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On Doctrine and Discipleship

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Abstract

The church has long held that doctrine is fundamental for the Christian life, yet the way in which doctrine informs discipleship is often underspecified. This article examines two ways in which doctrine can be an aid for the task of discipleship. It first draws on the work of Medi Ann Volpe to portray doctrine as claims about God and humankind that invite challenge and consent, spurring a depth of engagement that leads to greater integration of faith and practice. It then draws on the work of Ellen Charry, in order to liken doctrine to medicine that effects human transformation. Finally, Julian of Norwich is used as a case study to demonstrate how the regulative and rehabilitative functions of doctrine cohere.

Keywords: Doctrine; discipleship; Julian of Norwich; congruence; Medi Ann Volpe; Ellen Charry

In the sight of God we do not fall, and in our own sight we do not stand. While both of these perspectives are true, as I see it, the way God sees is the higher truth.[1]

Introduction

Medi Ann Volpe opens the final chapter in her book *Rethinking Christian Discipleship: Doctrine and Identity* by explaining its cover. Raphael's *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes* adorns it because the image of Christ calling Peter is representative of 'the

[1] Mirabai Starr, *The Showings of Julian of Norwich: A New Translation* (Charlottesville: Hampton Roads, 2013), p. 219.

dynamic of faithful Christian discipleship' which Volpe understands to be central to the experience of understanding oneself as Christian.[2] Peter's obedience to Christ's words led to his reception of generosity and grace (seen in the 'miraculous draught'). Yet Peter was simultaneously humbled, reminded by the miracle of his own finitude and sinfulness ('Depart from me, O Lord!'). This pattern of 'moving forward in faith [and] overcoming sin not once, but over and over again as the light of Christ penetrates deeper into our hearts' is to be expected.[3] We do not follow Christ in a vacuum; everyone has to overcome both personal opposition to Christ's call from within and endure the antagonism that comes from a world whose values often run counter to Christ. This resistance has epistemic consequences: in the absence of a timeless standard for what constitutes faithful practice, it can be hard to know what 'following Jesus' looks like.

In this paper I aim to examine further what Volpe identifies as one of the key tools in marking the way of faithful discipleship: doctrine. How does doctrine clarify whether we are moving in the right direction in our religious lives? How might doctrine preserve and energise us for the journey? I pursue these questions by first reviewing the role doctrine plays in Christian discipleship as outlined by Volpe in her article 'Living the Mystery: Doctrine, Intellectual Disability, and Christian Imagination'. Volpe's perspective, in a word, is that doctrine is a *gift* to those whose 'lively and imaginative minds' might otherwise derail their journey of discipleship.[4] Next, I review an article by Mark Chaves who points out the persistent incongruence between peoples' religious beliefs and their attitudes and actions. While Volpe focuses on how doctrine chastens and disciplines energetic minds, I aim to show that doctrine can serve a more positive function in helping believers achieve greater congruence between their beliefs and daily lives. I then put Volpe in conversation with Ellen T. Charry. I begin with Charry's portrayal of the role of doctrine in moral and spiritual growth as found in her book *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine*. Charry aims to show that reading theology can be

[2] Medi Ann Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity: Doctrine and Discipleship* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 223.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Medi Ann Volpe, 'Living the Mystery: Doctrine, Intellectual Disability, and Christian Imagination', *Journal of Moral Theology* 6 (2017) pp.87–102 (p. 98).

'aretegenic' — a neologism she coined that means 'conducive to virtue'.[5] Finally, I consider her perspective alongside Volpe's through a discussion of Julian of Norwich, one of Charry's interlocutors. Julian exemplifies the creative tension between doctrine as a gift to the mind and as a medicine for the soul.

