Moral Formation and Christian Doctrine: “The Conjunction against which We Must Now Struggle”

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Abstract

This essay explores the importance of Christian doctrine for moral formation. It asks why theological study can be transformative. It is not, as is commonly thought, simply the unambiguous power of the biblical text itself. Indeed, the connection between Scripture and the Christian life is not always clear. I argue that human agency in the form of teaching, the root of doctrine, bridges the gap between the text and the moral life. In the economy of God’s redemptive activity, the text is involved in moral transformation as human agents express claims about its authority and validity. This means that the doctrinal claims of the church sets readers or hearers in the scriptural world. The essay concludes with a description of the content of doctrine that functions in this way.

[What we do not need, if we are better to understand the nature of our existence as Christians, are further nuanced accounts of the relation of doctrine and ethics. For such accounts too often simply reproduce the presuppositions that created the ‘and’ which divides theology and ethics into separate realms, the conjunction against which we must now struggle.]

— Stanley Hauerwas

Like any self-aware educational institution, the college at which I teach regularly surveys its students to see what parts of college life are functioning to advance our

objectives and which are not. College life for our students includes the usual mix of social engagements, sports, chapel, classes and service opportunities. What continues to surprise those who evaluate these reports is the recognition among students that *their course work in theological and biblical studies is transformative*. Students regularly cite classes as one of the components of their experience that “changed their life.” In an age of cutbacks and austerity this certainly relieves those of us whose livelihoods depend on this type of teaching.

The assurance is nice but provocative: How does biblical and theological study, rather arcane fields, participate in this type of transformation? My assumption is that Christian institutions concerned with faith formation participate in the catechetical mandate. Even though a theological college isn’t a church, it can still take part in the ecclesial task of moral formation, which particularly in pluralist societies has become a topic of deep concern. In Canada recent reports show not just that we live in a very diverse nation, but that the situation is fluid. Here only 1 in 3 young people who attended church as children still do, and only about half of those who no longer participate in ecclesial life continue to identify with the Christian tradition at all.² It is this sort of data that prompts the reflection in this essay. Statistics like these make us wonder how the Christian life is to be cultivated as a distinctive way of being that contributes to the common good and witnesses to God’s own goodness.

**Take Up and Read**

The biblical text itself deals not only with propositional claims, beliefs, or a noetic sense of faith, but also with faithfulness and the moral life. This is beyond dispute. The text has been instrumental in the western legal tradition as well as numerous historical and ongoing prophetic subversions of the status quo. Its influence can be detected both on the social or political level, but also on more personal strata. Consider an example, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes as his “grand liberation.” In 1936 Bonhoeffer wrote to a friend named Elizabeth Zinn describing a key transition in his life,

> I came to the Bible for the first time. It is terribly difficult for me to say that. I had already preached several times, had seen a lot of the church, had given speeches about it and written about it—but I still had not become a Christian, I was very much an untamed child, my own master. I know, at that time I had turned this whole business about Jesus Christ into an advantage for myself, a kind of crazy vanity. . . . It was from this that the

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The change he describes took place in 1930-31 during his stay in New York. As he describes it, his encounter with Scripture gave him both freedom from self-interest and a sense of vocation. Notice Bonhoeffer does not point to his formal academic engagement at Union Theological Seminary nor to the various spectacles of American religiosity, of which there are many, but to Scripture as the agent that precipitated his transformation. Bonhoeffer’s is a twentieth-century example, but of course there are others—the result of Augustine’s response to the child’s “tolle lege” and Luther’s wrestling with Rom 1:17. Certainly, there are countless less famous examples as well: Vernon Wayne Howell’s life was changed when in a prayerful moment his attention was drawn to Isaiah 34; at least that’s how the story goes.

Yet one wonders if it is as simple as that. Despite the revivalist notion that the two material causes of Christian transformation are the troubled heart and Holy Scripture, the process by which reading or hearing Scripture gives birth to a transformed moral life is not at all clear. Consider a common component of both sermons and devotional reading: the ubiquitous “application.” Countless sermon outlines have just this word somewhere near the bottom. The preacher explains what the author intended the text to mean and then “applies” it. The bridge between the world of the text and the life of the Christian community is this rickety span of application, which too often seems to mean something akin to brute similarity or even inference.

