Spring 2023

The Affectivity of Doctrine: Making Sense of the Many Disagreements Between Christians

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ASSURE Final Report

May 31, 2023

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Abstract

Christians frequently disagree on what they all ought to believe—how they should vote, whether evolution happened, etc. This affects Christians' relations with each other in no small way, leading to conflict, sometimes trauma, and often isolation and resentment. To mend these scars of disagreement, people try to find unity amidst diversity and division by asking, if Christians disagree so harshly on what all Christians should believe, what makes them all Christian? That is, how can Christians be unified despite their many disagreements? I explore this question by examining various theories of doctrine—explanations of what it means to believe, evaluating how these theories make sense of Christianity's internal diversity by paying special attention to how belief feels and what belief does in Christians' lives. One popular theory, the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction, distinguishes between essential beliefs, which all Christians have in common, and nonessential beliefs, which Christians can disagree on. But instead of uniting Christians on the essentials, the distinction divides Christians on what the essentials are. This paper explores alternative theories of doctrine designed to help Christians navigate their disagreements, finally arriving at what I call transformation theory. According to transformation theory, a Christian is one who continually comes to terms with what they believe, always stumbling, always learning, always transforming. By focusing on their journeys of spiritual transformation and how their doctrinal beliefs facilitate that process, Christians can locate their doctrinal unity not around shared belief, nor shared practice, but around shared transformation.[1]

[1] This is adapted from an abstract that I submitted to the University of New Mexico (UNM) for their Undergraduate Research Opportunity Conference (UROC). San Nicolas, "Abstract."

Preface

I had finally switched majors to pursue my passion of studying religion and philosophy. One of my first courses turned out to be a perfect mix: an introduction to the philosophy of religion. We read many texts written by Christian philosophers, and with each reading I encountered a different sort of Christianity that I never could have imagined.

Imagine that you are raised in a religion that matters the whole world over to you. And imagine that, as you grow up, you are taught that you are learning the only true version of that religion and that you must take great care in getting your religious beliefs right. Imagine that when you start studying that religion, you find many more expressions of it than you ever thought there could be. That is what I found when I first peered into the vast, vast chasm of Christian diversity.

In the course, I found philosophers who believe that God knows everything before it happens, and others who think that God chooses not to know what will happen in the future. On one camp were thinkers who believe that God does not feel emotion, while the other camp says that God feels our pain and suffers with us. There were philosophers who talk of God as a Father, and other philosophers who talk about God as gender neutral. Some philosophers believe that hell is a place of eternal conscious torment, while others think that hell is only temporary, and still others that there is no hell at all. Each philosopher had something strikingly different to say, and each one thought themselves a Christian.

At this time, I began to encounter many other, far more consequential controversies within Christianity. I was confronted with the powerful critiques of the pro-life movement made by pro-choice Christians. I was abashed when I saw Christian nationalists storm the Capitol. I was captivated listening to gay Christians wrestle through what the call of Christ means for them

in matters of love and chastity. These things held much more sway than the old controversies I had grown up around, such as whether infants can be baptized, whether Christians can cuss, or whether Christians can celebrate Christmas. These old debates were bickerings compared to the urgently important questions that Christians around me were coming to terms with. But there was an underlying theme: across these debates, each side believed they were Christian and that they were arguing for the truly Christian position.

Lingering behind all this was the question: with so many different sorts of Christians who disagree on so many sorts of sometimes profoundly important things, what is it that makes them all Christian? For me, this was an especially important question when it came to what Christians ought to believe. See, I was raised to be very careful with my beliefs, to make sure that they were not 'false' or 'heretical'. Being exposed to so many conflicting beliefs held by people who all claimed to be Christian, I had to ask myself, as Pontius Pilate asked Christ, "What is truth?" This was not an outward question directed to the people I was listening to. This question was a most inward one, directed at my very self.

That same semester, I took a life changing course in New Testament studies. We approached the Bible as a collection of historical documents, learning about what it is and how it came to be. I had a lot of unlearning to do. Pastors from the pulpit had always said that the Bible contained no contradictions, that it was inerrant. Yet, I was finding many apparent contradictions in the four gospels alone. (Who was Jesus's grandfather? Was it Jacob, or Heli? Was Jesus silent and misunderstood as He was in Mark, or did He give long monologues and perform spectacular miracles in public as He did in John?) In church I was taught that the Bible was historically accurate, but the claim did not seem to hold up. (The Gospel of Luke says that Jesus was born during the reigns of Herod the Great and Quirinius, governor of Syria—except that Quirinius

only became governor a decade after Herod died.) The straw that broke the camel's back was when we studied Revelation at the end of the course. I had been dogmatically raised to read Revelation as a book foretelling the political future of the world (and for some reason, Revelation had much to say about the future of America in particular!). Yet, the way we read it in the course was far different. Rather than telling the future, Revelation was like a time capsule, addressing the harsh reality that early Christians were facing when it was written.

All this left me with a faith that was nothing like the faith I had started out with. I began to wonder if I had gone off the wrong track. Do I still believe the right things? Have I somewhere gone wrong? This is what set me on my quest to make sense of the sheer diversity in Christianity. Am I believing as a Christian should? How much diversity of belief is too much diversity? What beliefs do all Christians share? What is so important about belief, anyways? How can Christians who disagree navigate their disagreements better, rather than shutting down or calling each other 'false Christians'?

As I talked with other Christians at various churches, I found that they shared my concerns. We needed a way to understand our diversity when it came to beliefs and doctrine. There was one way in particular that seemed rather popular. It was a certain distinction between essential doctrines, which all 'true' Christians believe, and nonessential doctrines, which can be disputed. But there did not seem to be any sufficient answers as to which doctrines are essential, and how to tell essentials from nonessentials. Unsatisfied with this distinction, I decided to look into the matter myself. With the help of El Puente Research Fellowship, the ASSURE program, and my mentors, friends, and colleagues, I set out on a journey that was every bit academic as it was personal to find out what it means to believe in something, and how to share a beautiful, spiritually transformative journey with people who believe sometimes very differently than I do.

It is with great pleasure that I present this research paper. It is my hope that the contents herein are communicable, applicable, and edifying to those who read it. Navigating theological diversity and disagreement can be a great difficulty, but it is something that can be approached with love, humility, and mutual understanding.

In the current context from which I write, the Church approaches a new moment of anticipation and danger. It is now chiefly along political lines that Christians disagree and divide. If Christians are to handle the coming moments with care, grace, and charity, we must recognize that our social and political worldview is inextricably tied to how we think about God, human nature, sin, and the world. The political is theological. If it is not theological in itself, it is sufficiently implied by theology that we should talk about it theologically. As Christians talk about their disagreements, it is fruitless to *only* relegate the conversation to the same, perennial issues that Christians have faced throughout the years: predestination, infant baptism, and so on. These issues are fruitful in themselves, but there is more harvest to be reaped in discussing the many other ramifications of the Gospel and of faith. In the current polarized moment, I daresay that the fate of the American Church depends on Christians' capacities at navigating their many, many disagreements.[2]

[2] This preface is adapted from a Research Story originally submitted to UNM's 2023 UROC conference. The Research Story is currently forthcoming as a blog post on UNM's Undergraduate Research, Arts & Design (URAD) Network. San Nicolas, "Christianity, Disagreement, and My Journey Towards Research."

Introduction

> Grandma Hahn was the only Catholic on either side of the family. She was a quiet, humble, and holy soul. Since I was the only 'religious one' in the family, my father gave me her religious articles when she died. I looked at them with disgust and horror. I held her Rosary in my hands and ripped it apart, saying, 'God set her free from the chains of Catholicism that have bound her.' I also tore apart her prayer books and threw them away, hoping this superstitious nonsense had not trapped her soul.
> —Scott Hahn, *Rome Sweet Rome*.[3]

> We can easily now conceive of a time when there will be only one culture and one civilization on the entire surface of the earth. I don't believe this will happen because there are contradictory tendencies always at work – on the one hand towards homogenization and on the other towards new distinctions. The more a civilization becomes homogenized, the more internal lines of separation become apparent; and what is gained on one level is immediately lost on another. . . . I have no clear proof of the operation of this dialectic. But I don't see how mankind can really live without some internal diversity.
> —Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning.*[4]

Christians and their Many Disagreements

Christians disagree on a great many things. Their disagreements range from which denomination is best, to which political party is best; whether infants can be baptized, to whether Christians should be pacifists; whether Christmas is a pagan holiday, to whether women can speak up during church service. These controversies span triviality to gravitas. Christians find themselves navigating conversations that would not even be tolerated in other spaces—rarely tolerated in Christian spaces, at that—such as whether systemic racism exists, whether evolution is real, or whether sexual consent is necessary for a married couple.[5] And, as C.S. Lewis pointed out, not only do Christians disagree, but they also disagree upon "the importance of their disagreements."[6]

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[3] Hahn, *Rome Sweet Rome*, 6.
[4] Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*, 21.
[5] I have too often seen the citation of 1 Corinthians 7:4—wherein St. Paul writes that a married person no longer has authority over their own body, but that this authority now belongs to their spouse—to justify sexual abuse within marriages, in some cases rendering the very notion of sexual consent within a marriage null and unnecessary.
[6] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, x.

