Theological doctrines, plain speech and the public square

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What basic Christian tenet, doctrine or word have you struggled to "translate" into plain speech? That question is part of an essay prompt I'm considering for a July writing workshop with Kathleen Norris at the Collegeville Institute at St. John's Abbey and University in Minnesota. Can you help me think out loud on this one? I'd love to read your thoughts.

I recently hosted a Theology Pub on the topic "What Idols Do We Worship?" Those 20/30-somethings gathered enjoyed a raucous discussion of idolatry. I was struck by how easily the conversation progressed. Young adults didn't need (or want) a definition of idolatry. They didn't really care about its place in the ten commandments. They jumped into the discussion with both feet, I think, because they all knew idolatry. Some quite intimately. To speak about the classic Christian definition of idolatry with this group would require some fleshing-out, but the skeleton was already present.

We haven't talked about sin directly at a Theology Pub in a while, but previous conversations have gone fairly similarly. Though those skeptical of God's existence certainly questioned how sin relates to the divine, the basic idea that we humans are broken and prone to err is not difficult to communicate, superficially at least.

Other areas of doctrine strike me as much more difficult to communicate or, to use language approaching a doctrine itself — they do not come as natural theology. Grace unearned and undeserved, for many at least, fits this bill.

Similarly, a rich Trinitarian theology is a head-scratcher for many pastors, let alone parishioners or non-churchy folks. Jesus' full divinity and full humanity is another tricky one. And, I've always thought justification and sanctification require some significant foundation work before they can be grasped. How the Bible functions — I suppose that'd be connected to the doctrine of revelation — confounds many as well (particularly religion reporters, it seems). And I won't even mention atonement theories (whoops).

So, my initial reflections on Kathleen Norris' prompt have me wondering what task is more needed, and what task is more difficult: should Christian leaders clarify particular aspects of Christian doctrines that already have some cultural cache (such as idolatry, sin, etc.) or should we emphasize discussion, instead, on doctrines that are less understood or even completely unconsidered (e.g. nobody *really* talks about John Calvin's actual understanding of double predestination these days)? Yes, this is obviously a false choice, but it's a consequential one.

What do you think? What Christian doctrines most immediately need to be translated for public consumption? What doctrine needs to be freed from theological language to enjoy communication in plain speech and, maybe, more clear understanding?

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