There is, I would suggest, something of a crisis of today precisely related to the move from “meant” to “means,” both in preaching and in moral theology more technically. Some, whom Kevin Vanhoozer would call “epic” theologians, believing there is really no gap: we can know what was intended by the author and believe the text means exactly the same thing to us. Others, whom Vanhoozer would

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label “lyric” theologians, assume the ditch cannot be crossed with even the most sophisticated modern historiography. Instead, the lyric theologian thinks Scripture presents us with an opportunity for our own self-expression. Academic specialists sometimes lose sight of the challenge, because as biblical scholars we spend little time reflecting on the way the text lands in the church, or because as theologians we hardly engage Scripture at all. Though this does little to harm our academic careers, it has contributed in no small way to a general befuddlement among Christians.

To show the depth of this challenge I’d like to skim a few examples that are more sophisticated than the bare inference of “application.” I’m particularly interested in texts that are written for non-specialists, not high-flying works of theory, but books written in a pastoral tone. First, consider the prologue to Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen’s *The Drama of Scripture*, which is an introductory text in biblical theology. To paraphrase the subtitle, its intent is to help students find their place in the biblical story. This is a useful book written by established scholars; it has been required reading in an introductory course I team-teach. Yet think about the following sentences from the perspective of moral formation: “As we enter deeply into the story of the Bible, God will be revealed to us. We will also find ourselves called to share in the mission of God and his purposes with the creation.”

Let’s sidestep for a moment the curiously passive way of speaking about revelation, and notice the way the “story of the Bible” is linked to sharing in God’s mission. The authors laid the groundwork for this a couple of pages earlier when, drawing on the work of Leslie Newbigin, they discuss grand narratives, i.e. the “Western story” and the “scriptural story.” Their point is that “[b]asic stories are in principle” both normative and comprehensive. The result is that Scripture is linked to the Christian life with a vaguely philosophical principle—a theory about narratives.

Another, more recent, example comes from a book titled *A Community Called Atonement*. I’m drawing our attention to this work, because in many ways its authorship represents a best-case scenario. Scot McKnight is an able NT scholar and effective popular writer. His work demonstrates obvious pastoral concern. The suggestion in *A Community Called Atonement* is that Scripture is “the Spirit-inspired story of Jesus as communicated, through, to, and for the church.” The goal is to “shape the identity of God’s people.” He continues, “The church invites

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6 Ibid., 20.

everyone to learn this story and to let this story become each person’s story.” Further down the page the working theory surfaces even more clearly: “The best way to describe Scripture is that it is identity shaping.”

What does it mean to say that Scripture is “identity shaping”? How does Scripture affect this psychological process? McKnight writes,

The church becomes a community called atonement every time it reads the story of Jesus and every time it identifies itself with that story and every time it invites others to listen in to hear that story. Reading Scripture and listening to Scripture and letting Scripture incorporate us into its story is atoning.

In McKnight’s view the bridge between text and reader is a psychological process of identification and the social process of incorporation. We might wonder, then, how one encounters Scripture such that the stories of Jesus are formative in ways the genocides of Joshua are not? A number of recent books have in fact pointed out that some Christians have identified themselves with the perpetrators of these ancient accounts of violence. Christians have felt themselves incorporated into a people that conquers by the sword. It may be a bit unfair to poke our noses into McKnight’s book this way. He obviously wouldn’t support such a reading. My point, however, is not to critique either of these books specifically. I simply want us to notice that in them we see appeals to philosophical, psychological, and social modes of connection between the text of Scripture and the formation of the reader.

Earlier I referenced the biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. What is intriguing about his approach to Scripture and moral formation, despite his mention of pacifism in the long quotation I read, is his consistent rejection of “ethics”. In what was probably intended to be the first chapter in his magnum opus, a book under the simple title Ethik, he writes, “The knowledge of good and evil appears to be the goal of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to supersede that knowledge. . . . [I]t is questionable whether it even makes sense to speak of Christian ethics at all.” Bonhoeffer was a sort of protégé of Karl Barth, and Barth’s take is even stronger. In volume II.2 of his Church Dogmatics Barth

8 Ibid., 146. In the same context he invokes Kevin Vanhoozer’s theo-dramatic description to say that it is to be performed (147).
9 Ibid., 148 (emphasis added).
10 For example, see the opening of Eric Seibert, The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament’s Troubling Legacy (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012).
11 Unfair, because one of McKnight’s central points is that we should think of the atonement as Christ’s identification with humanity for the purpose of our being incorporated into his life (McKnight, 107).
writes, “Strange as it may seem, that general concept of ethics coincides exactly with the conception of sin.”13 What both Barth and Bonhoeffer are worried about is the creation of a theoretical system that stands in for the living, speaking God. They would, it seems to me, be similarly worried about social, psychological or philosophical bridges mediating Scripture’s formative mandate.