Doctrine for the Capacious Mind

Volpe begins her article by relaying an anecdote from early in her academic career that revealed to her a 'persistent fissure in relating doctrine and ethics'.[6] One of her students questioned whether the intricacies of Trinitarian doctrine enshrined in the Nicene Creed had any relevance to the actual practice of the Christian life. If such doctrine was indeed immaterial, why does it enjoy such pride of place in defining essential Christian beliefs? What would be lost by forgoing it? Volpe admits that 'grasping fully the import of the language of the creeds' is not a prerequisite for salvation.[7] Yet doctrine, she contends, understood as 'the task of setting forth the Church's faith in the God who came to save us in the person of Christ' has direct bearing on following Jesus.[8] Volpe demonstrates the kind of practical function one can have by retrieving the work of the fourth-century bishop and theologian, Gregory of Nyssa.[9]

Volpe's reading of Gregory highlights the centrality of mystery in understanding the Christian God: 'Even as Gregory examines the evidence and draws carefully-reasoned conclusions, he insists that the doctrine of the Trinity only traces

[5] Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 19.
[6] Ibid., p. 88. Volpe completes this sentence by noting that the 'rule function of doctrine has been unable to bridge' this gap. George Lindbeck argued that doctrine is best understood as regulative in nature, offering the 'rules of discourse, attitude and action' in Christianity akin to how grammar functions when learning (and speaking) a language.' George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*: *Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), p. 18. Lindbeck is not mentioned by name in Volpe's article but is mentioned throughout *Rethinking Christian Identity* (see pp. 12–19).
[7] Ibid., p. 89.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Specifically, Volpe highlights a tract written by Gregory often labeled *The Great Catechism* designed to help catechists properly prepare candidates for baptism into the (newly standardised) faith of the Triune God.

the outline of an impenetrable mystery'.[10] There is a paradoxical element in Gregory's doctrine of God: while aiming to convince his readers *that* certain things about God are true (e.g., that God is Trinity), he is wary of explaining *how*. Volpe refers to this tension in Gregory's thought as an 'epistemological reserve', designed to keep his readers close to the mystery at the heart of the Christian faith.[11]

How does this 'reserve' intersect with the challenges of discipleship? Volpe, referencing a passage from the New Testament, argues that doctrine is a key 'weapon' yielded in the effort to 'take every thought captive to obey Christ' (2 Cor. 10.5). As Christians aim to grow in their understanding and appreciation of God, doctrine functions as a kind of boundary, which keeps their imaginations channeled in the right direction. To borrow an analogy from the world of sport, doctrine is like a referee that keeps the game moving and the players safe.[12] This safeguarding is especially helpful for more agile ('capacious') minds intent on defining (or collapsing) elements of the Christian faith that defy simple explanation; it serves as a check against the mind's desire for control and resolution.[13] By preserving mystery, doctrine also enables creativity in theological reflection. In the words of Josef Pieper, the received truths of the Christian faith function like a 'silent, immovable rock that hinders and prevents thought from flowing on uninterruptedly in the lifeless calm of a well-constructed channel'.[14]

Volpe offers two examples to illustrate the relationship between doctrine and discipleship. First, reflecting on the opening lines of the Nicene Creed, Volpe shows how doctrine deepens and enriches our understanding of God, which, in turn, influences how we see everything else:

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[10] Ibid., p. 90.
[11] Ibid., p. 95. Joseph Ratzinger sounds a similar note: 'God has become quite concrete in Christ, but in this way his mystery has also become still greater. God is always infinitely greater than all our concepts and all our images and names. The fact that we now acknowledge him to be triune does not mean that we have meanwhile learned everything about him.' *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), p. 25.
[12] In session six of The Alpha Course ('Why and how should I read the Bible?'), speakers are encouraged to contrast the chaos that results from playing football on an open field with no pitch, goals or referees with the freedom that follows playing on a pitch with a defined set of enforced rules. Volpe is making a similar argument here (albeit about doctrine not Scripture) and I have seen many sceptics persuaded by its logic.
[13] Volpe, 'Living the Mystery', p. 94.
[14] Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), p. 121.