There are a few reasons why it is important for Christians to navigate their disagreements—and I say 'navigate' rather than 'resolve' because some disagreements seem too ancient or too contentious to be resolvable. First, it is a matter of pure interest for some Christians, how Christianity can be such a diverse tradition, and where to draw the line between acceptable, heretical, and harmful positions. Second, resolving disagreements, even identifying them in the first place, is a way for Christians of different sorts to learn about one another. Third, many controversies that Christians have bear heavy consequence for Christians and the communities they live in. Navigating such disagreements impacts lives and livelihoods.

I should also establish the scope of disagreements which I am writing of. I do not only concern myself with a few important, theological disagreements perennial to Christian history. No, I am writing about Christians and their *many* disagreements. The disagreements which I wish for Christians to navigate better can all properly be labeled as 'theological', but this label ought to go much further than it usually does. In evangelical discourse, as an evangelical Christian, I have found that there is often a 'wall of separation' between theological disagreements, on the one hand, and non-theological disagreements, on the other. This wall of separation often functions to downplay social and political issues as unimportant, or as improper subjects of Christian discourse.

The Baptist theologian Gavin Ortlund, in a book on navigating theological disagreements, makes an interesting demarcation between disagreements he deems as theological and disagreements that are not. Ortlund writes to "the dire needs"[7] of "our fractured times."[8] He rightly points out that "some of the most divisive issues among Christians concern . . . cultural,

[7] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 18.
[8] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 17.

wisdom, and political issues."[9] Indeed, whereas previous generations might have debated across denominational lines, today Christians draw lines across cultural, generational, and political lines. Colleen Batschelder in her dissertation on the generational differences between younger and older Christians writes that within evangelical Christianity alone, "statistically, there is still a wide gap between generational values and perspectives [that] span the constructs of politics, theology, sociology, culture, and Christian praxis."[10] Especially in the current polarized environment in the US, these are indeed "fractured times" with "dire needs." But Ortlund, in a book about navigating theological controversy, delimits the theological in such a way that excludes the cultural and political as "not theological matters per se,"[11] deciding to focus instead on "specifically theological matters."[12]

Ortlund's exclusion of the cultural and political from the theological seems typical of evangelical discourse. Jerry Falwell, in his 1965 sermonic critique against the civil rights movement, declared:

> As far as the relationship of the church to the world, it can be expressed as simply as . . . "preach the Word." We have a message of redeeming grace through a crucified and risen Lord. This message is designed to go right to the heart of man and there meet his deep spiritual need. Nowhere are we commissioned to reform the externals. We are not told to wage wars against bootleggers, liquor stores, gamblers, murderers, prostitutes, racketeers, prejudiced persons or institutions, or any other existing evil as such. *Our ministry is not reformation but transformation*. The gospel does not clean up the outside but rather regenerates the inside.[13]

[9] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 22.
[10] Batschelder, "Exvangelical," 10.
[11] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 22.
[12] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 23.
[13] Falwell, "Ministers and Marches," 3, emphasis added.

The Gospel, for Falwell, is not concerned with social or political issues.[14] As Falwell goes on to say, "Love cannot be legislated."[15] The preacher is even said to have declared that "preachers are not called to be politicians but to be soul winners."[16] Shockingly, Ortlund labels marriage and abortion as "social issues" as opposed to "doctrinal matters like women in ministry, spiritual gifts, the millennium, and so forth."[17] It seems that the usual evangelical understanding of the theological is severely bracketed if it excludes theological issues like marriage (which images Christ and the Church, cf. Eph. 5:22-33) and abortion (which involves deeply theological questions about human dignity and liberty).

If Christians are to address the "dire needs" of their "fractured times," they must address their *many* disagreements. Even political, social, and cultural disagreements are theological—if they are not theological in themselves, they are at least sufficiently related to theology and so should be properly called theological. I offer a brief overview of such issues from academic and nonacademic publications alike. These controversies vary in how disputed they are, and some may seem more important than others, but these are all *theological* issues which Christians must navigate in these "fractured times."

A good starting point which Christians are for the most part unified around is the issue of pornography, which theologian Ray Ortlund calls "a justice issue"[18]—indeed pornography is

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[14] That is not to say that Falwell viewed the Gospel as apolitical, even though he removed it from direct political involvement. "If as much effort could be put into winning people to Jesus Christ across the land as is being exerted in the present civil rights movement," hatred, prejudice, and racism would be no more. Falwell, "Ministers and Marches," 8. Regarding discrimination, he said, "we all recognize that there is a degree of discrimination in every place and in every land. As Christians, we detest discrimination. But we do need to see that we can never stop it through any other means than that weapon which was given the church 2,000 years ago—the preaching of the gospel of Christ." Falwell, "Ministers and Marches," 16.

[15] Falwell, "Ministers and Marches," 16.

[16] This saying has been attributed to Falwell in his "Ministers and Marches" sermon, though I have not been able to find the quote in the transcript. "Jerry Falwell," PBS; Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 336; Batchelder, "Exvangelical," 54.

[17] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 68.

[18] Ortlund, *The Death of Porn*, 18.

only one part of the issue at which Christians are getting at, manifesting itself to many through shame, objectification, manipulation, and the exploitation of bodies for pleasure. Resisting pornography, the vices it can lead to, and the system that produces it for Ortlund means advocating "for a new world of nobility. And it's more powerful than politics." Though Ortlund does not call for policy change, he calls for political change in the sense that "small personal changes will grow . . . into big social changes."[19] To work against pornography and the social ills associated with it is to make a difference in the world. The way forward is only possible because of God (which, as we will see, is a recurring theme throughout these issues). As Thabiti Anyabwile writes in his foreword to the book, the death of porn is only possible "because God in Christ is renewing [Christians] in his image."[20] Pornography might not be theology, but it is sufficiently implied by theology.

Material possessions is also a site of controversy for Christians.[21] Craig L. Blomberg in his biblical theology of what the Bible says about money and material possessions writes in hope that Christians

> may realize the substantial disparity between the biblical mandates and contemporary Christian practice. . . . In fact, whether or not one adopts the agendas of the so-called 'left' or 'right', the increasingly acute needs of the poor worldwide . . . may well demand nothing less than a significant change of spending priorities on the part of many affluent Westerners.[22]

Material possessions is a theological issue, and while Christians agree *that* they should serve the poor, there is substantial disagreement as to *how*. Blomberg argues that as public spending decreases, "churches and Christians will be asked to bear an enormously larger burden of helping the needy in their own communities, one few seem currently prepared to accept."[23] Others like

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[19] Ortlund, *The Death of Porn,* 116. Here, I must note that I often use 'political' in the sense of public, social, or communal life, and not only to refer to politics.
[20] Anyabwile, foreword to *The Death of Porn*, 13.
[21] See Blomberg's survey of the literature on material possessions. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 21-29.
[22] Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 32, emphasis in original redacted.
[23] Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 253.

the philosopher of religion John D. Caputo take a different stance, depicting a position like Blomberg's as "letting the poor fend for themselves with whatever private charity happens to 'arrive' their way."[24] Indeed, the focus on charity might seem, to more structurally minded Christians, like a symptom of how "evangelical Christianity has . . . been corrupted by unfettered capitalism."[25] Whichever way Christians go about economic matters, they must strive to "get Christian faith and a concern for the common good inside the same head."[26]

Another issue facing Christians today, often addressed harmfully and irresponsibly, is mental health. Ryan Casey Waller, pastor and therapist, alludes to the cultural underpinnings in many churches which lead Christians who struggle with mental illness to feel "too ashamed to speak up about it," that doing so would mean "letting down God" or "admitting that [one's] faith in [God] isn't strong enough."[27] Suffering from mental illness can lead to a painful way of doing theology. "When comparing the life of one who suffers from depression with one who doesn't, it's plain to see the one without the disorder has certain advantages. Why would God allow this painful illness? Why does he allow suffering at all?"[28] Waller's own painful theology has led him to conclude that to be Christian "is not to eradicate all suffering or even overcome suffering but to endure it faithfully and ease it in people and places when we are able to . . . as Jesus did."[29] Mental health is theological because the imitation of Christ, doing "as Jesus did," is the model for Waller. And for the Church at large, it is a theological issue that must be navigated.[30]

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[24] Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct*, 95.
[25] Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct*, 96-97.
[26] Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct*, 98.
[27] Waller, *Depression, Anxiety, and Other Things We Don't Want to Talk About,* xiv.
[28] Waller, *Depression, Anxiety, and Other Things We Don't Want to Talk About,* 47
[29] Waller, *Depression, Anxiety, and Other Things We Don't Want to Talk About,* 54.
[30] I distinguish between two types of C/churches. Church with a capital 'C' is taken to mean the full community of Christians that is not limitable to a local congregation or denomination. It is also the global community of Christians which not only spans space, but time. Church with a lower case 'c' refers to local bodies of Christians, such as physical houses of worship.

