. How many Protestants spend time pondering whether it is acceptable to chew Communion bread (a major issue for the first Reformers)?

But we have to ask: Is it possible to live out discipleship without a good measure of heady doctrine? I see doctrine not as a boundary but as a compass. Its purpose is not to make Christians relevant or distinctive but rather to make them *faithful* in their contexts. Doctrine is a way of articulating what God's presence in the church and the world looks like. It can orient us by helping us, like Jon, major in the majors.

In addition, I believe the crisis in the Western church is not about information itself but about the kind of information we absorb in our churches. Philosopher James K. A. Smith put it best: "Theology is not some intellectual option that makes us 'smart' Christians; it is the graced understanding that makes us faithful disciples."

Default Buddhists

I'm using the terms *doctrine* and *theology* interchangeably. To be exact, doctrine is more or less settled theology. You find doctrine in creeds and statements of faith. Theology or "doing theology" is about the process and rules we use to talk about things that may end up as doctrine. A doctrinal statement (Jesus is "true God from true God," as the Nicene Creed testifies) is always a theological statement. But not all theological statements become doctrine. Still, in this essay, I will use *doctrine* and *theology* to refer to our intellectual grappling with the faith, which, as Smith notes, can give us graced understanding and lead to faithful discipleship. Doctrine, while static at times, is meant to help us think about our lives more deeply by considering alongside other Christians the implications of our thoughts and deeds. Doctrine is wisdom that

helps us clarify our mission.

Doctrine. The word conjures in the modern mind a string of negative images: The Inquisition. Boring professors debating the number of angels on the head of a pin.

Yet we seem decidedly uninterested in such wisdom today, both inside and outside the church.

Sociologist Steve Bruce has observed that Western spirituality is "Buddhist by default": that Westerners, even Christians, are obsessed with what goes on inside, with spiritual experience. We don't usually welcome any external testing of our thoughts or actions. Subjectivity takes the ethical and doctrinal teeth out of every religion. Doctrine can help us *think*.

Bruce does not mean that we are actually Buddhists. We don't practice its asceticism. Instead we prefer a pallid, easy Buddhism, a series of feel-good statements supposedly culled from the Buddha. Our culture does this with all religions, Bruce says. It boils them down to one basic principle: Do what makes you feel good about yourself, and preferably in 10 minutes or less. As religious consumers, we warp every tradition by subjecting it to our needs. The Christian West's consumer needs, he notes, have by and large led us to abandon traditional Christianity, and the Eastern spirituality we adopt is actually the vapid form of Christianity created by modernity. This is a Christianity of self-experience.

In this sense, Western Christians are children of Friedrich Schleiermacher, the 19th-century Enlightenment thinker who built his theological system on the foundation of spiritual experience. In many cases, we find his influence unwittingly embedded in our church leadership, our seminaries, and our theological faculties. A theology grounded in experience ultimately fades into soft moralism, humanism, or, in the unique case of American Christianity, a civic religion wherein God and country are easily confused.

As I write this, the top three best-selling books in the Christian nonfiction category of Amazon.com are also listed (and number one) in the personal transformation, New Age, and self-help categories. All three books also appear on the *New York Times* bestseller list. It seems we believe that what we experience is more important than what we think, and we buy accordingly. The authors and their fans would likely say that they are addressing needs. But do we best serve our culture by becoming increasingly theologically illiterate?

Spirituality in the Balance

At the heart of Schleiermacher's work lay an important quest: to understand how to be faithful in a particular context. Schleiermacher and his progeny wanted much to be relevant Christians. The problem lies in where he started.

Schleiermacher thought that the essence of Christianity was its spiritual impulse, not its doctrine, which seemed to cause most of the problems. It had fueled violent conflicts between

Catholics and Protestants and threatened to stifle scientific progress and human achievement. For Schleiermacher, as for many today, if one could boil ideas down to a common essence, differences would dissipate and humankind could move forward in harmony. That essence was religiosity—a connection to God that every human being has the capacity to feel and experience. We might call this *spirituality* or *awe* in everyday parlance.

Schleiermacher began with internal experiences of God and built theology around those experiences, reconfiguring doctrine as needed. He assumed that by starting with ourselves and our desires, we would glimpse a purer vision of God and perhaps a more relevant church. But how did the project fare?