This is precisely why the contemporary theologian John Webster considers Bonhoeffer a model reader of Scripture. Webster writes, “More than anything else, it is listening or attention which is most important for Bonhoeffer, precisely because the self is not grounded in its own disposing of itself in the world, but grounded in the Word of Christ.”14 I’m drawing here from Webster’s little book *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, which among other things is a flag of resistance hoisted against the tradition-centered, cultural-linguistic construal of the church where doctrine functions like the basic grammar of a community’s speech. Webster is concerned not to let Scripture be subsumed under ecclesiology, but would rather have us reverse the relationship so that the church is understood essentially as a listening community. Webster puts it quite pointedly: “The definitive act of the church is faithful hearing of the gospel of salvation announced by the risen Christ in the Spirit’s power through the service of Holy Scripture.”15 Let’s be indulgent for a moment and ignore what Webster, the systematic theologian, says about the risen Christ’s announcement. Let’s focus in on the oh-so-Protestant notion of hearing or listening. Can we simply lock that in as an explanation for Christian moral formation?

If all that is going on is reading or listening, how is the church different from a reading group? In his engaging little book *The Pleasure of Reading in an Age of Distraction* Allen Jacobs considers the nostalgia of former students for the formality of college learning. Jacobs wonders if the experience might in fact be replicable outside the academic seminar,

[L]et’s imagine a Platonically perfect book group, one that would meet every need for the former literature majors who sometimes write to me with longing for the good old days of college. What would characterize such a group? First and most important, people committed both to careful reading and serious conversation; second, books with sufficient complexity and thoughtfulness to generate significant debate, whether about the work’s own structures and procedures or about the

15 Ibid., 44.
issues they raise. Given such circumstances, the solitary act of reading and the communal act of conversing could merge into a single and beautiful entity.\textsuperscript{16}

One can imagine of course that in such a “Platonically perfect book group” application is inferred, basic stories are discovered, identities are shaped and individuals feel incorporated. So what distinguishes the engagement of Christian communities with Scripture from the book group in the mind’s eye of Jacobs?

Earlier I mentioned the moment when Vernon Wayne Howell read Isaiah 34. That moment isn’t particularly famous, not like the conversion of Augustine or the enlightenment of Luther. It’s not even as well-known as the “grand liberation” of the modern martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The phrase from Isaiah that caught Howell’s attention, at least according to some sources, was one of the middle lines from verse 16: “none shall be without a mate.”\textsuperscript{17} Howell had fallen in love with the pastor’s daughter; the biblical line gave him the courage to approach her father. The problem was, her father did not exactly warm to the idea of giving his daughter to the young man, was quite cold to it actually, and Howell was eventually expelled from the congregation. Later the young man connected with a related community, a group known as the Branch Davidians. In 1990 he successfully petitioned a judge, “for publicity and business purposes,” to change his name to approximate that of the ancient Persian king Cyrus or “Kurosh.” In 1993 David Koresh, claiming to be re-establishing the Davidic kingdom, was involved in a violent confrontation with government authorities. He died during the final assault, along with 73 followers and children.\textsuperscript{18} The story of David Koresh, along with those of countless other mis-readers of Scripture, calls into question any notion that Scripture has within itself the power necessary to form faithful Christians. “When it came to the Bible,” Malcolm Gladwell writes, Koresh “was without peer.”\textsuperscript{19}

The Missing Role of Doctrine
The overlooked linked between Scripture and Christian moral formation is doctrine. Doctrine mediates the scriptural world to contemporary subjects. With this


\textsuperscript{17} Quoted from the English Standard Version.


assertion, though, we must keep in mind the Barthian worry, which is that theory might stand in the place of an active God. As well, Stanley Hauerwas has observed that hermeneutical theory sometimes attempts to take the place of the hermeneutical community.20 Put another way, moral concern, and thus any account of moral formation, must reckon with the fact that what we’re after is not just maintaining the current social architecture, but also a reconfiguring of our communities and selves. The political philosopher William Connolly helps us see the devastatingly challenging nature of this when he writes, “it is extremely probable that all of us today are unattuned to some modes of suffering and exclusion that will have become ethically important tomorrow as a political movement carries them across the threshold of cultural attentiveness and institutional redefinition.”21

The inability of some forms of Christian doctrine to create space for positive movement has led to a widespread questioning of doctrine’s place. If understood as a charting of true belief fully attained and timeless, doctrine can stifle Scripture’s witness against oppression and suffering. This is why Webster is right to say, though perhaps too optimistically, “Scripture is as much a de-stabilising feature of the life of the church as it is a factor in its cohesion and continuity.”22 Webster may be too optimistic because his emphasis on listening and reading can minimize our realization that sin clouds our ability to hear the Word of God to us in the biblical text. The question then is this: How can members of the Christian community learn to listen to Scripture well?