Christians tend to support each other in certain hardships, such as financial difficulties or short-term injuries. But when a Christian opens up about their difficulties with mental illness, "the church gets quiet."[31] Waller observes that "Christians have been some of the worst offenders when it comes to attaching stigma to mental illness, often attributing it to a spiritual failing, unconfessed sin, flimsy faith, or plain old lack of religious devotion."[32] Poor understandings of mental health and the guilt and shame that results are theological, too. "But we can do better," Waller writes, "We must do better because folks are dying."[33]

The debates over sexual orientation, whether homosexuality is a sin, whether gay and queer people can become Christian and how they should be treated (objectifying rhetoric, that), are especially important and urgent for the Church today. How Christians navigate questions of sexuality directly impacts how welcoming churches are to people, the traumas gay and queer people face in Christian homes and communities, and which political agendas Christians vote for. Shortly after coming out to his pastor, Gregory Coles, author of *Single, Gay, Christian* recounts a story of a woman who went up to speak during a prayer meeting.

> She told us how she was on a mission to spread the truth about the disgusting gay agenda. She told us how the homosexuals were forcing schools to teach that their behavior was normal, even though the Bible called it an abomination. She told us to pray for the upcoming Supreme Court vote on so-called gay marriage, *that the gays would be defeated*.[34]

For Coles and other Christians, evangelicalism "is a strange place to be a sexual minority." There is "the person who reviles you, the person whose heart breaks for you, the person ready to cast demons out of you, the person ready to scout out a boyfriend for you. . . . There are people scattered across the political spectrum, across the theological spectrum."[35] Theology as well as

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[31] Waller, *Depression, Anxiety, and Other Things We Don't Want to Talk About,* 63.
[32] Waller, *Depression, Anxiety, and Other Things We Don't Want to Talk About,* 62.
[33] Waller, *Depression, Anxiety, and Other Things We Don't Want to Talk About,* 65.
[34] Coles, *Single, Gay, Christian*, 58, emphasis added.
[35] Coles, *Single, Gay, Christian*, 61.

politics informs how gay Christians are perceived, how they belong, how they are evaluated or judged by others in the Church. Not only is there discourse *about* gay Christians, for that language seems to exclude before the conversation even begins, but there is also gay and queer Christian discourse about what faithful Christianity looks like—celibacy, marriage, or somewhere in-between or beyond?[36]

Sexual abuse is a prevalent and horrific issue within the Church, both by clergy (ministers, priests, pastors) as well as lay members. Catholicism may come to mind as having caused and covered up abuse the most, but this sin is not exclusive to Catholicism. In May 2022, a report was released on how leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention "stonewalled and denigrated survivors of clergy sex abuse over two decades while seeking to protect their own reputations."[37] In February 2023, a scandal broke out over how John MacArthur's Grace Community Church shunned and shamed Eileen Gray, a woman who refused to "take back her child-abusing husband." Gray was one of many women in abusive relationships who Grace Community Church failed, as "church leaders reportedly quoted the women Scriptures on forgiveness and submission and told them to return to situations they feared were unsafe for them and their children."[38] A handbook written for churches on caring well for survivors of abuse points out that Christians often think of "abuse as just a social issue," but if it were only a social issue, "then the church is not the refuge for the oppressed that God intended His people to

[36] There is a diversity of views on what faithful Christianity looks like for gay Christians. Caputo represents a viewpoint much more lenient with Christian tradition than conservative Christians might be. "Based on the gospel of love by which [Jesus] was driven, he would today have found love in homosexual love and a mission among the advocates of gay and lesbian rights." Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* 109. Caputo "[treats] scriptural literalism like papal infallibility, as idolatry." Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* 110.

[37] Thank you to Dr. Kathleen Holscher for sending me this news article from AP. Bharath, "Report: Top Southern Baptists stonewalled sex abuse victims." The full report is titled "The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee's Response to Sexual Abuse Allegations and an Audit of the Procedures and Actions of the Credentials Committee," accessible at https://www.sataskforce.net/updates/guidepost-solutions-report-of-the-independent-investigation.

[38] Roys, "Former Elder at John MacArthur's Church Confronts 'Awful Patterns' of Endangering Abuse Victims."

be."[39] Abuse is a theological issue. As one contributor puts it, Christ's crucifixion "made abuse a gospel issue. It was part of the oppression that He bore at His cross and overcame at the resurrection."[40] For the sake of the Gospel and for the safety of its members, the Church must address abuse and not downplay its importance—or existence.

Gun violence, increasingly prominent and normalized in America, is an issue that Christians need to address despite the sharply polarized positions taken on either side. Presbyterian pastor emeritus James E. Atwood holds that the way one navigates gun policy, gun violence, and how one serves those affected by it follows from "agape love," the love that God shows for humanity.[41] Atwood sees the way forward against gun violence as grounded in faith. "To believe in God is to . . . be certain that what ought to be done can and will be done. Knowing that truth in the depths of my heart makes me joyful, even though gun violence can be so overwhelming."[42] Gun violence, a political, social, and cultural issue, is also a theological one. "The movement to end gun violence is gaining steam, and the church must be at the heart of it."[43]

Ongoing but obscured from the American public, war is another issue which Christians disagree upon. Robert G. Clouse in *War: Four Christian Views*, writes that due to humanity's capacity to annihilate ourselves, Christians "must seek to understand [Jesus's] will in . . . matters of war and peace."[44] There are several views on war, and holding to any single one leads to real ramifications for life in one's society, especially if one is considering joining the armed forces of one's nation, or is facing conscription. Christians, Clouse writes,

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[39] Hambrick, *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused*, 4.
[40] Hambrick, *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused*, 7-8.
[41] Atwood, *Collateral Damage*, 161.
[42] Atwood, *Collateral Damage*, 181, emphasis in original redacted.
[43] Atwood, *Collateral Damage*, 188.
[44] Clouse, *War: Four Christian Views*, 26.

> ought to warn their fellow Americans against the waste and corruption of the military-industrial complex. . . . Those who follow Jesus Christ [will be led to] oppose certain aspects of the modern patriotic outlook, but also to adopt a kindly outlook even toward those they consider their nation's enemies.[45]

Racism is another issue that holds the Church to task, not at all without controversy. Christians disagree over whether racism is interpersonal or structural, while others hold that it is merely a 'woke' myth.[46] However, racism is an utterly important issue for Christians (especially given the Church's history), and racial reconciliation and liberation are theological matters. Evangelical scholar J. Daniel Hays writes that within white evangelicalism, many Christians are "still entrenched" in racism, while others "assume that the Bible simply does not speak to the race issue" (which probably means either that race is regarded as non-theological or as a non-issue), while still others are simply apathetic.[47] From a biblical theological perspective, Hays finds that race and ethnicity are enmeshed in the theology of Scripture, "which teaches that all people are equal."[48] Christians from every people and nation find a transcendent identity within the multiracial Church, all "brothers and sisters of the same family."[49] Hays urges for "a theology . . . of racial equality and unity that is based on Scripture."[50] Researchers Christina Edmondson and Chad Brennan coin the term 'faithful antiracism', with the belief that "it is essential to rely on God's power and leading in order to make progress" against racism.[51] Edmondson, who grew up in the Church, saw that white evangelicalism preached a Jesus who

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[45] Clouse, *War: Four Christian Views*, 195.
[46] Christina Edmondson and Chad Brennan have found that Christians, especially white Christians, tend to have less accurate views on race and less motivation towards working for racial justice when compared to Black, Asian, and Latino Christians. Edmondson, *Faithful Antiracists*, 15-17. There is a plethora of reasons for why Christians tend to be misinformed or actively ignorant of racial issues, which Edmondson and Brennan touch on in their handbook. Edmondson, *Faithful Antiracists*, 20-22.
[47] Hays, *From Every People and Nation*, 19.
[48] Hays, *From Every People and Nation*, 202.
[49] Hays, *From Every People and Nation*, 204.
[50] Hays, *From Every People and Nation*, 206.
[51] Edmondson, *Faithful Antiracists*, 2-3.

