

Preaching the **Big** Questions

Doctrine Isn't Dusty



Catherine Faith MacLean and John H. Young

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Foreword

A popular adage has been making the rounds in church (and other) circles: “You’ve got to walk the talk.” This saying has to do with integrity, with practising what you preach. It is about congruity between what you say and how you act and live. For a number of years now I have flipped this adage around, saying we need to “talk the walk.” On a personal level, this means that you need to be able to understand and articulate why you act and live in a particular way. In communal terms, as people of the Christian faith, it means being able to articulate the reasons that inform our practice of ministry, including our ethical commitments and our work for justice, healing, and transformation. To use biblical language, you need to “always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15–16).

In our post-modern context, our testimony must be current to be accepted as credible in our social market of ideas. People are interested in believability and authenticity. We are interested to know the *why* behind a person’s actions, convictions, and activism. Folks want to know the reason for your hope and for the passion that animates your commitments.

Simon Sinek’s book *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* argues that most people connect with the *why* behind what you do, more than the what and the how. What, they want to know, is the deep purpose, belief, or conviction behind what you do?

Preaching the Big Questions: Doctrine Isn’t Dusty takes on 13 of the key historical doctrines of the Christian church. It is a compelling, necessary, and accessible excursion into the *why* of our faith, our theological statements, and our pastoral undertakings. The authors, Catherine and John, acknowledge that there is an unpopular stereotype attached to the word *doctrine*. For many of their colleagues in ministry—and for many of those both within and outside of the church—the

word conjures up images of dusty, boring, stuffy, bygone theological articulations that are pretty much irrelevant for today.

Catherine and John—both of whom I have known for many, many years through conferences, conversations, and the wider work of the church—would beg to differ. They contend that preaching doctrine is a “crucial issue for the contemporary United Church.” They suggest that doctrine “addresses the big questions of our lives, our relationships, and our understandings of God. Faithful and questioning people have brought their best energies to these questions over the centuries.... We are a living part of doctrine as we sift inherited wisdom and bring fresh ideas.” Doctrine, they argue, “is less about attempting to be correct and more about exploring possibility.”

Both Catherine and John believe that doctrine is not only important but even fun and stimulating to engage with. Now some of you may be a little incredulous about the latter part of that statement. Well, in the words of Mother Teresa: “Come and see.” Take the plunge and read through this book. You will quickly discern that their passion and enjoyment comes through in every chapter. Why? Because they write as those who have sat intentionally and reflectively—for a long time—with questions of faith and practice, and they have been wrestled with them in scripture and in the long and storied theological tradition of the historic Christian church. They also care deeply for the world and for those who comprise the church.

The authors are enjoining us to “think critically, live faithfully”—to borrow a motto from *The Christian Century* magazine. Many of us in paid accountable ministry have huge ministry pressures. It is often difficult to feel that we can take the time to engage in what seems like the luxury of reading theology and studying and reflecting on historic articulations of the Christian faith. And yet, what is helpful in this book is the legitimate connection that is drawn between such an undertaking and the qualitative contribution that it makes to our faith, preaching, pastoral care, ethical practice, and worship leadership, as well as to the lives and faith of the ones we are privileged to serve in our pastoral charges and venues of ministry.

In reflecting on the doctrine of grace, Catherine writes: “Doctrine doesn’t constrict the preacher—it gives us adventure.” And in John’s chapter on the doctrine of the church, he talks about the need to strengthen, and perhaps recover “the sense of the church as a place where God can be, and is, active, and the related understanding of the church as an ‘instrument of the loving Spirit of Christ.’” They are excited about not only the importance of doctrine but its applicability and its capacity to liberate and inspire.

It is worth noting that this book arose from presentations that John and Catherine made at Worship Matters and Queen’s Annual Theology Conference. An overwhelming number of attendees at each of these events asked John and Catherine to put their presentations into book form. Sensitive to this request and the context out of which it came, they have structured each chapter in a way that explores a particular doctrine while attending to possible pastoral concerns that may arise. As well, they propose liturgical settings in which the doctrine may be addressed and provide a sample sermon with a biblical text or two.

I appreciate the generous hospitality of both these authors in a particular way. While stating their preferred way of understanding each doctrine there is a grace that allows for a diversity of interpretations. We are a big tented church after all.

Catherine and John are well suited for this project. Catherine is an academic who is fully ensconced in all the joy and complexity of pastoral ministry, and John is an academic who is vocationally dedicated to teaching and participating in the formation of critically thinking individuals for the tasks of ministry. Together, they are able to reflect on and write about the continuum of formation in the practice of preaching, intentional theological reflection, pastoral and spiritual care, the crafting of liturgy, and engagement in social justice.