> We interpret events differently, finding God at work where healing and peace are happening. We expect certain things from God in our own lives […] An imagination that has been nourished and chastened by the Church's teaching about God perceives the world differently.[15]

Next, using an example from the Acts of the Apostles, Volpe shows how doctrine was used by Paul and Barnabas to instill courage and perseverance in Christians facing persecution. By 'chang[ing] the way we make sense of what is happening around us', doctrine 'aids us on our journey' of discipleship.[16]

The final section of the essay consists of reflections on both the ecclesial setting in which doctrine is formulated and what the capaciously minded people — described earlier in the essay — can learn from those with cognitive impairments. Volpe begins by noting that, for Gregory, those involved in the work of teaching and specialised theological reflection serve the greater purpose of benefiting the larger body of Christ. In fact, there is another set of Christians who 'supersede them', namely the 'champions of the faith' whose lives showcase the transforming work of Jesus.[17] Volpe makes her second and final point by highlighting the similarities Gregory of Nyssa's theological anthropology shares with his doctrine of God. The impulse to identify precisely *how* God can be three and one is mirrored by those who try to locate *where* the image of God resides in human beings. Yet, as Volpe explains, Gregory does not explain *how* human beings reflect God's image, he simply states they bear it. As with the Trinity, so with human persons: they are a mystery to be contemplated, not a puzzle to be solved.[18] Therefore, those with intellectual disabilities play a special role in the life of the church. While their incapacity to engage in abstract reasoning or grasp complex doctrine may be a stumbling block for

[15] Volpe, 'Living the Mystery', p. 97.
[16] Ibid. Volpe devotes chapter five of *Rethinking Christian Identity* ('The Nature of Doctrine Revisited') to the theme of how doctrine aids Christian imagination. There she argues doctrine is vital for creation and sustenance of hope and the shaping of memory.
[17] Ibid., p. 99.
[18] Ibid., p. 100.

those who seek to locate the God's image in cognitive ability, these imitations in fact testify to the gratuity of the Imago Dei.

Religious Congruence

In his 2009 presidential address to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Mark Chaves pointed out the ubiquity of 'the religious congruence fallacy' in the scientific study of religion.[19] Religious congruence 'can mean that religious ideas hang together, that religious beliefs and actions hang together, or that religious beliefs can indicate stable and chronically accessible dispositions in people'.[20] Chaves claims that 'the evidence overwhelmingly shows that people's religious ideas, values, and practices are not congruent' in any of three senses in which he uses the word. This claim is not controversial, he continues, 'it's established knowledge'.[21] Chaves cites evidence of religious incongruence throughout the essay.[22] He also suggests how scholars devoted to the scientific study of religion can overcome the religious incongruence fallacy in their work.[23] More relevant for my purposes, however, is Chaves' suggestions as to how religious congruence can be achieved.

Chaves lists three processes by which religious congruence can take place: 'conscious cognitive effort'; 'social rather than cognitive effort'; and 'experience that forges internalised, automatic responses to situations so that religious schemas spring automatically to mind in certain situations'.[24] It is this final process of integration that intersects with Volpe's claim that doctrine can be an aid to discipleship. Chaves notes the 'tradeoff between how easy it is to learn a schema and how deeply that schema is internalised'.[25] How might doctrine help believers internalise religious claims? Returning to Volpe's example of the first article of the

[19] Mark Chaves, 'Rain Dances in the Dry Season: Overcoming the Religious Congruence Fallacy', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49.1 (2010) pp.1–14.
[20] Chaves, 'Rain Dances', p. 2.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., pp. 2–5.
[23] Ibid., pp. 10–13.
[24] Ibid., p. 7.
[25] Ibid.; referencing Roy D'Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 144.

Nicene Creed, adults with typical cognitive capacities can be expected to learn the Christian confession that God is 'the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth' with relative ease. Internalising that belief, however, in a way that would lead to congruence may require something akin to doctrine. For doctrine 'puts the Creed in the context of broader theological reflection', placing the claim that God is Father and Creator into the larger story of *creatio ex nihlio*, which suggests an ontology of peace as the basis of creation, and divine aseity, which assures us that God's love for his creation is perfectly free.[26] Such an expansive understanding of God is neither easily mastered nor reducible to bare propositions; it requires critical thinking and intricate reasoning. As doctrine safeguards the mystery at the heart of the Christian faith, it invites continual exploration and reflection. One cannot simply master Christian teaching like a child masters a multiplication table. Aided by doctrine, believers discover that 'the more they learn the more they realise they do not know'.