was "open to Black faces but rarely Black voices and certainly never Black pain or power."[52] Antiracism is only possible "with God's help,"[53] and so fighting racism is a theological ordeal. The way out is through God. As the political theologian Jonathan Tran writes, "Here is revolution, at least where it begins. Or, where it continues, with the church being the church."[54]

I present one final issue quite unlike pornography, which Christians tend to agree upon and work together against with degrees of ease. This issue was not only unheard of in the churches I had attended but was also previously inconceivable to me: the American carceral system and prison abolition. Religious studies scholar Joshua Dubler and political theologian Vincent Lloyd cowrote *Break Every Yoke*, a book about the abolition of prison from a theological perspective. Dubler and Lloyd chart out a historically American controversy between evangelical and liberal Protestants on the question of justice. For evangelicals, justice tends to mean "making the bad guys pay."[55] Justice requires punishment and time behind bars. For liberals, though, justice means "laboring more concertedly to make worldly law and society more just."[56] Thus, evangelicals tend to prefer the punitive carceral system as a criminal *justice* system, as a system that is just. For liberal Christians, this view of justice is unjust, and the justice offered up by liberal secularists tends to be too low—where justice only looks like reforming prisons or making mass incarceration less 'mass'.[57] To push past evangelical and secular conceptions of justice, prisons must be abolished. The way out for Dubler and Lloyd is

[52] Edmondson, *Faithful Antiracists*, 3-4.
[53] Edmondson, *Faithful Antiracists*, 208.
[54] Tran, *Asian Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism*, 297.
[55] Dubler, *Break Every Yoke*, 93, emphasis in original redacted.
[56] Dubler, *Break Every Yoke*, 7.
[57] Dubler and Lloyd point out that evangelicals and secularists "share a worldview that reduces justice to the proper operation of the law. For both groups . . . the meaning of justice is confined to modifying . . . the criminal justice system. Were justice to be regarded as more than the law, worries the secularist, sectarian religious values could be imposed on the pluralistic public. Dubler, *Break Every Yoke*, 70.

also theological, for "without getting religion . . . prison abolitionism will never acquire its necessary force."[58]

I have set out a variety of issues which Christians disagree upon *theologically*. The theological diversity of Christianity cannot and must not be limited to "more specifically theological matters," but extended to the full array of theological disagreements which carry immense personal and systemic weight. But before navigating these disagreements, some groundwork must be laid. To start, why do Christians face such a vast scope of theological disagreements? The answer begins with two vices—divisiveness and the avoidance of division—and finding the golden mean between them.

Orthodoxy and Ecumenism

There is an ancient tension in the Christian tradition. Gavin Ortlund in *Finding the Right Hills to Die On* writes of this tension as being between what he calls doctrinal sectarianism and doctrinal minimalism. Sectarianism is "any attitude, belief, or practice that contributes to unnecessary division in the body of Christ."[59] This is what Baptist theologian Albert Mohler calls 'fundamentalism', which leaves Christians "wrongly and harmfully divided,"[60] or what Baptist theologian Rhyne R. Putman calls polemic theology, which "explains and defends the distinctive beliefs of a particular theological tradition."[61] Minimalism is the opposite tendency, refraining from "talking about doctrine completely," to "reduce our doctrinal focus to a small body of truths related to the gospel message and then ignore everything else."[62] For Albert

[58] Dubler, *Break Every Yoke*, 11.
[59] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 28.
[60] Mohler, "A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity."
[61] Putman, *When Doctrine Divides the People of God*, 28.
[62] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 46.

Mohler, this is the similar to theological liberalism, the "basic disrespect for biblical authority and the church's treasury of truth,"[63] or for Putman, irenic theology, which seeks "peace with fellow believers from other traditions."[64] Ortlund's *Finding the Right Hills to Die On* is about finding a middle way between the unnecessary exclusion of those one disagrees with on one hand, and the radical avoidance of disagreement for unity's sake on the other. As Putman puts it, "Christian unity is a good, valuable thing to pursue, but not at the expense of essential truth."[65] Sectarianism and minimalism are like the stance of a boxer. Leaning too far to one side will leave one off balance. Ideally, one must find what Ortlund calls *poise*: balance on both feet.[66]

Sectarianism and minimalism result from two concepts that are fundamental to Christianity itself. These two foundational concepts are orthodoxy and ecumenism. Orthodoxy stems from two Greek words, *orthos* ('right') and *doxa* ('opinion'). Orthodoxy—believing the 'right things'—is a communal construct determining which beliefs are 'in' and which are 'out'. It is not an exclusively religious construct, either. In an analysis of a film deemed by many to be 'anti-Catholic', Anthony M. Petro avers that the film reveals "a *powerful orthodoxy* . . . informing what religion is and can be."[67] Jonathan Tran presents his "political economic approach to race and racism" as challenging "identarian antiracism, . . . academic and popular antiracism's *reigning orthodoxy*."[68] Orthodoxy determines the beliefs which one is free to hold in a community. It lists certain beliefs as requirements for joining a group. To belong in a community, one must assent to its 'reigning orthodoxy'.

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[63] Mohler, "A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity."
[64] Putman, *When Doctrine Divides the People of God*, 28.
[65] Putman, *When Doctrine Divides the People of God*, 29. This 'middle way' seems to be the typical goal for evangelicals (at least, for Baptists) who are interested in balancing unity and diversity, as seen from Ortlund, Mohler, and Putman.
[66] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 27.
[67] Petro, "Ray Navarro's Jesus Camp, AIDS Activist Video, and the 'New Anti-Catholicism,'" 947, emphasis mine.
[68] Tran, *Asian Americans*, 7, emphasis mine.

Christianity has historically been understood (and practiced) as an orthodox faith. The search for orthodoxy began early on.[69] Historian Averil Cameron in her 2011 lecture on the Patristic period notes that orthodoxy, on the traditional view, was developed by identifying its opposite, heresy. Heresies are beliefs that are unacceptable or unorthodox. Throughout Christian history, orthodoxy was strengthened and more fully revealed when threatened by heresies.[70] "The delineation of heresy . . . was an integral part of the process of forming a comprehensive Christian knowledge system" about orthodoxy.[71] Condemnations of heresies "were ways of asserting orthodoxy."[72] Thus, orthodoxy is better known by what it is *not*, and naming what it is not asserts what orthodoxy *is*. Orthodoxy divides, separating right beliefs from wrong ones. Naming what or who is 'in' necessarily casts something or someone as 'out'. Orthodoxy is divisive by nature—division is baked into the concept.

Thus, orthodoxy casts out unorthodoxy (and those who are unorthodox) but in the same breath it gathers to itself the orthodox—those who are 'in' because they believe the right things. It is at once divisive and unifying, though in different ways. Jannel N. Abogado's dissertation on the Council of Nicaea of 325 CE demonstrates this divisive-unifying nature of orthodoxy clearly. The Council of Nicaea was convened to address the Arian controversy, a doctrinal issue so divisive that by 324 it had fragmented the Eastern Church.[73] The Roman Emperor Constantine, seeing that the controversy had divided not only the religious leaders but also ordinary people,[74] resolved himself to "preserve the unity of the people" and "protect the purity of faith," and thus

[69] Cameron, "The Cost of Orthodoxy," 341.
[70] This is a traditional view of orthodoxy and is perhaps not the view of much scholarship. However, the traditional view is the most helpful for analyzing the concept of orthodoxy. As such, for illustrative purposes, I assume the traditional view here to emphasize orthodoxy's conceptual relation to unorthodoxy. Cameron, "The Cost of Orthodoxy," 344-5.
[71] Cameron, "The Cost of Orthodoxy," 346.
[72] Cameron, "The Cost of Orthodoxy," 349.
[73] Abogado, "The Anti-Arian Theology of the Council of Nicea of 325," 260.
[74] Abogado, "The Anti-Arian Theology of the Council of Nicea of 325," 260.

convened the Council of Nicaea.[75] For Constantine and the Council, the Church had to be united around the right beliefs, and the Council served such a task. But the Council of Nicaea was more than a clarification of orthodoxy. The Council started what is known today as the Nicene Creed (which would be finished by the second ecumenical council), a powerful affirmation of faith still used today by Christians of all sorts. At the end of the Nicene Creed were "anti-Arian statements" which sent a clear message to Arius (the focus of the Arian controversy) and his followers that they were *anathema*, cast out from the Church. Not only did the Creed clarify what was right belief, but it explicitly ruled out what was wrong belief. Orthodoxy, like the Nicene Creed, unites the orthodox and casts out unorthodoxy.

