The Danger of Doctrine

DAVID MILLS

An extraordinary number and variety of people believe that insisting on right doctrine threatens the unity of the Church and hinders her in her mission to the world. In many circles nothing is more feared than being 'dogmatic', and nothing more praised than doctrinal versatility, usually called openness to new truths or inclusiveness.

These people usually suggest that believers need a more immediate and fluid relation to God, uninhibited by dogma. Doctrines are merely 'images that bind and blind us all,' the Bishop of Newark, U.S.A., has said in his helpfully straightforward way and an Episcopal Charismatic leader is fond of saying that 'theology divides, but experience unites.' Both treat allegiance to dogma as the unenlightened recourse of lesser men. The same attitude reveals itself in the now ritual appeals to 'our unity in diversity,' 'the comprehensiveness of Anglicanism,' and *koinonia*. It can be seen in its mildest form in the pained look that crosses a mainstream Anglican's face when someone is so ill-mannered as to suggest that something might be true and someone therefore wrong.

At first sight, this desire to meet God without the interference of doctrine is a very good thing. The Bible itself begins with the representative man and woman walking and talking with God in the Garden and ends with the redeemed crowded round His throne. Even John Henry Newman, one of the most dogmatic of theologians, believed that freedom from doctrines is 'the highest state of Christian communion'.

Further, if doctrine comes between us and God, it also comes between us and our fellow believers. Doctrinal differences have broken friendships, destroyed families, divided Churches, brought nations to war. In our own Episcopal Church, civil war is threatened on both sides of several issues by loyal Episcopalians who will never retreat, and if they are right never should retreat, on their points of doctrinal certainty.

Given the enormous danger of doctrine, why keep it? Is it not wiser to treat doctrine as a luxury the Church can no longer afford? However dangerous doctrine is, and however difficult it will be to bring the Episcopal Church to agreement, neither the unity of the Church nor its mission to the world is even possible without a common doctrine. If we are to be one body in any meaningful sense and our Christianity is to get anything done, we have to be dogmatic. To *stop* worrying about right doctrine is a luxury the Church cannot afford.

Sources of Unity

In the face of its deep division on fundamental questions, the American Episcopal Church is witnessing the desperate attempt to find *anything* other than doctrine to hold it together. Unfortunately, the attempt will fail.

Four sources of unity are usually proposed to replace doctrine: a common ethical standard, a common religious experience, a common process, and a common institution. None can by itself create unity. The life of the American Episcopal Church in the last two decades has made that clear.

Each alternative is necessary to the stability of the Church's life. Dialogue, for example, does sometimes reveal a deeper doctrinal unity obscured by superficial doctrinal contradictions. Judiciously applied, the alternatives protect the Church from shattering along doctrinal lines. But they cannot produce unity. If anything, by displacing the real source of unity they make division and schism all the more likely.

1. A common ethical standard

The first alternative usually proposed is a *common ethical standard.* It is thought that whatever doctrines people hold, they all recognize the same moral laws. If they disagree about the Resurrection, nevertheless they agree that murder, adultery and apartheid are wrong. (The contemporary form of this alternative is perhaps the political agenda Church leaders treat as self-evidently true. Several have recently suggested that environmentalism will bring the Church together.)

A common ethical standard will fail to produce unity because a common ethical standard requires a common doctrine. People act in certain ways because they believe certain things to be true. If they did not believe them they would act differently. In one of G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown mysteries, the Master of an Oxford college tells Father Brown that he prefers the old adage, 'For forms of faith let graceless zealots fight; he can't be wrong whose lie is in the right.' That cannot be true, Father Brown replies.

> How can his life be in the right, if his whole view of life is wrong? That's a modern muddle that arose because people didn't know how much views of life can differ. Baptists and Methodists knew they didn't differ very much in morality; but then they didn't differ very much in religion or philosophy. It's quite different when you pass from the Baptists to the Anabaptists; or from the Theosophists to the Thugs. Heresy always does affect morality, if it's heretical enough. I suppose a man may honestly believe that thieving isn't wrong. But what's the good of saying that he honestly believes in dishonesty?

In the Episcopal Church, different doctrines have led to irreconcilable ethical standards. Those who accept St. Paul's teaching believe that sex outside marriage is sinful; those who do not, do not. Those who believe everyone is created in the image of God oppose abortion on demand; those who believe in the ultimate importance of individual choice support it. Without a common doctrine, there is no common ethical standard, and no unity.