Another focus of Chaves' essay is the problem of situational specificity. Religious practice often occurs in spaces explicitly designed for such a purpose; for example, a church. This specificity presents a problem for those hoping to inculcate religious attitudes and actions accessible to people outside these settings.[27] How might doctrine enable believers to extend their internalised responses beyond the religious domain? Or, to use an example from Volpe's essay, how might learning of the ways in which the cognitively impaired bear God's image enable believers with typical cognitive capacities to treat the impaired with befitting dignity and respect? Doctrine trains the imagination; it serves as a kind of therapy that helps 'take our wondering thoughts captive' in obedience to Christ and leads to the discovery of Christ 'in the vexations of daily life and in the faces of our fellow human beings'.[28] Such a realisation may not be the result of consistent attendance in Christian

[26] Volpe, 'Living the Mystery', pp. 96–97. Volpe cites John Millbank and Karl Barth as theologians who explicate the doctrine that surrounds the Creed in those ways. Milbank develops alongside his doctrine of God an ontology that counters a vision of reality defined by conflict and violence. This 'ontology of peace' is tied to Scriptural narratives of *creatio ex nihlio* in that the primordial chaos is overcome not by violence but God's 'gratuitous, creative positing of difference […] which is existence'. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 422; quoted in Volpe, *Rethinking,* p. 114.

[27] Those who have served in pastoral capacities will surely resonate with Chaves's observation that 'a lifetime of Easter services […] surely establishes powerful, persuasive, long-lasting moods and motivations specifically regarding Easter', but these 'do not necessarily extend beyond' the service. Chaves, 'Rain Dances', p. 8.

[28] Volpe, 'Living the Mystery', p. 102.

worship or adult education forums. Perhaps only the crucible of examining (and being examined) by the doctrines, which undergird the Christian faith will lead to such focus and clarity of vision.

Theology and Medicine

Charry begins her book about the pastoral function of Christian doctrine with a genealogy of modern theology. While theology in the patristic, medieval and reformation eras emphasised the practical task of 'assist[ing] people to come to God', this approach has all but disappeared in modernity.[29] Theology is now preoccupied with method and epistemology, 'burdened as it is in the modern period with the awkwardness of speaking of God at all'.[30] What happened? Charry first distinguishes between 'primary Christian beliefs' and 'second-order thought'. The former consists of 'the practically oriented content of the faith' — normative descriptions about God, human life, and how the two intersect.[31] The latter is concerned with the practice of theology itself, exploring the basis of which theological claims may be determined to actually refer to God. In Charry's telling, the birth of modern theology is the story of second-order questions gaining precedence over primary beliefs.

Charry traces the reflexive turn of modern theology by appraising the legacy of John Locke, David Hume and Immanuel Kant. She summarises their influence as follows:

> Locke separated faith from knowledge, denying the importance of trust as an element of truth. Hume insisted on the repeatability of events as a sign of their truth and disallowed inferential reasoning, tentativeness, and discerning judgment. Kant pointed out that the conditions for knowing lie within the limits of time and space within which the mind operates.[32]

[29] Charry, *By the Renewing,* p. 5.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., p.10.

Charry then compares the 'knowledge' utilised in clinical medicine and Christian theology. Charry observes an irony: both theology and medicine rely on notions of reason and truth excluded by these Enlightenment thinkers, yet the benevolent effects of medicine are widely trusted (and celebrated) in the modern world while theology is no longer considered a source of healing and means of human excellence. Charry refutes the anticipated objection that her project amounts to an attempt 'to jump over modernity and reimpose classical theology'.[33] Rather, through the extended analogy with medicine, she wants to persuade her readers of the viability of the classical project and the possibility that theology can help people flourish by bringing them to God and changing how they think and act.