What is not often observed is that listening—especially listening as comprehending—cannot be an entirely passive activity. If it were there would be little if any difference between David Koresh and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The challenge is to define doctrine in such a way that it enables listening without protecting Christian communities from the necessary destabilization of an external voice. That is the constant formal challenge. The occasional challenge, at least in the conversation outside scholarly circles, is that the very term “doctrine” has a dated ring. This is partly because the term is used infrequently in modern translations of the Bible. In older ones, the King James Version for instance, the Greek terms didachē and didaskalia are regularly translated as “doctrine.” In modern translations like the English Standard Version the terms are usually translated as “teaching.” Acts 2:42 is an example: the KJV refers to the “apostle’s doctrine,” where the ESV refers to their “teaching.” What is regrettable is that the downplaying of doctrine has not been replaced by a focus on teaching in theological and pastoral work.

This prosaic change of terminology is one of the factors enabling a contempor-

21 William E. Connolly, Why I am not a Secularist (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 68.
22 Webster, Holy Scripture, 46.
ary separation of Scripture and doctrine, and as well doctrine from ethics. Other factors are the fragmentation of the theological school where pastoral theology is hived from dogmatics, and where biblical studies is similarly situated. This is amplified by a contemporary proclivity to specialization and technical proficiency. In the evangelical world of North America the problem is further exaggerated by an anti-intellectualism native to the revivalist movement. One way to see the effects of this are the numerous institutional doctrinal statements that make little if any mention of ethics. When institutions are concerned with the moral life they usually create a second set of documents to codify behavior. The corrective is not that doctrine and ethics should be “linked” but the realization that doctrine is a constitutive part of Christian moral formation calling forth action as well as belief. Doctrine directs traffic between reader and the biblical text. It cuts off some avenues and expedites others.

Assertions like this often conjure up old ghosts, debates about the relative importance of tradition and Scripture, in this case transformed into a power struggle between doctrine and Scripture. What gets us past this false choice is the recognition that doctrine is teaching. Doctrine is best understood not as a timeless list of truths, grammar rules, or renderings of a spiritual experience. Lindbeck, Vanhoozer, Webster, and others have noted the shortcomings of these three options. Rather, doctrine is best understood as carefully considered teaching about God and creation in light of the witness of Scripture. This description helps us see that the bridge between Scripture and moral formation is the teaching community. Through teaching, whether formal or informal, followers of Jesus make claims about God and creation that open up new avenues of self-understanding and apprehension of the world among hearers. Through this activity people can identify with the text of Scripture, they can find themselves within the drama of God’s redeeming work.

Recovering the simple understanding of doctrine as teaching clarifies its necessary role in ethical formation. The moral life is something we learn. Doctrine not only summarizes and synthesizes the biblical witness, as many have noted, but it also enables readers to encounter the text itself as Christian Scripture. Doctrine is thus teaching about Scripture, and in this way teaching about the text’s subject matter, creator and creation. While I’m not sure that this simple definition will satisfy my Catholic friends, it should be recognized that doctrine inherently includes tradition because it recognizes the necessity of receiving teaching. Remembering that doctrine is teaching reminds us that it requires an agent—the teacher, one who has been taught. As well, recognizing the role of the teacher makes obvious the fact that Christian formation, in both its moral and ideational

23 Stanley Hauerwas provides a brief narration of the separation of doctrine and ethics in “On Doctrine and Ethics,” 21-40.
facets, is inherently dialogical. In a post-Christendom society the teaching church must reckon with the freedom of learners to accept or reject what it is they are saying. This does not negate the authority of the church’s doctors but qualifies it vis-à-vis the rest of the *ecclesia* and the freedom of those beyond who may or may not be convinced. For the teaching church the hermeneutical community emphasized by Anabaptists like John Howard Yoder and Jim McClendon is unavoidable.