Prima facie, orthodoxy is an effective construct for unifying the Church while setting its doctrinal boundaries (and every community has its boundaries). In practice, though, orthodoxy can become problematic. The Nicene Creed, which was supposed to "preserve the unity of the people,"[76] would later find itself at the center of the greatest schism in Christian history in the 11th century, when Western and Eastern Christians split over whether the Spirit proceeded from the Father, or from the Father and the Son (among many other points of disagreement and cultural difference).[77] The Church delineates heresy to know its orthodoxy better, but sometimes delineation goes too far when orthodox Christians, once united around a shared faith, anathematize and condemn each other over what should have kept them together.

Orthodoxy has led to innumerable schisms and anathemas. One wonders how much (or how little) the various resulting denominations and schools of thought share with each other. If one is a Methodist, one believes like a Methodist. If one is Roman Catholic, one believes like a

[75] Abogado, "The Anti-Arian Theology of the Council of Nicea of 325," 255.
[76] Abogado, "The Anti-Arian Theology of the Council of Nicea of 325," 255.
[77] This is called the 'Filioque controversy'. Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, 109.

Roman Catholic. The same with a Greek Orthodox Christian. It is relatively easy to adduce what Methodists, Roman Catholics, and Greek Orthodox respectively believe, but what makes them all Christian? If Christianity is an orthodox faith, whose orthodoxy is it a faith of? All agree that there *is* a Christian orthodoxy (even if they claim it is a non-orthodoxy), but not all agree on *what* exactly that orthodoxy is. As the historian Averil Cameron laments, "the drive to orthodoxy has been unsuccessful."[78] Christians, because of their disagreements, are in need of reconciliation.

But some question whether in fact reconciliation is necessary. In my personal experience, these people say that the Church is not really divided. Though Christians do not all believe the same things, they are still one—unity does not equal uniformity. I must ask, in what sense is the Church one? In what sense is the Church not divided? If local churches squabble over each other's compliance or defiance to COVID-19 mask mandates? If they gossip about the church-down-the-corner's policies on unmarried couples? If they lie to their congregations about the beliefs and practices of other denominations such as Protestant pastors telling their attendees that Catholics worship Mary? If they bar a man who identifies as a gay Christian from coming to speak at their Wednesday night service (but at least they still sold his book)? If they say that members of a particular political party cannot be faithful Christians? Is that a unity worth wanting? Even if, despite appearances and experiences, the Church is not divided, why do so many feel that it is, and why the discontentment with whatever unity there is presently? To say that the Church is already one is to act as if there are no disagreements important enough for Christians to navigate. Seeing the Church as simply unified can lead to a dangerous apathy or denial of theological diversity and disagreement.

[78] Cameron, "The Cost of Orthodoxy," 360.

This leads us to ecumenism. Ecumenism is about re-unifying the Church, or about bringing to bear the unity that is already present. (It is important to note here that I use 'ecumenism' to refer to the concept of unity and not the historical ecumenical movements.)[79] To be ecumenically minded, what Andrey Shishkov calls 'ecumenical consciousness', has roughly three criteria. The first is the "recognition of the community of Christians," even if others belong to a different group than one's own. The second is a "rejection of proselytizing." This means that an ecumenical Christian accepts other Christians as Christians already, with no need to bring them into one's own denomination of Christianity. The final criterion is a "fundamental rejection" of labelling other Christians as heretics.[80] To be ecumenical is to accept other Christians as Christians, even if they believe differently.

Ecumenism, though it includes, also excludes. Being open-minded usually closes oneself off from those who are close-minded. Open-mindedness has its boundaries, too. As Ortlund puts it, "Believe anything [be open-minded], and you are disbelieving its opposite [close-mindedness] and therefore dividing, in some sense, from those who don't share your belief."[81] Open-minded groups can also be open-minded within themselves but close-minded towards each other. An open mind is not all-inclusive, but necessarily has boundaries. One might say that every ecumenism has its orthodoxy. This is exemplified, as Andrey Shishkov describes, by some liberal ecumenicists' perceptions of conservative ecumenicists as non-ecumenical. "They believe that a movement that uses militaristic rhetoric, promotes violence, and sows hatred for certain groups of people cannot be considered ecumenical." These liberal ecumenicists have limits for

[79] The conceptual rather than historical sense of 'ecumenism' is what Rhyne R. Putman calls 'catholicity'. Evangelicals according to tend to view ecumenism as marred by "surrender and compromise" of doctrinal positions, reconciling Christians of different traditions by simply ignoring doctrine altogether. Putman, *When Doctrine Divides the People of God*, 25.
[80] Shishkov, "Discussing the Concept of Conservative Ecumenism," 7.
[81] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 46.

what counts as ecumenical, in Shishkov's words "doing everything they can to strip [conservative Christian] alliances of their ecclesiastical status."[82] Conceptually, ecumenism divides even as it unites. Even unity has its boundaries.

It seems then that orthodoxy and ecumenism contain each other. Though orthodoxy divides right beliefs from wrong beliefs, it unites those who are orthodox, so it is ecumenical. Though ecumenism unites, its unity is limited, so it has an orthodoxy which limits its unity. And though they go hand in hand, too much of one forsakes the other. Too strong of an orthodoxy—having strict rules for what people can and cannot believe—becomes too divisive and too demanding, and this is what Ortlund calls sectarianism. Too strong of an ecumenism—having no boundary lines whatsoever—becomes too expansive and too indistinct, and this is what Ortlund calls minimalism. Too much focus on orthodoxy sacrifices ecumenism, while an unbalanced emphasis on ecumenism forfeits orthodoxy. Believing that one has the absolute knowledge of truth leaves one in meager company, while inviting everyone to the table leaves one with desperately little to stand for. We must find a middle way that is not sectarian and does not minimalize doctrinal differences. We must find an ecumenism that is orthodox and an orthodoxy that is ecumenical. Christians need an ecumenical orthodoxy.

What is Ecumenical Orthodoxy?

Ecumenical orthodoxy is what Ortlund calls 'poise'. It is the balance between unity and diversity, sectarianism and minimalism, ecumenism and orthodoxy. Ecumenical orthodoxy is a methodology, a way of navigating disagreements. It concerns "the whole way we go about theology."[83] It carries a dual hope for ecumenism, not at the expense of orthodoxy, and for

[82] Shishkov, "Discussing the Concept of Conservative Ecumenism," 16.
[83] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 22.

orthodoxy, not at the expense of ecumenism. As a way of navigating disagreements, ecumenical orthodoxy will not appeal to those who do not care for ecumenism, nor to those who do not care for orthodoxy. Rather, the findings and discussions that this paper offers are addressed to those that share my dual hope for truth and unity. These recognize the beauty of standing somewhere, but the loss of standing alone. Essentially, my paper seeks to "combine commitment to the search for Christian unity with faithfulness to historic creeds and confessions."[84] So, how might we develop an ecumenical orthodoxy?

Findings

First, we must set a parameter for an ecumenical orthodoxy. It would be impossible to get all Christians to agree on everything. It would also be of little use if Christians were to have an abstract sense of unity without coming to terms with their differences. Therefore, an ecumenical orthodoxy must accomplish what George A. Lindbeck in *The Nature of Doctrine* calls 'doctrinal reconciliation without capitulation'.

> How is it possible not to surrender or relativize historically church-dividing doctrines and yet maintain that these doctrines are no longer divisive? How can fidelity to opposing confessions of faith . . . be compatible with church unity? Is it imaginable . . . that opposing Catholic and Protestant orthodoxies could coexist in full ecclesial fellowship? Or . . . can there be "reconciled diversity" in which the diversity remains intact? Most starkly stated, the problem is how doctrines that contradicted each other in one historical context can cease to be contradictory in another and yet remain unchanged.[85]

Reconciliation without capitulation means that groups and individuals who believe different things must be able to retain their particular orthodoxies to some degree (Methodists believing as Methodists do, and Roman Catholics believing as Roman Catholics do) while recognizing each other as orthodox Christians (Methodists should not need to give up their Methodism to

[84] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, xxx.
[85] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 126-127.

recognize Roman Catholics as Christians and vice versa). An ecumenical orthodoxy is not about getting Christians to believe the same things, nor is it about getting Christians to pretend as if their doctrinal differences do not exist. Rather, it is about establishing a unity "in which the diversity remains intact."

Christian theologians and theoreticians have historically sought to develop an ecumenical orthodoxy by formulating theories of doctrine. Theories of doctrine explain what doctrines are, what they are for, and what they do. Doctrines themselves are typically understood as 'teachings' or 'beliefs'. Wayne Grudem in his much-used *Systematic Theology* defines doctrines as "what God wants [Christians] to believe and to know," prescribing "how [Christians] should think."[86] A theory of doctrine is usually based on an aspect of religion such as cognition, experience, culture, or feeling. Any of these aspects "can be a source [from] which one seeks to organize one's understanding of all aspects of religion for particular purposes."[87] Some theories of doctrine, as we will see, can be limited if they overemphasize one aspect of religion, such as belief, at the expense of others, such as religious practice or community.[88] However, a theory need not explain everything about religion and doctrine. It need only provide sufficient explanation according to the purposes toward which it is formulated.[89] In the present study, the purpose that a theory must serve is that it should allow for an ecumenical orthodoxy.