I am writing this foreword near the beginning of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Our son came home the other night and engaged me in a conversation that reminded me of the importance of this book. He was working out at the gym with a Muslim acquaintance who was

articulating not only why he was a Muslim, but why Islam was superior to Christianity and all other faiths. He proceeded to tell our son that “Jesus isn’t really very special because he didn’t do anything new.” He said, “Mohammed actually recorded the words of Allah, directly.” Standing there in the kitchen, our son and I had a wonderful conversation, for all intents and purposes, about the doctrines of God, Jesus, the church, sin, atonement, grace, scripture, and ministry. We spoke about respecting other faiths and traditions while not being afraid or shy about lovingly articulating our Christian faith and being proud of it. As well, we spoke about how we can work together with others for justice and the common good. Afterwards, he felt a lot more prepared, clear, and encouraged to articulate the *why* of his faith; the Christian faith. Doctrine matters!

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We are grateful to Mark MacLean and the working group who created the Worship Matters events in The United Church of Canada and, in particular, the team responsible for the 2007 gathering in London, Ontario. We offer thanks to Jean Stairs, Principal, and the participants at the Queen's Annual Theology Conference in 2010. Colleagues in ministry encouraged us to say more beyond the conferences; we appreciate those conversations. When we were deep into the material, students and teachers in our denomination and abroad gave us confidence that the project was worthwhile: we are grateful.

We offer thanks to Emmanuel College in Toronto for its hospitality when we managed to get to the same city at the same time, and to Queen's School of Religion for allowing us to integrate the seminary experience with pastoral formation. United Church Publishing House said yes, and the team there has been attentive and creative: thank you.

At early ages, we learned from our families the pleasure of wondering where ideas come from and why. Catherine learned the power of preaching from her father, George. In these recent years of

writing together, our home lives have sustained us with patience and encouragement. Caroline has been a source of strength for John and, happily, a willing conversation partner about the book. Catherine's children, Andrew and Hannah, wrote university essays alongside her during reading weeks and cheered her progress. Earl never doubted her, or the project; his confidence and humour mean more than he can know. Many thanks, and deep love to you all.

Our collegial work has developed into friendship, and we want to acknowledge our deep appreciation for each other's stamina, imagination, and commitment.

Faith Speaking Understanding

The bicycle was borrowed from a faculty member and the backpack was heavy. I navigated narrow streets and back lanes every day, from residence to class and home again, the weight of the books heavy on my shoulders. I secured the bike against theft with an enormous lock, and returned the books on time to avoid fines. I was careful. Evenings found me in the residence, at an oak table that seated 12, heavy into debate. Original sin and grace, Origen and Augustine, Christology and the faces of Buddha: rich, enriching conversations.

In those seminary days, I had lots of time to discuss God and to ponder theology. I loved it: the leisurely conversations as I chopped lettuce in the residence kitchen, the lively arguments as students walked across well-tended lawns, the curiosity about books we borrowed from the library, the questions we posed as we sipped espressos or cheap red wine in Harvard Square. The topics mattered. I learned about the roots of justice, the trajectories of contemplation, the issues of relationships, and the influence of social location. The study of God's presence in human history and experience gave me a reliable lens through which to see the world.

Now I chop vegetables for my children, dash along the expressway to a meeting, or sit in a grieving person's home with a pot of Lapsang souchong tea going cold on the table between us. Amid the demands of a personal life, engagement with the world, and ministerial responsibility, I hope those theological foundations sustain me. I trust my continued study keeps the reflections fresh.

Perhaps this story—Catherine's story—sounds familiar. Maybe it is true for you, too. Or maybe you are in the midst of studying now. For many ministers, the pleasure we once had in leisurely conversations has

accelerated into an urgent calling. Pastoral care, church budgets, social action, congregational change, and the weekly rhythm of Sunday worship preparation require immediate attention. When is there time for long theological conversations? How do we recall the joy we had in those conversations? How do we make time to read?

We sign up expectantly for conferences, workshops, and webinars; invitations from across the continent arrive in our inboxes. Sometimes there may be a long conversation about the authority of scripture or the sovereignty of God, atonement theories or human depravity. Every now and then we taste again the pleasures of those debates. Then we return home, where relentless demands call on our energy and thought.

In this activity we find the reality and the expression of our faith; we are busy with meaningful work. We are aware, too, that the external world judges us by how we live and how we give, by where we show up and what we do. More weight is given these days to action than to speech. Yet the meaning behind all this activity is *why* we do it. The meaning is the reason; it generates the energy.