Let me push my point a bit by summoning the biography of another theologian, this time that of Ellen Charry, who teaches at Princeton Theological Seminary. In 1999 Charry was featured in an article in the American evangelical publication *Christianity Today* that described her as one of the “new theologians.” In that piece author Tim Stafford notes that Charry came to faith as an adult. He writes, “Charry must be one of the very few persons in all the modern world won to Christ though the reading of theology.” She had been a social worker in Philadelphia and New York and was searching for a way to put her head and hands together. She found God while studying religion at Temple University.24 In the same article Charry describes a key juncture in her study, which was reading Karl Barth. Charry told Stafford, “Barth just undid me. . . . Barth enabled me to first taste that God is a reality and not an idea.” As well, she describes a moment in her reflection on the Augsburg Confession: “Justification by grace through faith . . . what are we talking about? So I decided to try it on. I lifted my arms up and I put in over me like a dress, the doctrine . . . . I tried it. And I fell off the chair. . . . I tried it on like a dress, and I just fell over.”25 The link between Scripture and doctrine is only implied in Charry’s experience; certainly Barth and the Augsburg Confession teach. This cannot be said in the same way for literature groups. Doctrine as teaching is obviously anything but a new idea, but why is doctrine so often equated with a freestanding body of information?

The helpful thing about certain academics is that they not only have biographies but they reflect with some substance on these very topics. In the case of Charry my attention is drawn to her book *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine*. Working under the assumption that both insight and practice are viable components of moral formation, she sets out to recover a sapiential approach to theology and human excellence. Charry describes this as “engaged knowledge,” that is, both information and attachment to that information. She observes that both eastern and western streams of ancient Christianity affirmed that “God was the origin and destiny of human happiness, that knowing and loving God are the foundation of human self-knowledge and direction, and

25 Ibid., 47.
that life’s goal is conformation to God.”\textsuperscript{26} The problem, as she identifies it, is that over time the sapiental approach has lost influence. This is particularly true in modernity when theology ceased to be understood as a practical discipline.\textsuperscript{27}

Another way of describing the faded sapiental assumption is to say that doctrine itself has ceased to be understood as salutary. The burden of Charry’s argument in \textit{By the Renewing of our Minds} is to show that this has not always been the case. She aims to demonstrate that for pre-modern or “classic” theologians doctrine was understood as bringing health and nourishment, not just information. Or as she states near the end of her study, her goal is to “highlight the indivisibility of the intellectual and pastoral interests of classical doctrinal exegesis.”\textsuperscript{28} Webster, whom we encountered earlier, weighs in affirmatively when he says that modern theology has become dominated by the rhetoric of cognate disciplines. He writes “Much theology in the classic mould was, by contrast, centrally (though not, of course, exclusively) concerned with the instruction, guidance and information of the disciples of Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{29} For Charry’s part she attempts to prove her point by dealing with the hard cases. If she can show that in the most unlikely of places—e.g. Augustine’s \textit{De Trinitate} and Anselm’s \textit{Cur Deus Homo}—doctrine was understood as salutary, then surely it was understood this way in general. What this shows, Charry believes, is that “when Christian doctrines assert the truth about God, the world, and ourselves, it is a truth that seeks to influence us.” She continues, “In the older texts, evangelism, catechesis, moral exhortation, dogmatic exegesis, pastoral care, and apologetics were all happening at the same time because the authors were speaking to a whole person.”\textsuperscript{30}

None of the classical theologians, Charry surveys, Calvin, Basil, Augustine, among others, could have envisioned truth as something that did not help us become excellent persons. If something is untrue it is obviously harmful. The inverse is likewise the case; “truth, beauty and goodness are affective.”\textsuperscript{31} So for the classical theologians, getting doctrine right was important, but not the end in itself. The end was pastoral: spiritual and moral formation, belief serving devotion. What is needed, then, to connect Scripture and ethics is not a theory about the function of narratives or psychological assumptions about how we identify with texts, not something called “practical theology” or “peace and justice theology,” but rather just good theology undertaken in the classic mode. Where necessary it must revise what Christians teach, but mostly it must reconnect truth and moral excellence.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 235.
\textsuperscript{29} Webster, \textit{Holy Scripture}, 132.
\textsuperscript{30} Charry, \textit{By the Renewing of Your Minds}, viii.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 235.
The theologian must keep pastoral concerns before herself, as the pastor must never tire of speaking rightly about God. “For theology,” as Charry says, “is not just an intellectual art; it cultivates the skill of living well.” Doctrine is not just the theory of the Christian life, which then needs to be applied. No, doctrine, which we encounter in moments of practice and reflection, is itself formational; it shapes character and virtue. Charry’s study nicely adds a layer of meaning to our description of doctrine as teaching. It helps us see the relationship between the church’s teaching, the Christian life, and human flourishing, each linked to the other through the mutuality of truth and excellence.