Her specific argument is that theology and medicine are practiced in similar ways: 'Both are clinical arts that require knowledge, careful judgment of a total situation (including inference and interpretation of data) and cooperative trust among the parties involved'.[34] Doctors and theologians work within a certain body of knowledge: information about the human body and its processes of disease and recovery for the one; knowledge of Scripture, creeds and the means of interpreting them for human well-being for the other. Broadly construed, both admit a measure of mystery – Charry points out 'there are many diseases scientists do not understand and others they cannot treat' – and both can be considered a kind of science.[35]

To be successful, theologians and medical practitioners also utilise clinical judgment. Medical care begins with inquiry; the efficacy of treatment often depends on the ability of healthcare workers to ask the right questions. Caregivers will likewise reassess treatment plans based on their demonstrated effects. Theologians follow a similar pattern: their work does not arise out of nowhere but 'in the middle' — in response to the context, situation and tradition in which the theologians find themselves.[36] They marshal Christian doctrines for the cause of human excellence by disentangling what they believe to be helpful in the moment from their biases and predispositions. They balance the theoretical cogency of doctrine with its

[33] Ibid., p. 6.
[34] Ibid., p.11.
[35] Ibid., p.12.
[36] This phrase is taken from Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.xii.

demonstrable effects. If certain beliefs consistently produce noxious outcomes, they may need to be readjusted.[37] In the same way that physicians prescribe medications that have proven to be effective despite the explanations for why, theologians are comfortable ascribing a positive change or healing in a person to God while not claiming to fully understand the mechanism behind such transformation.

In addition to knowledge and good judgment, trust and cooperation are vital in the care of bodies and souls. Nearly every course of medical treatment involves diet, exercise, and a positive attitude. Patients are never unwitting recipients of care; placebos can work in clinical trials simply because people believe they are getting better. Believers hoping to grow into greater spiritual maturity are similar participants in their own transformation: they attend worship services; pray in public and private; and seek guidance from trusted leaders. There are innumerable examples of doctors and theologians overstepping the bounds set by their respective traditions and inflicting harm. Such malpractice is lamentable, but is hardly a reason to abandon the enterprise.

Charry employs the extended analogy between theology and medicine as a means of inviting her readers to more fully appreciate the assumption shared by the pre-modern theologians surveyed in her book: God effects spiritual transformation. Some of these figures make only slight references to the metaphor of medicine to explain their work, but they all understood their task as therapeutic. They believed that 'God's being, work, and teaching, as well as the practices of the church, are genuine knowledge that may effect salutary human transformation when applied prudently and caringly in the proper setting and under optimum circumstances'.[38] Implicit in Charry's second-order reflection on *how* theology can be trusted and criticised as medicine is the constructive thesis that doctrine can indeed function in this way. Her exploration of Julian of Norwich is one example of doctrine operating in this salutary way.

[37] Charry cites 'enrich[ing] language for God beyond monarchical and feudal language' as an example of theology modifying its claims to better capture the grace and mercy of God. See *By the Renewing*, p. 31.
[38] Charry, p. 15.

Theology for the Anguished Soul

Julian of Norwich lived in the latter half of the fourteenth century. It was a tumultuous period: at least three rounds of the bubonic plague swept through Norwich in her lifetime, reducing the general population by a third and killing over half of the clergy.[39] There were famines and economic scarcity, political upheaval and military conflict. Such adversity was at least in part understood as divine judgment and corresponded with a widespread emphasis in Christian teaching on eternal punishment. Indeed, the 'fear of God's wrath was a determining feature' in the popular piety of that era, while 'love and mercy (except in the narrow sense of forgiveness of sin if people repented) was in short supply'.[40] Charry sketches the religious landscape by exploring the influence of *The Rule of St Benedict* and Bernard of Clairvaux's *On the Steps of Humility and Pride* and *On Loving God*. Summarising the twelve steps of humility detailed in the Rule's seventh chapter, she writes that 'the teaching appears to be that God wants us to hate ourselves, and the more we do, the better we will be'.[41] This is not the whole picture; the telos of monastic devotion is the supplanting of servile fear by the practice of humility, achievement of empathy and growth in love. Yet, in practice, Charry notes that 'it is easy to slip from the humility-as-compassion' as detailed in these texts to 'humility-as-suffering' whereby self-hatred is considered a kind of virtue.[42] It is not surprising, therefore, that people sought concrete forms of self-denial: refusing property, marriage and family, and abstaining from sleep, food and shelter. These practices were conceived as a means of 'carrying the cross' — imitating the Passion of Christ by seeking suffering. A medieval church historian notes that 'the saints went to extraordinary lengths to participate in Christ's agonies —a form of piety almost incomprehensible to modern readers, for whom the saints' delight in illness, wounds, and persecution is