The experience of weekly worship opens us to the presence of God. A regular worshipping practice can focus our awareness of the Holy and of God's touch in our lives. Our congregations hope ministers do many things. But they invite us into their midst primarily to help them with basic religious questions. Who am I? Why am I here? What is the meaning of life? Who is God? What wisdom will sustain me through trouble?

It is in hard times that people lean into what they believe. So ministers aim to provide worshippers with sufficient resources to strengthen the faith that will inform the decisions they make at work, in the community, and at home—in other words, to guide their thinking about how they lead their lives. We assist as they make sense of their lives. That is a remarkable task, and pastoral care is a privilege as well as a calling. In that calling, the practice of theology sustains us.

What we believe energizes what we do. Preaching for the long run, we need sustenance. Words are powerful; ask anyone who has felt bullied. Confident, strong, vulnerable, open-minded, deeply rooted, and loving

words crafted into sermons have transforming power. What we say— Sunday after Sunday, year after year—in some sense becomes who we are. The word informs our expression. What we proclaim becomes who people know us to be.

I return to the Sunday sermon. Sitting at my desk, I am aware of the commotion in the front office, of the appointments on my agenda, and of the shelves of books along the wall. Twisting my attention away from pressing tasks, I turn to the wisdom of the church to guide me so that I can offer leadership. Others have walked these paths, prayed these petitions, thought through the challenges, and written theology that speaks to the issues of our lives.

This is “faith seeking understanding.” The phrase *fides quaerens intellectum* comes from Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), who posited that after faith comes the call to reason the faith. When we incorporate reasoning the faith into Sunday preparation, it is apologetic preaching. Beyond what we do, this is the *why* of what we do.

The Origins of This Book

Worship Matters was a series of national events on preaching, music, the arts, and worship leadership in The United Church of Canada. At the symposium held in London, Ontario, in 2007, the co-authors presented a keynote address called “Shortening the Distance between Podium and Pulpit.” We discussed how to sustain our preaching, season after season, through pastoral care and congregational change. We acknowledged that ministers are outrageously busy. There is no such thing as a “low Sunday” anymore; preachers are “on” constantly.

We recognized that in the midst of these constant demands, it is difficult to integrate the lectures we heard in the classroom. How could we bring that material to our pulpits? Pastoral need, our social justice commitments, and the study groups we lead drive the bulk of our theological study. The common lectionary guides us through three years

of biblical material. Many of us preach on grace regularly, but beyond that, we lack the breathing space to pick up a theological text for personal pleasure or supplementary study.

At Worship Matters we argued that it was important to preach about doctrine, and illustrated how one might do that for four topics: Sovereignty of God, Human Depravity, Grace, and Vocation. We wondered how our colleagues would receive our work. We also wondered what they would think of bringing inflammatory and controversial topics like the Sovereignty of God and Human Depravity to a national event. At the end, we were given prolonged applause.

Three years later we presented again, at the Queen's Annual Theology Conference. We brought resources on Sin and Regeneration, Scripture, Last Things, and Ecclesiology (the church). We wondered particularly if Sin and Last Things would be welcome. Again, the idea was well received. Attendees asked us to put our approach to preaching doctrine into a published form so they could try it out themselves.

Now we've taken those lectures, reworked them for a broader audience, and added five other topics. The result: *Preaching the Big Questions: Doctrine Isn't Dusty*.

Our Interest in Preaching Doctrine

When *doctrine isn't dusty*, how are we using the word *doctrine*? The term can refer to a denomination's formal statement(s) of faith, as in the Doctrine section of the Basis of Union. It can also be used as a synonym for *theology*, or comments about or reflection upon some aspect of the Christian faith tradition. It is in this latter sense that we use the term *doctrine* in this book. So, for example, when we speak about a doctrine of ministry, we are talking about a theological understanding of ministry. Christian denominations hold doctrinal understandings of the Christian faith and sometimes in particular ways that vary from one denomination to another. So do individual Christians.

Doctrine addresses the big questions of our lives, our relationships,

and our understandings of God. Faithful and questioning people have brought their best energies to these questions over the centuries. Tradition, inspiration, and fresh possibilities informed their responses to the dilemmas they faced—and that we often face. We are a living part of doctrine, as we sift inherited wisdom and bring fresh ideas.

Attention to doctrine in preaching, as we understand it, is less about attempting to be correct and more about exploring possibility. Striving to be correct gets dry fast. Having said that, preaching ought to have a solid starting point. There is wisdom in our traditions that speaks—in fact, declares—relevant truths. Sermons about doctrine should mean something useful, uplifting, and worshipful. Doctrine can be a solid path to fresh thought, relevant commentary, and faithful proclamation. Doctrine won't be dry if we preach it with joy, and with both feet on the ground.