It stands to reason that where the Church has failed to develop an ecumenical orthodoxy and if such an orthodoxy can be developed through a sound understanding of doctrine, then perhaps the nature of doctrine has been misunderstood. A better theory of doctrine must

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[86] Emphases omitted from original. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 26.
[87] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 16.
[88] Rossano, *Supernatural Selection*, 3.
[89] For examples, Rossano writes that ecological theorists themselves acknowledge that their theory does not account for all aspects of religion. This implies that such theorists probably did not have the goal of accounting for religion in its totality, and we can safely assume that they formulated the ecological theory with certain purposes in mind. Rossano, *Supernatural Selection*, 5.

therefore be formulated. The question becomes, by what measure is one theory 'better' than another? How can Christians tell which theory will work the best? The best theory is not the 'true' one, since theories are merely explanations of how things work and cannot be ontologically true—or at least, that is not how we usually treat theories. To illustrate, we have made several theories about ourselves to explain who we are and how we function. Dualist theories say that we are made up of two parts: mind/body, spirit/flesh, intellect/sense perception, and unconscious/conscious. It is impossible to determine which theory is the 'true' one, but these models are all very useful in discovering who we are and how we work in different contexts. Christians might find the apostle Paul's spirit/flesh theory more helpful in spiritual growth, while philosophers might find the intellect/sense perception theory more useful in philosophy. In each, case, it is irrelevant which theory is the 'right' one. Theories in general can be evaluated based on their usefulness towards particular goals.[90] In this study, the best theory is one that allows for an ecumenical orthodoxy, 'reconciliation without capitulation'. To the extent that a theory bears (or allows Christians to bear) such fruit, that theory is the best one for the Church. Though no one theory of doctrine will suffice by itself in bringing the Church together,

> theoreticians may be of some modest help to religious communities if they can show how doctrines can be both firm and flexible, both abiding and adaptable. To the extent that they are unable to do so, their theories are theologically and pastorally unfruitful.[91]

The quality of a theory "depends on how well it organizes the data of Scripture and tradition with a view to their use in Christian worship and life."[92] As with people, Christians will know the theory by its fruit (cf. Matt. 7:16).

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[90] In science, too, theories are not evaluated by which one is ontologically true. Lindbeck: "Aristotelian, Newtonian, and Einsteinian theories of space and time . . . are evaluated scientifically quite independently of the metaphysical questions of which is closer to the way things really are. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 92.
[91] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 65.
[92] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 92.

Before developing an ecumenical orthodoxy, it is useful to examine two problematic theories of doctrine which are not conducive to an ecumenical orthodoxy that George Lindbeck, a Lutheran theologian, lays out in his book, *The Nature of Doctrine*. The first theory of doctrine is propositionalism, which "emphasizes the cognitive aspects of religion," treating religions as belief systems.[93] Doctrines, under this theory, are "informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities."[94] A doctrine is either true or it is not. "Religions may be a mixture of true and false statements," and the 'one true faith' or denomination is the one which "makes the most [true] claims and the fewest false ones."[95] Propositionalism is well-suited for "traditional orthodoxies"[96] and for the "traditionally orthodox."[97]

Propositional theories recognize that doctrines regulate how Christian communities speak and live. Modern propositionalists also recognize that the significance of certain doctrines varies over time: what one generation of the Church views as essential might not be essential for the next. Furthermore, doctrines as propositions do not change, but the way in which they are formulated and articulated through time and in different places can vary.[98]

However, Lindbeck finds various problems with propositionalism. First, though modern propositionalists acknowledge that the significance of doctrines can and does change, "propositionalism makes it difficult [but not impossible] to understand how" this happens, as well as how new doctrines get formulated (such as doctrines concerning Artificial Intelligence that do not exist currently).[99] Second, the propositionalist view does not make good sense out of "how old doctrines," like God giving dominion over the earth to humanity (cf. Gen. 1:28), "can

[93] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 2.
[94] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 2.
[95] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 33.
[96] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 2.
[97] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 33.
[98] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 91.
[99] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 64.

be reinterpreted to fit new circumstances," such as the current climate crisis, due to the "difficulty in distinguishing between what changes and what remains the same."[100] Third, propositionalism ignores the "particular way of behaving" that ought to result from believing certain things.[101] If doctrines are only propositions, one can 'believe in God' yet live like an atheist (cf. Jas. 2:19). On the contrary, if someone acts against their beliefs, we doubt whether they truly believe what they say they believe. Propositions do not care about practice, and yet it seems that one's religious beliefs should correspond to a certain way of life. Fourth, propositionalists are obliged to an "endless process of speculative reinterpretation" to find what doctrines truly mean, which can be especially difficult when a single doctrine has a multiplicity of possible and acceptable interpretations.[102] As Lindbeck suggests, perhaps propositionalism has made doctrine so divisive that many have given up on doctrinal altogether,[103] by either choosing to set doctrines aside (as the World Council of Churches has done)[104] or by not caring about doctrines at all.[105] Finally, if doctrines are only propositions, then Christians who believe in contradictory truth claims cannot possibly reconcile their differences unless they fully accept each other's beliefs and believe the same things—which, as we have noted, would be impossible.[106, 107]

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[100] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 64.
[101] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 50.
[102] Lindbeck raises a good point regarding the "economic and immanent aspects of the Trinity," two views of the Trinity with neither having been condemned as heresy. He writes that propositionalism "suggests that one of the two main streams of Christian theological thinking about the Trinity is unwittingly heretical, even though the church has not yet made up its mind which one." Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 92-93.
[103] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 64.
[104] Pratt writes that the World Council of Churches originally began their ecumenical project with resolving doctrinal differences, an approach that was eventually "dismissed as an abstract arid exercise, effectively the antithesis of genuine dialogue." Pratt, "Interreligious Dialogue," 194.
[105] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 60.
[106] Lindbeck refers to "many Quakers and Disciples of Christ" who hold to a supposedly 'creedless Christianity'. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 64.
[107] This seems like a strawman, and eventually when we discuss doctrinal taxonomies, especially Stinson's article, we will find that this critique does not work against propositionalism.

In addition to Lindbeck's criticism, some theorists criticize propositionalism for "[reducing] religion to a series of cognitive appraisals of the world."[108] Propositionalism gives poor account for why people *care* so much for the doctrines they believe in.[109] Evolutionary scientist Matt J. Rossano writes that such a theory makes it hard to understand the "motivational pull of religious belief and behavior" and the deep commitment it often entails for religious people (sometimes leading to martyrdom or religious war).[110] Propositionalism reduces faith and salvation to a "bare assent to propositions."[111]

The second problematic theory that Lindbeck discusses is experiential-expressivism, almost an opposite theory than propositionalism. This theory suggests that doctrines are expressions of one's experience of the Divine, that all religions express the same experience, and that this experience is common to all humans.[112] This view presumes religion to be "an ahistorical phenomenon, a transcendent source of meaning arriving from beyond human circumstances."[113] The 'truth' of a religion, unlike tallying the number of true and false claims that it makes, consists in how adequately its doctrines express the experience of the Divine.[114] Under this view, doctrines are "noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations."[115] Doctrines as symbols do not carry meaning well, even losing meaning altogether.[116] The Buddhist doctrine of enlightenment and the Protestant doctrine of justification, under the symbolic view, express the same experience. The doctrine that

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[108] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 10.
[109] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 35. Just as propositions do not care about how one lives, a proposition as a proposition does not account for what makes some doctrines more attractive or compelling or central than others for particular people.
[110] Rossano, *Supernatural Selection*, 4-5.
[111] Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 156. Found in Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 91.
[112] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 17.
[113] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 5-6.
[114] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 33.
[115] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 2.
[116] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 3.

Christians should be pacifists and the doctrine of just war symbolize the same thing. The doctrine that there is no God and the doctrine that there is, both represent the same experience of the same Divine. The most foundational issue for this theory is that, under an experiential-expressive model, Christians do not actually disagree with each other. Christians may believe in different doctrines, but these doctrines all symbolize the same thing. This suggestion is profoundly counterintuitive, even counterfactual. An experiential-expressive approach would gaslight Christians by asserting that their many disagreements are not real and that everyone is saying essentially the same thing. Such experiential and symbolic theories "make meaningless [the Church's] historic doctrinal affirmations . . . and thus leave nothing to discuss."[117]

Propositionalism tends too far towards orthodoxy. It makes it difficult and even impossible to reconcile Christians who believe contradictory things. Experiential-expressivism is far too expansive, leaving doctrines with potentially no meaning at all. The theory that we are searching for in this study must lie somewhere between or beyond propositionalism and experiential-expressivism.