Westerners, even Christians, are obsessed with what goes on inside, with spiritual experience.

With some 200 years of hindsight, we see that the ramifications were immense. Take what has been called the only empirically verifiable Christian doctrine, the doctrine of original sin. For Schleiermacher, sin is not primarily about trespassing against God's laws or a moral debt we owe to a divine being. Sin is misspent energy. If we only paid better

attention and had better information and better situations, we would naturally want to be spiritual. This kind of thinking defines sin as a mis-education or mis-direction of our innate sense of awe. A sinner is one who is out of continuity with his own sense of self, and a religious founder is one who is aware of higher spiritual truths and awakens them in others.

In this trajectory, Jesus becomes a sage who, among others, came to tell us about our potential and awaken our religious sensibilities. Jesus Christ is a spiritual avatar who may be called the Son of God but is different from us only by degree, not by kind. He is certainly not the unique God-man. Church becomes a kind of group therapy we attend to be told we are all right, to share in the piety of Jesus' example. While there is much positive here, the question remains whether God matters as *the* agent of changed lives. In the final analysis, core Christian beliefs, even those about Jesus, have to *feel* authentic or they are discarded.

Let's return to Amazon.com's bestseller list. The current number two bestseller, from a prominent Christian author, claims that belief itself is not enough to overcome bad habits, and that we need to stretch our faith, just as Jesus taught. Ultimately the book points to one goal: achieving *our* dreams and destiny by dint of effort. Sin is a failure to achieve our dreams, Jesus is a personal sage who helps us experience those dreams, and church is where we go to receive positive reinforcement to actualize our destinies. The book does not mention the Sermon on the Mount, or that God's destiny for us may be martyrdom (Heb. 11).

In hindsight, we can see that the belief driving Schleiermacher's entire theological machine needed correction. Schleiermacher led us astray by proposing that we interrogate theological ideas rather than allow ourselves to be interrogated by them. The emphasis on spiritual experience put us, not God, in the driver's seat.

As far as we remain the children of Schleiermacher, we either unconsciously or actively transform Christianity into something that, while seemingly relevant, is bereft of spiritual vigor.

Interrogated by the Bible

The sharp-eyed reader will note two things missing from my argument so far. One is positioning the Bible as the only guide to Christian faith. The other is looking at the role of the Holy Spirit. Both are integral to theology. Without them, doctrine and theology become propositions or proof-texting. The opposite of experience is dogmatism, staid religious scholasticism that sucks the life out of a relationship with God.

We have to begin by acknowledging a reality that rightly makes us nervous: All Christian theology helps us interpret the Bible. Theology is what helps us read disparate writings that span thousands of years and arise out of cultures very different from ours. Further, the Bible comprises many texts that address specific problems in specific places (e.g., sexual immorality in Corinth). It presents ideas that at times seem current and at other times obscure. One seemingly crystal-clear verse (Gal. 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek ...") or book (Philemon on slavery) can be interpreted by the faithful in a variety of ways. The earliest Christians knew this all too well.

The first three centuries of Christianity featured a running dialogue with the Bible. In their theology, the earliest Christians had to avoid reading the Bible as too Jewish, too Gentile, too focused on Peter, too focused on Paul, too focused on faith, or too focused on works. To read the Bible through only one interpretive lens could lead to false conclusions, like denying the Trinity or Jesus' humanity or divinity. In each case, a simple reading of a passage, usually through the reader's cultural lens, resulted in a distortion of Christian life. Those who found little biblical evidence for what was emerging as the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, usually ended up with a Christ who never knew humanity (docetism) or a Jesus who was not fully God (Arianism). Thus, doctrine became a yardstick by which to measure various readings and help Christians pinpoint the essentials.

To some people, this will sound like the Bible is not primary, that theological discourse needs to correct Scripture. This could lead some to see the Bible as an interesting historical document to get us started, not the active Word of God that shapes us. And some argue that Christianity is more a communal practice than a

personal relationship with the living God. (Schleiermacher would likely agree with that statement.)