Preaching doctrine is a crucial issue for the contemporary United Church, and our comments may well be true for other mainline denominations in Canada and the United States. That issue is the need to emphasize theology in the life of the church, particularly in its preaching and teaching ministries in the local congregation. We do not mean heavy-handed pronouncements of perceived right thinking. We mean the skill of talking theologically. The skill calls on the heritage of faith and the wisdom of forebears who faced human dilemmas, while also taking into account contemporary thinking that is considered and fresh. Our sense of its importance has become ever clearer to us during our years of ministry.

We met three decades ago while John was in his settlement charge, and Catherine was a divinity student and candidate for ministry. Christianity was significantly more culturally dominant then than now; changes were happening but we were slow to recognize them. In such an environment, being a Christian was rather akin to being a good Canadian—you paid your taxes and supported the government, you treated your spouse and children well, you didn't break the law (except, perhaps, with regard to the speed limit), and you acted toward your neighbours as you hoped they would act toward you. You really did not need to think about theology or what you believed; belonging to the church was the thing to do.

Also at that time, Christianity was about what we did: social justice, keeping a lid on misdemeanours, being kind. It was a common, popular morality rather than doctrine. There was still a culture of Christendom, in which, if you belonged to a so-called mainline denomination, government and religion were intertwined. It is fair to say that being a Christian was often understood as being a nice person who went to church each week.

That time is not our time. We are not sure that the overlap between culture and religion in which we grew up was a healthy one for Christianity. But whether it was healthy or not is immaterial; that world is not our world. Now, the values the Christian tradition espouses are usually at variance with the values of the culture. Sometimes they are diametrically opposed.

Our values can be articulated when we examine our doctrine. In an increasingly secular Canada where other values are dominant, we need to teach the traditions of our faith—which is to say, teach doctrine—for three related reasons: formation, ethical living, and pastoral care.

Formation

First, those who would be part of the Christian community need to understand what the Christian tradition is about; they need to be schooled in it. *Formation* is a term for that. People who are drawn to check out Christianity and who desire to become part of the church want to learn about the Christian tradition and be formed in it. They are new to a life of faith, or new to our denomination, or new to a specific congregation's expression of faith. Many long-time members of the church are also interested in learning about our heritage of faith and fresh perspectives on it. When church membership classes are opened to anyone who is interested in attending, long-time members often outnumber the recently arrived.

Our Christian point of view is different from the view of our culture. Our faith tradition leads us to value ourselves, and our place in this world that God has made, in a way that is not the way of the world. People in the congregation can only come to value themselves and the world as

Christians if they are offered formation in the traditions of our faith. Yes, we learn by doing, but we fine-tune the learning through conversation, teaching, and listening. We are going to form opinions about personal self-worth, the value of relationships, the rights of others, and the wider world. Preaching doctrine gives words to the *why* of the opinions, and allows those opinions to be considered and faithful. Listening to well-taught doctrine helps us explain our countercultural behaviour, both to ourselves and to others.

Catherine ran our ideas about doctrine past some colleagues at lunch. “They’ve all got doctrine,” one said. He’s a Presbyterian, and he wasn’t referring to a presbytery meeting; he was referring to churchgoers. “They’ve all got doctrine. It’s not orthodox, or rigid, or catalogued. It’s not unfriendly or defensive. It’s simply ways of living, expectations, a story.”

How deep does it go? we wondered. In this postmodern world of questions and subjective truth, how much of life is sustained simply by ways of living, expectations, a story? When the hard times hit, is it enough?

Ethical Living

For those who would be Christian, the faith tradition represents a spiritual home. It roots the ethics according to which we lead our lives, the position from which we approach the world. And that perspective is different from the mindset of secular North American culture.

We need to teach the doctrine of the church because our faith tradition represents a particular spiritual home. Christian teachings and Christian values speak to our finitude, to the reality that we are stewards and not owners of the things of this world, to the need to love our neighbours as ourselves. Our culture teaches us that we human beings are self-made and that we are to put our own well-being first. Christianity presents an alternative way of viewing the world and therefore of living. Members of our congregations, and those who are curious about Christianity because of something they have read, heard, or experienced, are only going to be able to live according to such a perspective if church

leaders present it to them. Teaching the tenets of the Christian faith is the way we do that.