[39] Grace M. Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 8.
[40] Phillip Sheldrake, *Julian of Norwich: In God's Sight: Her Theology in Context* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2018), p. 30.
[41] Charry, *By the Renewing*, p. 177.
[42] Ibid., p. 188.

masochistic, or worse'.[43] The worse people felt, the more they believed they were pleasing God.

Julian, on first glance, might be taken as representative of this 'theologically gloomy age'.[44] She recounts wishing to have been physically present for Christ's crucifixion and asking God for a bodily vision of the Passion, a physical illness and a true contrition for sin.[45] When Julian was thirty years old, she became gravely ill and received the vision of Christ's suffering for which she had asked. She reflected on what she had encountered for the next two decades, teasing out the psychological insights and pastoral function of all she had seen as she counseled the seekers who frequently visit her anchorhold. What would her visitors have heard? The refrain throughout her published memoir is widely known: 'All will be well, and all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well'. In an era where humility could be easily equated with self-hatred, Julian 'sounded a new note for theology', affirming creaturely worth and dignity, instructing those seeking her care to reframe their self-perception, and teaching there is no anger in God.[46]

In the Fourteenth Revelation of *Showings* Julian vividly recounted her struggle to understand how God sees humankind in its sinfulness. This problem was not academic; medieval society was rife with elaborate mechanisms to alleviate (and monetise) guilt.[47] Julian perceived two forms of judgment experienced by human beings. The first is from 'God's own endless love' whereby God views human beings in their 'natural substance' and 'assigns no kind of blame'.[48] The second judgment

[43] Clarissa W. Atkinson, review of Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), *The American Historical Review* 90 (1985) p. 918.
[44] Julian of Norwich, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love,* ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), p. 15; quoted in Amy Laura Hall, *Laughing at the Devil: Seeing the World with Julian of Norwich* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 2.
[45] *Julian of Norwich: Showings,* ed. and trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 178. While it can be argued that Julian's desire for a vision of Christ's suffering is not in and of itself particular to her time, her desire for a near-mortal illness in order to experience the purgative effects of death seems characteristic of a 'gloomy' spirituality.
[46] Charry, *By the Renewing*, p. 186.
[47] Ibid., p. 193. Charry lists pilgrimages, the sale of relics and indulgences, the construction of shrines and the cult of saints as examples.

comes from humankind and is based on observable behavior. She counted this judgment 'the common teaching of the Holy Church' and deemed it 'necessary to see and know that we are sinners'.[49] Julian believed in the veracity of the first form of judgment by virtue of the direct revelation given to her: 'I saw truly that our Lord is never angry [and that] God is that goodness which cannot be angry'.[50] Yet she could not silence the second. She therefore sought to 'see in God in what way the judgment of the Holy Church here on earth is true in his sight, […] whereby they both might be reconciled'.[51] Veronica Mary Rolf distills Julian's dilemma: 'Essentially, she is being pulled between two strongly held beliefs: on the one hand, the lack of wrath and blame in God, and on the other hand, the teaching of the church that God condemns sinners'.[52]

Julian resolved this tension by relaying an extended vision of a lord and a servant that she received at the height of her spiritual conflict. Through this parable Julian saw 'reality as God sees it' and grasped the 'orthodox solution to the problem' of sin, human culpability and forgiveness 'not as theory but as experience'.[53] The vision is multifaceted and her explanation thereof is complex; reviewing its intricacies is beyond the scope of this article. It will suffice to say that Julian now understood that God views all of humankind who will be saved through the lens of Jesus, God's Son.[54] Thus, even those who succumb to temptation and fall into sin (and thereby warrant the judgment of the church) can rest secure in the knowledge that their souls are united to Christ 'by a knot so subtle and so mighty that it is united in God'.[55]