**Doctrine—”A Simple Sketch”**

It is the role of the teacher, or to use Paul’s term from Ephesians 4, the didaskalos, that the popular-level proposals cited earlier fail to clearly acknowledge. Hidden beneath the claim that Scripture provides the basic story of the world or that it shapes the believer’s identity is the fact that claims must be made about the text’s status and its meaning. Texts themselves cannot make such claims; people do. Or to speak with the native tongue of a Christian, God does through creaturely agents. This means the impingement of Scripture on human lives is an ecclesial event, which is to say, an event marked both by human fallibility and divine rejuvenation.

To further describe the character of doctrine as teaching I want to turn once more to John Webster. Reflecting on the work of the sixteenth-century Lutheran theologian Zacharius Ursinus, Webster gives a minimalist definition of what doctrine or theology can provide, suggesting that it is but “a simple sketch or outline of the different parts of Christian teaching with an eye to their scope and interrelation.” On this account he thinks it should use “quite minimal organization.” The goal of Christian doctrine is not the construction of a fully mature worldview or a historical uncovering of textual origins; rather, it is a “practical knowledge of God” or knowledge intended to further “the life of the Christian community, the salvation of humankind, and godly discipline.” Therefore, it isn’t surprising that Webster concludes that theology is less a scholarly discipline than it is “a process of moral and spiritual training and an exercise in the promotion of common life.”

The theological work of the ecclesia and its designated pastoral and pedagogical agents serves the gospel by building up the community in the economy of God’s grace. Theological work can provide an example of “attentiveness to and deference before the gospel.” Shifting from the activity of theology to the content of Christian teaching itself, Webster proposes that doctrine should serve Scripture.

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32 Ibid., 240.
33 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 113.
34 Ibid., 116, 128.
35 Ibid., 129.
Doctrine traces or indicates Scripture. The dogmatic conclusions of theology aren’t superior to Scripture—they aren’t improvements; instead, doctrine helps readers “find their way around the biblical worlds.” Therefore, we must be cautious to maintain control over theological rhetoric so that it doesn’t give the impression that doctrine is an unbending list of truths floating free from Scripture. If we don’t, Webster points out, there is a risk that theological rhetoric can “de-eschatologize the church’s apprehension of the gospel.” We may think the glass we see through is the crystal of the New Jerusalem.

What I find helpful about Webster’s reflections here is that despite his aversion to heavily methodological exegesis, he grants space for the church as a catechetical community to teach. This is not the poetics of self-creation, but humble instruction that connects us to the center of the biblical witness. It represents the partly formed fruit of theology—pedagogy with the goal of helping individuals and communities realize the goodness of God and their full humanity. As teaching in the economy of grace, doctrine creates space within the closed world of the text and the closed world of our own experience, for readers and hearers to enter into the territory of the Triune God. This is the role of the traditional themes of dogmatics. The doctrine of “justification by grace through faith” is a rendering, albeit neither total nor perfect, of the content of Scripture such that hearers find it addresses them and evokes a response. As so often is true of God’s way with creation, doctrinal teaching is an instance of God’s use of frail human creatures to make apprehensible the truth of his love.

In conclusion, let me refer to Jesus’s reply to a questioner recorded in the Gospel of Mark. In the twelfth chapter of that Gospel he states that the greatest commandment is to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength. Jesus ties this to the overtly ethical command of loving one’s neighbor as oneself. It is difficult at times not to allow the distinction between the first and second commands to become a separation. Part of the problem is that we miss in the first the fact that the love of God involves more than mental affinity. Such a love for the world’s creator and redeemer involves the formation of particular disposition and desires. This challenge has its corollary in a general temptation to see doctrine as merely informative, separated from the process of moral formation. I’ve tried to argue that this ought to not be the case, that doctrine as a part of the teaching mandate of the church functions in a life-giving way as it forms persons in relationship to the true and the good. As the performance of a teacher empowered by the Spirit, doctrine provides the agential capacity necessary to evoke a response from hearers in ways that texts alone cannot.

36 Ibid., 129.  
37 Ibid., 130.