Here's an example. One of the kindergarten children in the K to 12 school stood in the hallway as the teenagers milled past. He was lost; his classroom was at the opposite end of the building. Quiet sniffles and tears began. One of the teens, dressed fully in goth style, stopped and turned toward him. He removed a black glove and stretched out a hand. The child looked at the hand and reached for it. Five minutes later at the kindergarten room door, the teacher asked the teen how he came to respond to the child. "I was taught to see people in need," he replied. "I go with my mum to church."

Pastoral Care

Finally, the Christian faith offers us the means through which to make sense of our own lives, of our personal high points and our times of crisis. In other words, it makes available to ministers the pastoral care we offer to others and need for ourselves, a theologically based pastoral care.

There are pastoral reasons to help members of our congregations deepen their understanding of the Christian faith. We have not talked much for most of the past century about the concept of original sin, let alone the overlapping concept of human depravity. But recovering solid notions of the meaning of sin, depravity, atonement, and the sacraments would be useful for us. "I don't ever take communion," a woman said to an elder. "I don't deserve it. I know you talk about forgiveness, but what I've done won't go away. You decent people go ahead." Clarity in our doctrines of sin and communion would serve her well.

In summary, we are proposing that a conscious, specific, open, and thorough wrestling with Christian doctrine is crucial for formation, for ethical living, and for effective pastoral care.

Preaching about doctrine and our faith tradition has influenced how we view ministry. At some point in John's pastoral ministry, he concluded that his role for his congregants was a modified form of "rabbi." They

had called him into their midst to do what rabbis in the Jewish tradition have historically done. The rabbi is the one called to be the teacher in the congregation, to be the resident theologian who helps members of the congregation with their religious, theological, and ethical questions. Our congregations may hope we also do other things, particularly in the area of pastoral care. But they invite ministers primarily to help with their basic religious questions.

A minister's calling is to help provide those who gather for worship with resources to enable their faith to inform how they lead their lives. It is to enable them to make meaning. It is about equipping the saints. It is about the cure of souls.

You may have some other individuals in your congregations who also do such equipping. If so, you are very lucky. But it is the responsibility of ministers to do so. No other professionals in society play that role, and it is a crucial one. Ministers function in the congregations we serve, and in the wider church, as the "stewards of God's mysteries," to borrow a phrase from Paul (1 Corinthians 4:1).

It has always been an important role for a minister to play. It is particularly so in the times in which we now live. And our hope is that as we accept the challenge, this theological thinking will become even more deeply a part of us.

Our Invitation to You

We have had the good fortune and privilege of listening to many of our colleagues preach. Each preacher brings faith, imagination, study, and a unique understanding of their particular context. Each has a singular voice, an individual practice of preparation, and a personal prayer life that makes every sermon a work of Spirit. There are many styles of writing and presenting sermons. The work is embodied, even incarnational. We benefit from listening to one another. It is in the spirit of that sharing that we offer this book, as an invitation into our theological and homiletical endeavour.

In conversations with colleagues across our church, we hear a yearning for theological conversations. When we bring up atonement, communion, or Christology, we hear opinions. When we ask about eschatology (last things), vocation, or sin, the room rarely goes quiet. We want to bring that passion into an exercise in preaching.

It is not our intention to cover every doctrine with all its nuances in this book. Even if we wished to, we could not include every angel that ever danced on a pin! What we offer is a solid grounding for preaching in what we understand to be foundational points of doctrine with which people in our pews wrestle in a variety of ways. We hope that our offerings will inspire preachers to continue to read theology, with an eye to pastoral application and also to the pleasure of thinking theologically.

We examine 13 doctrinal issues. We'll show how we have preached on each of them, using a passage of scripture for each doctrine. Some of the doctrines we cover are not issues the preacher has to deal with every week or very often at all. We are convinced, though, that we do face each of them at least occasionally, and they form a subtext in surprising ways. Issues of sin and guilt lurk, especially if we do not address them. Existential angst—last things—drives insatiable shopping, inconsolable anxiety, and a desperate desire for security. Entitlement sneaks in and poses as grace.

Each chapter has five parts. First we introduce a doctrinal concept. Then we suggest a biblical passage that is a source for reflecting on the doctrine: of many possibilities, we have made a choice. We outline pastoral concerns that make this doctrine an important living concept, and we present how it can preach. Finally, we attach a sermon that has been created with these thoughts in mind. Some of the sermons are edited versions of sermons presented in a congregation; some were written specifically for this collection.