2. A common experience

The second candidate to replace doctrine is a *common religious experience*. Everyone, it is thought, has some contact with the divine, though they express it in forms determined by their culture. Doctrines are only inherited formulations, more or less helpful and more or less relevant, our ancestors developed to express these experiences. If we can get behind these cultural forms and the inherited doctrines, we will find that we are all worshipping the same God.

A common religious experience cannot produce unity because, on the testimony of religious people themselves, they do not experience the same divinity. As people go deeper into their religion, they usually become more convinced of its unique truth, not less. The cultural forms and inherited doctrines are different because a different God is found in the different religions. You shall know them by their fruits, and their fruits are radically different.

In the American Episcopal Church, the religious experiences have been so diverse, or at least their interpretations so diverse, as to be useless as a source of unity and to suggest that different Gods are being worshipped. Some people experience God only in Jesus; others experience Him or Her in the deities of pagan religions or in the depths of their own psyches or even in passionate and varied sexual episodes. Some experience God as the Father outside us; others as the Mother of whom we are a part. Without a common doctrine, there is no common religious experience, and no unity.

3. A common process

The third candidate, invoked in desperation when the first two fail, is a *common process*, particularly of dialogue, or 'reception'. Unity, it is thought, is not to be found in our answers but in our questions, in opening ourselves to another's insight and experience, in coming to know each other better. Dialogue by itself will heal our divisions.

As attractive as it is, this alternative also fails. A common process cannot produce unity because dialogue, if it is sincere, must come to a conclusion about basic belief. Either we agree on doctrine or we disagree. Dialogue cannot heal division if the source of division is a doctrinal difference that neither side can give up.

In the American Episcopal Church, the process of dialogue has only delayed the official recognition of fundamental differences, creating frustration and anger rather than unity. We may respect each other more, but respect is not unity. Duellists may respect each other greatly and then try to kill each other. When a dialogue has come to some conclusion in the Church's legislative bodies, it has shown how profoundly divided we are.

We can talk, but we cannot agree. Some people believe that hearing the experiences of homosexual people cannot change the revealed judgment of homosexual acts; others believe that the experiences are more revealing, so to speak, than Scripture. Some people believe that God has revealed Himself in masculine terms; others believe that such terms are only histor-

ical products that can be changed as desired to serve new experiences and needs. Without a common doctrine, dialogue can only lead to disagreement and division, but not unity.

4. A common institution

The fourth alternative to doctrine, invoked when even the third has failed, is loyalty to a *common institution*. Unity of doctrine, ethical standard, or religious experience is held to be impossible, but it is thought that irreconcilable doctrines may be held together by a shared allegiance to the American Episcopal Church. Anglicanism is said to be 'comprehensive' or 'inclusive' (which as a matter of historical fact is simply untrue) and its mission to prove that people of profoundly divergent beliefs can live together in harmony.

A common institution cannot produce unity because it simply defines unity as the smallest boundary that can include everyone. Unity is more than the agreement to go about under the same name.

No institution with a mission can afford this radical diversity or such a depleted definition of its own unity. A club could perhaps have Jesse Jackson and Ronald Reagan as members, but a political party cannot. A club could perhaps include those who believe that Scripture is authoritative and those who believe that it must be revised to satisfy new demands, but a Church cannot.

In the American Episcopal Church, the appeal to membership in the same Church has at best maintained a legal unity in which the diversity of people grow farther from each other while maintaining a nominal membership in a common body. Without a common doctrine, a common institution can only be a marriage of convenience. It will be a Church in name only.

Thus the usual alternatives to doctrine as a source of unity are thus even less able to bring the Church together than doctrine. Without a common doctrine, a common ethics simply does not exist; a common experience produces examples of behaviours too diverse to call unity; a common process of dialogue leads to disagreement and division, if it leads anywhere; and a common institution is not unified in any meaningful sense. We now know from painful experience that none of these can bring us together.

If the American Episcopal Church is to be united, it must first return to a common doctrine. Then all these things—an agreed ethical standard, a shared religious experience, and meaningful dialogue—will be added unto it. To return to a common doctrine will not be easy or pleasant, but it is the only way to true unity.

The Church's ministry

If common doctrine is required for the unity of the Church, it is also necessary for the Church to minister to the world. The Church cannot act effectively without knowing what it believes. It cannot speak a word of judgment or a word of healing unless it can speak dogmatically; unless it

can say with confidence, 'Thus saith the Lord'. Otherwise its words are just opinions, of no more value or interest than anyone else's.