But, at its best, Christian theology has never understood itself to be merely a human reflection on contingent truths. The best theology grounds itself in Scripture as the revealed Word of God, not in the religious experiences of ancient people. Scripture's authority is not something that the community relates to first with its own experience. Instead, as Martin Luther put it, Scripture bears authority because it bears Christ—because it points unequivocally and majestically in grace to the living God. Scripture interrogates the community. Because it can be a difficult task to hear Christ speak clearly in Scripture, the church has used theology to test that interrogation. Some may read or hear Scripture in a new manner under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as the 18th- and 19th-century abolitionists did regarding slavery. Theology tests such new readings by asking questions of both the text and the church, helping to clarify the movement of the Spirit.

The church's theological task has never been only to comprehend an impersonal piece of literature intellectually. Theology has always understood itself as being under God's providential grace. It is the result of faithful Christians grappling with Scripture in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Just as Jacob wrestled with God, so have Christians wrestled with Scripture as they have sought to articulate core beliefs about the God active among them, active in and through Scripture itself.

In our conversation with the Bible, we've developed shorthand (though imperfect) to articulate what it reveals. We say God is the *Trinity* and Christ is *Savior*, and we talk about *sin*, *heaven*, and *church*. We use those meanings to understand Scripture even as those core beliefs have come from Scripture. These are not esoteric abstractions but fundamental ways in which Christians cross-index their spirituality (their relationship with the God who is present) with a faithful reading of the Bible.

This theological method inverts Schleiermacher's. We do not start with "my spirituality" and then identify core beliefs. Instead, we begin with core beliefs—those discovered by the church as it has intellectually wrestled with the truth of Scripture in the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit. These beliefs, which come from outside myself, correct and shape my spiritual experience.

The best theology grounds itself in Scripture as the revealed Word of God, not in the religious experiences of ancient people.

We have a good example of this process in the theological work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who studied in the era when Schleiermacher's spirit reigned supreme. Most of Bonhoeffer's teachers were in tune with their country's *zeitgeist*, the swelling German pride that manifested itself in part as anti-Semitism and pro-Nazism. They were reading Scripture, but with personal experience in the fore; thus, their theology merely reinforced the era's powerful sentiments.

But, as Bonhoeffer read Scripture, he began to understand Jesus of Nazareth as "Christ the Center." For him the seemingly dusty ideas of the Incarnation and the Atonement took on life. His theological reflections on Christ helped him see that anti-Semitism and Nazism, especially in the church, were replacing Christ as the center, that they were even anti-Christ. This prompted him to speak out, to actively resist the *zeitgeist*.

Cultivating Graced Understanding

Bonhoeffer knew, as did Calvin, Augustine, and many others, that dry, seemingly irrelevant ideas like the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement, and eschatology are crucial elements of our spiritual formation. Theology helps map a reading of Scripture as Scripture interrogates its readers under the guidance of the Spirit.

For the past 200 years, many parts of Western Christianity have labored as Schleiermacher's children. The mainline traditions have hoped to achieve relevance. The evangelical and free-church traditions have hoped to read the Bible unadulterated and alone. Both traditions, however, have made our feelings—which are, by definition, slippery and transitory—primary. Mainliners have eschewed theology for fear that it imposes another's context and assumptions, while evangelicals have eschewed theology because it might compete

with the pristine Bible or become a rigid boundary. Both traditions forget that theology is a kind of memory that allows us to hear God's Word by clarifying our experiences.

Many complain that the church has become incapable of cultivating Christian habits in its people. No wonder, when for so many the starting point is not God but spiritual experience. How can we sustain any spiritual growth if it is grounded in something as transitory as what we feel, individually or corporately?

The decreasing lack of interest in core Christian beliefs is due in part to church leaders who chase after relevance over substance—focusing on the *feeling* that something is meaningful rather than the *truth* that something is meaningful. It is also due to church members who imagine that their experience is the touchstone of truth about God, rather than learning to evaluate their experience in light of Scripture and theology.

Over the years, I have found that the students in my classroom grow in understanding by studying "dusty" and "dry" doctrine. They learn to interrogate their experiences, asking how they may find a "theological existence" or mission. I hope that Jon and his peers learn that they cannot have spiritual formation without doctrine, that theology is that business of graced understanding that makes us faithful disciples of Christ.

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