Here is an overview of the doctrines we address:

Sovereignty of God

When we are up against the hard things of life, our self-reliance begins to fade. We, who are so capable, are responsible for climate change and environmental degradation. How do we address the limits to our power? How do we speak about the all-encompassing love of God? This chapter will address our dependence on God, including our assumption that we are in control of our bodies—which we Westerners think of as a right, not a privilege. In the illusion of total control, the sovereignty of God comes into play. This chapter addresses our dependence on God, focuses pastorally on Alzheimer's, and leans on Job 38:4–7: “when I laid the foundation of the earth.”

Christology

A Christian affirmation about the person and work of Jesus stands at the centre of our faith tradition. Yet a wide variety of Christological positions exists. Who is Jesus for each of us? How do we answer such a question in light of contemporary and popular scholarship? How, in a pluralist age, do we understand Christianity's claims about Jesus? Contemporary Christians need to claim unapologetically the particularity of this affirmation of our faith tradition, without denying the possibility of God working also through other faith traditions. This chapter offers John 14:1–7 as a passage for preaching on Christology.

Atonement

Do we really have to believe that God sent Jesus to die? The medieval theologians Anselm and Peter Abelard bring us the arguments that we loved in seminary; some of us also encountered Gregory of Nyssa's classic view there. Substitutionary sacrifice may be the most common understanding, but it is not the only Christian understanding of Jesus' death. Ransom is a cosmic conflict, and satisfaction is a legal framework for understanding our relationship with God. Christ as witness to God's love kindles love in our human hearts and becomes the moral influence

in our lives. Members of the congregation may have their own questions or want to be able to discuss atonement with neighbours who belong to other churches. In either case, it is essential to develop articulate understandings. This chapter presents more than one orthodox view of atonement and suggests how to preach a non-sacrificial answer for followers of Jesus from Mark 1:16–20.

The Authority of Scripture

Many Christian denominations, including The United Church of Canada, have a high view of the authority of scripture in their formal doctrinal statements. But many contemporary Christians struggle with this authority; they equate the authority of scripture with the stories of scripture being “true” in the literal or empirical sense. Recovering the understanding that God’s Living Word comes to us through the words of scripture, as we hear the biblical stories read and explicated, would enable us to experience more fully the power of scripture, and its authority, in our daily lives. This chapter approaches preaching on the doctrine using 2 Timothy 3:14–16.

Sin and Regeneration

It seems that *sin* is a four-letter word. In the United Church there is deep interest in original blessing, and the corrective away from moralistic, judgmental preaching and teaching is a good thing. Yet around us we observe the infliction of suffering from one human person to another. Within us we observe a sense that all is not well, that we harbour temptation, selfishness, and the desire for self over other. What do we do with this reality? If we are not sophisticated enough to simply overcome our mistakes intellectually, how do we account for it? If sin is no more than our bad choices, and redemption merely therapy, where is Christ’s work? We find ourselves back at the concept of sin and the cure for it. In non-traditional language we will outline how sin is real—as is, significantly, being made new and free. We refer to Mark 2:13–17 and call on Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 37.

Human Depravity

The term *human depravity* fell out of fashion some time ago. Contemporary United Church members tend to reflect the societal view of ourselves as basically good people who sometimes make mistakes. But our ancestors, who used the term without hesitation, had a more profound sense of the human condition. They recognized that each of us has a “shadow side,” that both our humanity and our societal structures are fundamentally flawed. Recovering this doctrinal concept is pastorally important, for it enables us to address more adequately both systemic evil and the penetrating and controlling quality of addictions. The chapter suggests an approach to preaching about this doctrine using Romans 7:14–25 as a text.

Grace and Salvation

Grace is the reassurance of God’s constant presence and care. It is the fallback doctrine for much United Church preaching. Without it, we could not sally forth into the social justice and personal transformation we see in ministry around us every day. Yet our culture sees grace rooted in one another rather than in God. The first factor is to see grace without entitlement. For those of us who live in privilege, the distinction can be tricky. The second factor is to see grace as more than mere kindness. It is transformative. How do we communicate the awe of grace? The third factor is to wonder if grace is available to us all. Is salvation universal? We wrestle with Jesus’ parable of the vineyard, Matthew 19:27—20:16, as a way into grace and salvation.

The Church

Concepts of the church, such as “God’s gift to the world,” seem meaningless to many contemporary Christians. Distinctive denominational points, ministerial rivalries, and congregational competition are at best confusing and at worse antithetical to what the church “should be.”

Further, church scandals and the strong individualism of the last few decades make belonging to the institutional church uninviting for many. (Think: “I’m spiritual, not religious.”) But the church remains important as one place where injustice is challenged, where alternative perspectives to a secularized and consumer-driven society are presented, and where empowerment for mission happens. Further, the church becomes a critical counter to the individualism of our era. Those who participate in this countercultural institution need affirmation for their involvement. The chapter outlines one way to preach on this area of doctrine using 1 Peter 2:9–10.

