

Good use of doctrine

by [George Lindbeck](#) in the [June 3, 1998](#) issue

*By Ellen T. Charry, By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine. (Oxford University Press, 264 pp.)*

This ground-breaking volume belongs to the growing genre of works devoted to the “postcritical” retrieval of the Christian heritage. But it is the first to deal at length with the pastoral function of doctrine. Ellen Charry believes that classical doctrinal themes can and should be at the center of communal and personal formation for contemporary Christians, just as they were in the writings she examines. She hopes that her work will encourage the reform of ministerial studies and thereby contribute to revitalization—especially, one suspects, of the Protestant mainline. Charry, a second-career professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, has strong convictions about what contemporary Christianity needs.

Her book is important quite apart from whether it will have such practical consequences. The history of doctrine has become a moribund discipline. Like other branches of intellectual history, it is a child of the Enlightenment preoccupation with ideas and suffers from centuries of apologetic emphasis on “the justification of the faith (i.e., beliefs) apart from the practice of the Christian life.”

Historians wrongly assumed that premodern theologians (like modern ones) were chiefly interested in doctrinal truth claims as cognitively founded on such factors as reason, revelation, experience, scripture and tradition, rather than as practically formative of minds, hearts and actions. They paid little attention to what for Charry are the inseparable “aretegenic” and “salutary” roles of doctrine—that is, the way it promotes virtue or moral excellence, on the one hand, and human flourishing and happiness in the context of life with God, on the other. Standard accounts of Augustine’s *de Trinitate*, for example, concentrate overwhelmingly on its justificatory rather than its aretegenic and salutary functions, even though the latter are clearly central in the text.

One-sidedness produces distortions; doctrines cease to be intelligible and justifiable when they are abstracted from their pastoral use. An understanding of doctrines as

forms of wisdom has been replaced by a narrowly cognitive approach. In short, the history of doctrine has ignored much of its proper subject matter and misunderstood the rest. Given its deficiencies when judged even by its own modern standards of completeness and objectivity, it is not surprising that it attracts few recruits. Unless it is reconceived, it will perish.

The usual reaction to this problem is to abandon the field. Instead of studying the authoritative beliefs of religious communities, attention turns to their ethics divorced from doctrine, or to their economic, social or cultural dynamics. When joined to a hermeneutics of suspicion, this leads to the “postmodern” (a word Charry mercifully avoids) enterprise of diagnosing creedal teachings as disguises for oppressive power structures. This most recent development entails not simply the marginalization but the death of the history of doctrine.

Charry claims that the time for resuscitating the history of doctrine is now ripe. Her optimism is nourished, she explains, by recent developments in hermeneutics, philosophy, literary criticism and theology, as exemplified by figures as diverse as Hans-Georg Gadamer, William Christian, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum, Wayne Booth, Stanley Hauerwas and Janet Soskice. She also appeals to the analogy much emphasized in the patristic period between aretogenic theology and clinical medicine.

Charry concludes that it is no longer possible to defend the Enlightenment focus on ideas and justifiability at the expense of attention to the literary and rhetorical devices by which doctrinal discourse chiefly exercises its pastoral function. She argues persuasively that doctrines are neither abstractable nor reducible to the rhetorical concern for formation; sapience requires privileging their pastoral function, though without denying their cognitive aspect.

The bulk of the book consists of eight historical chapters which illustrate how to read doctrinal texts for their pastoral function. Charry chooses premodern examples in order “to allow the classical theological tradition to speak.” Two are from New Testament authors (Paul and Matthew), three from patristic and three from medieval ones (Athanasius, Basil and Augustine; Anselm, Aquinas and Dame Julian) and one from a Protestant Reformer (John Calvin).

Charry’s readings, though responsible, will often seem amateurish to those who have specialized in these figures. In view of her larger purpose, however, this is not

a weakness. Those sympathetic to that purpose may often want to improve on her analysis of materials with which they are familiar, but that is because she has led them to think new thoughts.

Charry would welcome their help. Her desire is “to plow frozen ground—to examine precisely the most distrusted Christian theologians, those who have held sway in Christian theology and are now widely regarded as useless or harmful. I hope,” she writes, “to prepare and prompt others to mine Christian theology for the diamonds I suspect lie buried there. These readings are not meant to be either definitive or exclusive. They are an invitation to consider how theology intends to shape readers for the good life.”

Those who accept this invitation will find plenty to do. Charry has had the daring and imagination to propose a long-range research program which has the possibility of radically redirecting now sterile but still deeply entrenched habits of thinking about doctrine. Hers is a first step. Many additional and more definitive ones will have to be taken by herself and others if the reorientation is to be complete.

It is unlikely that this will happen quickly; but perhaps breaking what Charry rightly calls “frozen ground” may release an avalanche. If so, many will rejoice. In any case, Charry’s book will prompt much-needed further mining of the doctrinal tradition for its pastoral riches.