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[48] 1. Colledge and Walsh, pp.256-57; 2. Veronica Mary Rolf notes that in 'medieval theology' humankind's natural substance referred to 'divinely-given capacities to reason and to will'. *An Explorer's Guide to Julian of Norwich* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), p. 120.
[49] Colledge and Walsh, pp. 258-59.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid. p. 259.
[52] Rolf, *Explorers Guide*, p. 125.
[53] *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Elizabeth Spearing, introduction and notes by A.C. Spearing (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. xxxi; quoted by Hall, *Laughing at the Devil,* pp. 47–48.
[54] Rowan Williams speaks of 'the extraordinary fusion of the fall of Adam and the Incarnation itself' when describing this aspect of Julian's thought: 'Because human identity is eternally decreed to be the inseparable companion of Christ's joy, [...] what happens to Adam happens to the Second Person of the Trinity.' *Holy Living: The Christian Tradition for Today* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 175.
[55] Colledge and Walsh, p. 289.

Julian is considered 'one of the first Christian theologians to examine Christian doctrine for the cumulative psychological effects it was having on a popular level'.[56] While many in her day stressed divine wrath as the explanation for the plagues, warfare and social unrest troubling medieval England, Julian heralded a God who had nothing but compassion for the suffering human beings afflict upon one another. Where it was likewise common for self-destructive behavior to be conceived as honorable, Julian emphasised the virtue that follows recognizing oneself as God's beloved creature, 'made so noble and so rich that we always achieve his will and his glory'.[57] She taught people to cling to God's mercy even when they believed themselves to be deserving of judgment. Her theology was medicine for the anguished soul. Yet she was keen to recognise received authority. She reflected on her visions for decades before memorialising them in writing, striving to understand how what she had seen thus cohered with the teaching of the church. Her patience was rewarded. Her theology is more nuanced and invigorating because of its complex relationship with the doctrine that preceded it. In this way Julian synthesises the arguments of Volpe and Charry: doctrine was a helpful boundary, spurring creativity and insight, and doctrine was a balm for fearful, distressed souls.

Conclusion

Like Volpe, Charry uses an early modern European painting to illustrate the thesis of her book (albeit Baroque not Renaissance). She examines Georges de La Tour's *Saint Sebastian Tended by Saint Irene* first as a critic and then as a spiritual seeker. The former approach focuses exclusively on composition and technique; it is 'analogous to the work of modern theology, which is critical in the sense of using second-order norms to describe and then evaluate doctrine'. The latter, representative of the theological inquiry Charry commends, appreciates aesthetics, but is drawn also to 'the message the artist is trying to convey', inviting the painting 'to *reform* and thereby *beautify*' the viewer.[58] These two verbs — reform and beautify — capture the

[56] Charry, *By the Renewing,* p. 193.
[57] Colledge and Walsh, p. 290.

gift of doctrine for discipleship that I have outlined in this article. Doctrine establishes an agenda for theological reflection and preserves 'the mystery of faith' to which followers of Jesus are called to hold fast (1 Tim. 3.9). Untethered from the church's teaching, we run the risk of repeating the mistakes of the past or collapsing the life-giving paradoxes of the Christian faith to appease the mind's desire for certainty.[59] Doctrine energises believers in their attempt to live with God and embody their beliefs in daily life. In its resistance to mastery and easy comprehension, doctrine encourages the continual exploration that promotes integration and trains the easily distracted mind's eye to fix its gaze of Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith (Heb. 12.2). The Christian tradition holds out a promise: we become what we know. In addition to reforming the mind, doctrine beautifies by connecting the knower to the Known: bringing healing; facilitating transformation; and inspiring excellence by grounding the events and insights constitutive of personal identity in the love of God.

[58] Charry, *By the Renewing,* p. 238; emphasis added.
[59] For a winsome portrayal of Christian faith that takes seriously the received teaching of the church and the intellectual challenges of modernity, see Daniel Taylor *The Myth of Certainty: The Reflective Christian and the Risk of Commitment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).