Having surveyed two problematic theories of doctrine, we can begin surveying some possibilities for developing an ecumenical orthodoxy. First, we begin with the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction. Second, we examine theological triage. Third, we analyze Lindbeck's rule theory of doctrine. Finally, we explore affect theory and Christian theology to develop a transformation theory of doctrine, which I argue is the best theory for developing an ecumenical orthodoxy.

The Essential/Nonessential Doctrines Distinction

[117] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 77.

In my personal experience, many of the Christians in balancing unity and diversity found helpful a distinction between essential and nonessential doctrines. Essential doctrines are understood to be doctrines "that no one can reject and still be considered orthodox,"[118] doctrines which the whole Church agrees on. Nonessential doctrines are up for dispute, and on these Christians can hold a variety of views. This view maintains that there is a set of shared essential beliefs that is "not only positive but pungent; divided from all non-Christian beliefs by a chasm to which the worst divisions inside Christendom are not really comparable at all."[119]

> It is at her centre, where her truest children dwell, that each communion is really closest to every other in spirit, if not in doctrine. And this suggests that at the centre of each there is a something, or a Someone, who against all divergencies of belief, all differences in temperament, all memories of mutual persecution, speaks with the same voice.[120]

The essential/nonessential doctrines distinction is designed to help Christians navigate doctrinal diversity. C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* is most illustrative of this solution, a book intended to "explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times."[121] The influence of Lewis's *Mere Christianity* has been recognized by many, including George Marsden, a historian of evangelicalism,[122] and researchers William W. Cobern and Cathleen C. Loving.[123]

The early formulations of the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction reveal a passionately ecumenical concern during and after the Reformation era between Catholics and Protestants and especially amongst Protestants themselves. Desiderius Erasmus set the trend for

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[118] Cobern, "Thinking about Science and Christian Orthodox Beliefs," 20.
[119] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, xi.
[120] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, xii.
[121] As such, Lewis had strong apologetical motivations. In presenting the essence of Christianity (which had to do with doctrine but was not totally concerned with it), Lewis believed he could make the greatest case for the faith. Any expression of disagreement would only ward off any who might have had ears to hear. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, viii.
[122] Marsden, "Higher Education in a 'Post-Secular' Age."
[123] Cobern, "Thinking about Science and Christian Orthodox Beliefs."

the distinction as the 'agree-to-disagree' solution to Christian division, striving "to reconcile Christians by stressing the common beliefs which Catholics and Protestants shared and by downplaying their differences."[124] Erasmus distinguished between 'fundamental' or 'essential' doctrines and *adiaphora* (Lt. 'of no difference'). Fundamental doctrines for Erasmus included the divinity of Christ, eternal life, the crucifixion, and resurrection. *Adiaphora* included the contemporary controversies surrounding predestination, salvation by works, and indulgences, among other issues. This early distinction was designed to "reduce animosity among Christians . . . and perhaps even help to reunify."[125]

John Calvin, though not widely known for his ecumenism, was similarly concerned with the unity of the Church. Like Erasmus, Calvin listed a few essential beliefs: the oneness of God, the divinity of Christ, Christ's Sonship, salvation as God's mercy, "'and the like.'"[126] By making the essential/nonessential distinction, Calvin established a "basis for agreement which would include the essential doctrines of the historic faith *without excluding anyone unnecessarily*."[127] It is interesting that Calvin viewed the bond of Christian unity to be doctrine itself, even during a time when Christians were already diverging from each other dramatically,[128] very much echoing Constantine's hope in the uniting nature of orthodoxy when the he convened the Council of Nicaea.[129] Calvin also drew attention to the emotional and affective dimensions of division between Christians: "Calvin argued strenuously and at great length against the sin of schism, emphasizing that . . . separatism comes from pride rather than holiness."[130]

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[124] Campion, Review of *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration* by Gary Remer, 486.
[125] Campion, Review of *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration* by Gary Remer, 486.
[126] The problem, as Hesselink points out, is how to discern what 'the like' entailed, and by which criteria 'the like' were to be judged to recognize these doctrines as essential. Hesselink, "Calvinus Oecumenicus," 110.
[127] Hesselink, "Calvinus Oecumenicus," 110-1, emphasis mine.
[128] Hesselink, "Calvinus Oecumenicus," 111.
[129] Abogado, "The Anti-Arian Theology of the Council of Nicea of 325," 255.
[130] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 32.

In the 17th century, Francis Turretin, a Reformed theologian, made a distinction between fundamental and nonfundamental articles of faith. Of him, Ortlund writes,

> Turretin was facing two distinct threats. First, he was concerned by Socinian and Roman Catholic claims that their distinctive doctrines were fundamental truths of [Christianity in general]. But, second, Turretin was concerned about other orthodox Protestant traditions that were dividing over nonessential matters of doctrine.[131]

In line with the emerging theme in the history of the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction, Turretin's distinction "derives from a deeper concern about the unity of the church."[132]

Richard Baxter, the inspiration for Lewis's title,[133] also categorized doctrines into these two categories. Amidst a fractured Church, Baxter "endeavored to draw out the common ground between the disputants and to set their differences in a proper perspective."[134] Baxter did not care for the distinctives of Christian traditions but rather their shared beliefs,[135] and pushing somewhat past doctrine chose to judge others "by their love rather than by their opinions, intellectual attitudes or religious allegiance."[136] Doctrinal disunity was not an easy problem to solve for Baxter, and both he and Lewis held to a spiritual unity that underlay doctrinal disunity.[137]

By the time of John Wesley, the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction still maintained its ecumenical concerns from nearly two hundred years ago. Wesley's distinction allowed Christians to "agree on a relatively short list of central or 'fundamental' teachings and allow a wide range of disagreements over non-essential doctrines."[138] Wesley's "Letter to a Roman Catholic" reveals an interesting framework for the essential/nonessential distinction,

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[131] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 30-31.
[132] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 31.
[133] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, ix.
[134] Keeble, "C.S. Lewis, Richard Baxter, And 'Mere Christianity,'" 29.
[135] Keeble, "C.S. Lewis, Richard Baxter, And 'Mere Christianity,'" 31.
[136] Keeble, "C.S. Lewis, Richard Baxter, And 'Mere Christianity,'" 38.
[137] Keeble, "C.S. Lewis, Richard Baxter, And 'Mere Christianity,'" 34; Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, xii.
[138] Campbell, "The Shape of Wesleyan Thought," 28.

which lays the groundwork for its later sophistication, theological triage. In the letter, Wesley discusses the doctrine of the Trinity and in what way it is essential. The Trinity is a "doctrine essential to Christian faith as such (i.e., not to the distinct identities of Catholics or Protestants.)"[139] This means that there are two ways in which a doctrine can be essential. Doctrines can be essential *in general* (that is, a doctrine can be essential to all Christians), or doctrines can be essential *to particular Christian groups* (*see* Figure 2).

The essential/nonessential doctrines distinction is not exclusively Protestant.[140] Vatican II's *Decree on Ecumenism* acknowledged a "hierarchy of truths," at the top of which are certain "fundamental truths."[141] Recent Protestant theologians have continued to stress the hierarchical nature of doctrine, such as Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck in the 20th century. In his discussion of "the church's catholicity," "Bavinck stressed the importance of recognizing a distinction between fundamental and nonfundamental truths."[142] The Reformed theologian R.C. Sproul, on Christian unity, writes that Christians "are not to negotiate over the essentials of the gospel, but neither should [they] be at odds over minor [nonessential] matters."[143]

The essential/nonessential distinction seems to be an ecumenically orthodox view of doctrine, stemming from an especially Protestant desire to crop out the "excrescences" of the faith.[144] We might map these doctrines onto a target (*see* Figure 1). Essential doctrines are found in the bullseye, while non-essential doctrines are located on the outer circles. Ecumenical orthodoxy under the essential/nonessential distinction is quite simple: those who agree on the

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[139] Campbell, "The Shape of Wesleyan Thought," 34.
[140] In Anglican-Orthodox dialogue, it must be noted that the Orthodox, from a report of the Lambeth Conference, resist the Anglican distinction between essential and nonessential doctrines, even though it resembles "the common Orthodox distinction between dogma and theologoumena." Miller, "Ecclesiology, Scripture, and Tradition in the 'Dublin Agreed Statement,'" 114.
[141] O'Neill, "The Rule Theory of Doctrine and Propositional Truth," 442.
[142] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 35.
[143] Sproul, *Everyone's a Theologian*, 267.
[144] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 84.

essentials are included in Christian unity, and those who disagree on the nonessentials are not disturbing it. Distinguishing between essential and non-essential doctrines thus helps to understand how the Church can be at once diverse and unified.