Vocation

We rarely discuss vocation, except when we are thinking about the call to some formally ordered ministry. Yet Protestantism in particular has a rich history of valuing God’s call to each person, regardless of their “station in life.” In a post-Christendom world, where the practice of Christianity is increasingly met with ambivalence or even hostility, members of the congregation need to be willing to talk about their faith and to stand out by virtue of their efforts to live lives that are consistent with the faith they profess. This chapter illustrates preaching about vocation, using 1 Peter 3:13–17.

Ministry

“The priesthood of all believers” is a popular and effective concept. But how does it function in a church culture of lay and ordered ministers, and a variety of streams of ministry? What did Martin Luther really mean by this phrase? The call to witness, *vocare*, is a privilege and a burden. This chapter speaks to an integration of ministers’ pastoral lives, the question of ministry in a variety of expressions, and the pressures of the changing church. We lift up the pastoral life of religious vocation working with Ephesians 4:11–16, Jeremiah 20:9, and the conviction that these gifts are God-given.

Baptism

Baptism, along with communion, is one of the two sacraments recognized in the United Church. Yet when we try to think through our understanding of baptism, there are challenges. The New Testament does not present a clear and consistent picture of either the meaning or the practice of baptism. Particularly since the 16th century, Christians have debated the appropriate age at which baptism should take place. Although the United Church understands baptism as that which, in a formal way, makes a person a part of the church community, current societal trends tend to separate baptism from its close church connection. This chapter emphasizes the dominant place grace has in the doctrine and the kind of community Christians understand themselves to be creating by virtue of baptism. Galatians 3:23–29 is the text for the sermon.

Holy Communion

Doctrinal discussions about communion frequently focus on how Christ is understood to be present to us in this sacrament. Most congregations exhibit a wide spectrum of perspectives. One also still meets individuals who feel unworthy to receive communion, even as liturgical scholars for the past two generations have encouraged a more frequent celebration of communion in mainline Protestant denominations. The reflections on doctrine and the accompanying sermon on 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 include examining the concept of “remembering,” what it is we are remembering, and the implications of the celebration of the sacrament for the type of community we are.

Last Things

Calves really are sometimes born with two heads. One-hundred-foot waves are increasingly common on our oceans. Nations rise up against each other with appalling violence. The shocks and surprises of our sophisticated contemporary lives involve disasters of biblical proportions,

and our future gazing is shadowed with fear of personal, economic, and ecological ruin. How can we ignore these concerns on Sunday mornings? When preaching is focused on personal agency and the call to social justice, it can be difficult to address the last things, the end times, eschatology, and rapture. But what lies beyond the grave is critical. A basic message of scripture is that death does not end our relationship with God. How do we make relevant the recurring affirmation that in death we continue to be in God's care and keeping? In our lives and beyond, there will be an end, a resolution, a bringing of all things, sanctified, forgiven, and renewed, back to God. We are released from the cycle of life or the circle of eternity. The doctrine of last things also concerns the purpose of time. This chapter outlines how to bring a message that we can rest assured that death is not the final word, referring to the frightening images in Revelation 6:12–17, and the words from the burial service in Revelation 21:1–7.

Preaching as a Transformational Practice

“He always comes up with something that probes your mind,” a woman said to Catherine of her minister when she visited a neighbouring congregation. Catherine was glad to hear it. The spiritual nurture we offer in sermons shows concern for the deep experiences of congregants' lives, for our impact on this earth, and for our relationships with God. Week by week preachers create trust as we speak truth, faith, and hope and acknowledge the hardship within and around us. In comments after worship, we listen for indications that we have touched a nerve. In messages through the week, we agree to pastoral care appointments to further the conversations. In the determinations of congregational boards, we see the connection between faith and action. In all of this, we trust that the creation of sermons is worth it, that it is transformative, that it matters.

Taking the time to know the members of our congregations, ministers hear truths about their lives. We have the opportunity to reflect on their

stories. Pastoral care is a great privilege. We cannot underestimate the importance of pastoral visitation: in emergencies, yes, when people are vulnerable. But also in the day-to-day routine of ordinary time, learning about where they live and how they work and play. To their lives we bring our interest in the traditions of the faith and our imagination as we create sermons. Steeped in prayerful writing, we are making meaning. More importantly, we are providing them with the tools to make Christian meaning themselves.

Some church libraries make a brisk business of lending books on contemporary theology. Members of our congregations also experience contemporary theology through the Internet and other media. As preachers we bring faithful, trained imaginations to make that learning lively. We offer an experience with God in the sermon.