One parish I know recently had two interim rectors. The first was a sentimental liberal for whom doctrines were divisive and the second a process theologian for whom doctrines tied Christians to the past and prevented them from being open to the future.

The first did not care what you believed, as long as you were not so ungracious as to think your beliefs true for others. He was a great advocate of dialogue. At statements of definite belief (such as appear throughout the New Testament), he would look pained and would suggest in a soft voice that we should *listen* to each other before coming to any decision, recognizing our diversity and being willing to give up our own personal agenda (in which he included orthodox doctrine) to maintain community. Openness was the thing.

His elegant correction was usually enough to end debate, but it did not answer the questions that needed to be answered. He could not avoid decisions which had to be made on the basis of doctrine. When the diocesan convention was to vote on the ordination of practising homosexuals, his only response was 'That's going too far'.

Not having a doctrine of human nature, he could only respond with a prejudice to a proposal that would either encourage immorality or liberate an oppressed people. He could not answer the crucial question of whether a given moral law excludes homosexual behaviour or an inclusive God affirms behaviour that is loving and monogamous. To suffering people, he had nothing of value to say, either of correction or encouragement.

The second interim rector believed that doctrine kept us from being open to the future. 'All is as it should be,' he began one particularly notable sermon. God willed the Fall, he want on, 'in order that man should live in a world of risk.' It was only in a world of risk that man would grow to maturity.

I think he thought the idea profound. It was in fact a lie, one which only a comfortable and somewhat insensitive member of the educated upper-middle-class could believe. It denied the reality of evil and thus the possibility of redemption from suffering and death.

Apply his idea to a mother whose child lies dying of leukaemia. Tell her that all is as it should be. Tell her that God willed a world in which her child would die in agony, that she should be grateful that she is thus growing into maturity, that she should rejoice that she lives in a world of risk.

This is not the religion of the Resurrection. If it is anything co-herent, it is a modern and sophisticated religion of human sacrifice, though it sacrifices its victims to an ideology, not to the gods. His doctrine of openness is unable to speak a healing or hopeful word, and treats evil as good.

Without doctrine, in other words, the Church flounders when it tries to explain pain and suffering. And without doctrine, the Church cannot challenge secular moralities even when it is unified in condemning them. The world has its own doctrines, which only another doctrine can challenge.

Speaking to *The New York Times* a few weeks ago, Christie Hefner defended the way that her father, *Playboy* publisher Hugh Hefner, treated women. (Hefner had left her and her mother when she was three and rarely saw her afterwards.) 'In a world in which infidelity, coercive sex in and out of marriage and dishonesty between the sexes are problems that men and women are concerned about,' she said, 'this is a man who has been open in his relations and lived a *highly* moral life' (emphasis hers).

Her's is a doctrine that any human relation is justified if it is open and honest. If young women want to sell pictures of their bodies and Mr. Hefner wants to buy them, their arrangement is 'highly moral'. Miss Hefner's is a clear, coherent, and consistent doctrine of human nature, and only an equally clear, coherent, and consistent doctrine can stand against it.

A Church without doctrine, however much it instinctively understands the evil of pornography, cannot condemn the pornographer's 'morality' of openness and honesty. It cannot propose alternative ideals or show why the pornographers' ideals are not ideals at all. It has no settled view of men and women, so that it cannot say with conviction that women are exploited and society debased thereby.

A world without doctrine, in other words, is a world which easily justifies exploitation. It is significant that the religion closest to the contemporary rejection of dogma—the religion that believes, in Bishop Spong's words, in 'a divine power that unites us as holy people'—is Hinduism.

It was the British empire, acting on Christian beliefs about the worth of each individual, that stopped Hindus in India from burning widows to death upon their husbands' funeral pyres. In a doctrinally agnostic Christianity-guided society, being burned on your husband's funeral pyre might well be the price you pay for growing to maturity in a world of 'risk' where, as you roast to death, you may take comfort in the fact that 'all is as it should be.'

The necessity of doctrine

The American Episcopal Church cannot live without doctrine, no matter how hard it tries. No Church can maintain unity or speak a word to the world without agreeing on the most basic questions. Until we can agree, our ranks will grow ever more divided and our voice in society ever weaker.

DAVID MILLS is Director of Communications, Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry, Ambridge, Pennslyvania and Editor of its journal, 'Mission and Ministry', in which this paper first appeared. He is also Editor of 'The Evangelical Catholic,' the journal of the Episcopal Synod of America.