As we engage the practice of preaching week by week, our personal worship experience transforms us, too. The rich experience of a preacher's growing faith deepens the congregation's faith. Our curiosity and our changing ideas benefit the listeners.

Studying theological texts enriches faith. Bringing those theological texts to our weekly practice infuses the realities of our times with the wisdom of the church. We can contemplate the possibilities in a particular doctrine as we read in our study, drive to the hospital, pray at the nursing home, pull on our boots for a political meeting, read news updates on our phones, or sit on the veranda at sunset. The connections are profound.

A Gift of Fresh Air

Doctrine is a gift. It is a breath of fresh air when everything seems routine. It is finding a new path of adventure when every other way looks predictable. Doctrine is meant to open our minds, to present possibilities, to engage us in transformation. It is not a constriction. Our hope in this book is that readers will enjoy doctrine and continue to explore it.

The way we present the 13 chosen doctrines is not exhaustive. There are many ways into each of them; doctrines are living concepts. Each

doctrine guides us in the *why* of what we do. There are more ways of writing and presenting sermons than we can begin to imagine. Sermons are always written and delivered in the context of a specific time and place.

We can preach doctrine in a way that people will sit up, take notice, and say, “That’s my life!” With attentiveness and care, we can preach Christian hope and the sovereignty of God at the time of a suicide, and predestination to God’s realm by God’s grace at a time when people feel entitled to greatness by their own achievements. We can strip the veneer off comfort theology, and look sin and depravity straight in the eye. We can get beyond default preaching and find the energies bubbling up out of the ground of our being. Life decisions are made in the deep-down places. We can preach solid doctrine with which listeners can go down deep, with confidence that they’ll come back up.

A colleague at one of our presbytery meetings said to Catherine, “Oh yes, you’re the one studying doctrine. Don’t you get bored?” She responded, “Mostly not.” We tell you that story not because we are judging her colleague—we’re not—but because we wondered why he would find this work boring. Catherine asked him to say more, and he said it was about the vocabulary. “Doctrine, dogma, theology: they’re old,” he elaborated. “I’m interested in what we do, in how we show ourselves in the community.”

The church brings the gift of theological reflection to social action. Partly it sustains us. Partly it calls us. Partly it brings us solid company, the reflections and assertions of others who have walked the path of justice and recorded their experience.

To those who say that doctrine is at best irrelevant and at worst a negative for the church and for contemporary Christian life, we say, *Try it*. Try it not as something that holds you back, but as something that offers you an adventure.

Here We Are

I gave the bicycle back to the professor. I have my own library now, shelves of accumulated texts. I prepare meals, drive to evening presbytery meetings, and listen to grief in coffee shops near congregants' workplaces. I trust my continued study keeps my pastoral care fresh. Perhaps this story is your story, too.

John and I remembered the leisurely conversations about meaning in theology classes. We wondered what would happen if we drew upon the vigour of our seminary experience and found a tool to bring it to the pulpit. From the joy of faith seeking understanding, we developed a formula for faith speaking understanding.

We hope this book will be helpful. We hope it will be a pleasure. We hope it will reconnect you with the theology you love to study, through the preaching you are called to proclaim. We hope that we inspire your imagination to do your own thing. Love your people. Stand with grace. Bring the Word.

Everything you'd never expect to find in a book on doctrine; it is refreshing, dynamic, and thought provoking.

—The Rev. Adam Kilner, Dunlop United Church, Sarnia, ON

Only authors deeply intimate with the life of the church could have written this book. I will be a better preacher and pastor for having read it.

—The Rev. Dr. Beverly C.S. Brazier, Whitehorse United Church, YT

What is the meaning of grace, of sin, of the sacraments?

How are we to understand our dependence on God or relate to the person of Jesus?

What roles do the Bible and the church play in our life of faith?

Talking about theology needn't be boring or stuffy, the authors argue. Rather, it is exhilarating to explore the *why* of our faith. Each of 13 key doctrines is explored theologically, scripturally, in pastoral application, and in a sample sermon.

Catherine Faith MacLean and **John H. Young** are leading United Church scholars.

The Rev. Dr. MacLean serves St. Paul's United Church, Edmonton. The Rev. Dr. Young teaches at Queen's University School of Religion. They have each contributed to many denominational and ecumenical publications. They are particularly known for theology that matters and sermons that move the soul.



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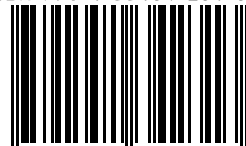
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