In addition to its ecumenical use, the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction functions as an apologetical tool in the defense of Christianity. The distinction has been used to respond to Samuel Ruhmkorff's incompatibility problem. Between different religions, the incompatibility problem is that if two different religious traditions make incompatible claims, such as "Jesus is fully God and fully man" and "Jesus was only human," then these two religious traditions cannot both be right. Ruhmkorff extends this problem to the intra-religious level as well, claiming that if the various denominations *within* a given tradition make incompatible claims, then that religion cannot be true. Matthew Stinson, in response to Ruhmkorff, points out that

> one must consider not just complete agreement on doctrine, but also agreement on priority within doctrine. For example, if one considers a set of beliefs to be incontestable [or essential] . . . and holds other beliefs to be contestable [or nonessential] . . . then even if those people disagree on contestable issues, they have a superseding agreement that those issues are allowed to be contested.[145]

Stinson concludes that "a hierarchy of beliefs allows for the confessionalist [one who believes in the exclusive truth of one's own religion] to be exclusivist to other religions . . . and inclusivist in regards to other denominations" within one's own religious tradition.[146] Essential beliefs "set the boundaries for in-group theological debate over the non-essential beliefs."[147] As such, the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction holds both ecumenical and apologetical value.

This distinction seems to allow for reconciliation without capitulation. However, despite its usefulness, there are serious problems with it. First, disagreeing on nonessential doctrines is

[145] Stinson, "Denominational Incompatibility and Religious Pluralism," 5.
[146] Stinson, "Denominational Incompatibility and Religious Pluralism," 5.
[147] Stinson, "Denominational Incompatibility and Religious Pluralism," 7.

sometimes important. 'Nonessential' issues sometimes get waved away dismissively—after all, why should one argue over something that is not essential? For example, in discussions on race and racism, it is not uncommon to hear statements like this: "I believe that Christians and their organizations should confront and actively prevent themselves from contributing to racism, *but I also believe the gospel is a higher priority*."[148] The distinction allows Christians to say, "Yes, but . . ." to a variety of important yet 'nonessential' issues.[149] Second, Christians who disagree on nonessential doctrines end up believing in (arguably) essentially different gods and leading very different lives. Sometimes, the diversity in Christianity is so great that one wonders whether it is in fact a unified religion.[150] Third, the distinction is not ecumenical enough. Instead of unifying the Church around the essentials, it becomes divided over *which* doctrines are essential and *how* to tell.[151] This last problem merits more discussion.

First, Christians disagree over *which* beliefs are essential, even if they agree that some beliefs *are* essential. One Christian might think it essential to be a Republican, while another Christian might disagree that one's party determines one's status as a Christian. Second, Christians disagree over *how* to tell which doctrines are essential and which are not. I have come

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[148] Edmondson, *Faithful Antiracists*, 39, emphasis added.
[149] Gavin Ortlund, as we will see, concurs with this critique against the distinction. Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 47.
[150] Martha Frederiks writes of Christianity as an "inherently plural and cumulative tradition," Frederiks, "World Christianity," 23. Frederiks and Dorrotya Nagy describe Christianity as "Christianity/ies," Frederiks, "Introduction," 1; and elsewhere as "Christianities," Frederiks, "Methodological Considerations," 305.
[151] This critique is far from novel. Frank Cranmer, from a Quaker perspective, writes that "the counsel of Peter Meiderlin *alias* Rupertus Meldenius – 'In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity' – would probably sum up the attitude of most Friends to ecumenical discussion. The problem, however, is how to tease out the essentials." Cranmer, "The Statement of Principles of Christian Law," 304. Leanna K. Fuller, United Church of Christ, writes that "[i]n many ways, this phrase seems like the perfect guide for church life: as long as we agree on the 'essentials' we are free to disagree (in love) on everything else. The problem arises when people cannot agree on what constitutes the essentials of their shared Christian faith." Fuller, "In All Things Charity," 136. Robert D. Cornwall, from a Disciples of Christ perspective, likewise writes, "[w]hile the Meldenius quote is a worthy statement, it begs the question as to what is essential or how we decide what is essential." Cornwall, "Disciples of Christ," 1. After a historical summary of what various denominations have taken to be fundamental, Conrad H. Moehlmann concludes that "Christianity has never been in agreement regarding what is fundamental." Moehlmann, "What are the Fundamentals?", 20.

across four typical answers as to what makes an essential doctrine essential. The first answer is to provide an exhaustive list of essential doctrines. This does not explain what makes those doctrines essential. The second answer is that an essential doctrine is essential because it is believed by all true Christians. This conjures up a vicious circle: we know who is a true Christian if they believe what all true Christians believe. The third answer is that essential doctrines are those which one must believe to be saved. This is an interesting claim because it reveals that doctrines are more than propositions—it means that doctrines do something.[152, 153] The fourth answer is that doctrines are essential if they are clearly defined in Scripture and Church Tradition, like the Creeds. This is too vague, though perhaps it appeals to those who are already convinced that they know how to tell what is clearly defined in Scripture—some may think that observing the Sabbath or selling all that one owns is clearly defined in Scripture, while others may disagree. This fourth definition simply moves disagreement back to what makes a doctrine clearly defined in Scripture.

In essence, the major problem with the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction is as straightforward as the distinction itself—instead of uniting Christians on the essentials, it divides them on what the essentials are and how to tell. It might be an intuitive solution (and we will

[152] I do not mean to imply that *all* who use the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction are propositionalists in their view of doctrine. However, C.S. Lewis according to Lindbeck is "clearly cognitivist" in his "view of religion and doctrine." Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 10. Aside from that, I can only appeal to my personal experience that this distinction makes doctrines out to be merely propositions, or rather that it keeps one from thinking of doctrines as anything more than propositions. The doctrine of the Trinity, for example, is quite universally held to be an essential doctrine to those who make the essential/nonessential distinction. However, defining the Trinity as such does not quite shed light on what the Trinity *means* and *why* it is so essential. One's attitude toward the Trinity becomes abstract and nondescript, without motive to further explore such an important doctrine.

[153] Gavin Ortlund raises this claim and identifies it as problematic. "Sometimes people define essential doctrines as those that must be affirmed in order to experience salvation. In certain circumstances, however, people experience salvation with very limited information." He then gives an excellent example of the thief on the cross, who we do not know gave assent to each and every essential doctrine. Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 80.

discuss why it is intuitive later), but it has too many conceptual problems to construct an ecumenical orthodoxy. Perhaps we can do better.

Theological Triage

Similar to the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction is theological triage, which sophisticates the older distinction by adding more categories of doctrines. It seems that theological triage is gaining popularity. Gavin Ortlund's *Finding the Right Hills to Die On* lays out the case for theological triage. The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy identified theological triage as helpful for "navigating various polarizing issues . . . in a way that does not deepen divides or calcify oppositional opinions,"[154] helping Christians to see that "not all beliefs have the same degree of importance."[155]

Theological triage is usually traced back to Albert Mohler,[156] who develops a three-tier taxonomy of doctrines. First-order doctrines "represent the most fundamental truths of the Christian faith, and a denial of these doctrines represents nothing less than an eventual denial of Christianity itself," such as "the Trinity, the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, justification by faith, and the authority of Scripture." On second-order doctrines, Christians can disagree, but such disagreement "will create significant boundaries between believers" on the congregational and denominational level. Some second-order controversies include paedo- versus credobaptism and complementarianism versus egalitarianism.[157] Lastly, "Christians may disagree and remain

[154] Many thanks to Maybree, a roundtable participant in Dr. James Patten's group in the Student Conference for Religion in the Public Sphere, 2023, for leading me to this article. The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy, "Final Pilot Report," 16.
[155] The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy, "Final Pilot Report," 18.
[156] Carson, foreword to *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 12.
[157] Paedobaptists allow for infants to be baptized, while credobaptists prohibit infant baptism, instead holding that one can only be baptized knowing what such baptism signifies for their faith. The complementarian versus egalitarian controversy, at least as referred to by Mohler, is over whether women can be ordained as pastors or not. In other areas, it is more broadly over the issue of gender politics and theology in general.

in close fellowship," over third-order doctrines, "even within local congregations," such as disagreements over the end times.[158]

The semblance between theological triage and the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction is clear. Mohler even uses familiar language while describing first-order doctrines as "*essential* to the Christian faith."[159] First-order and essential doctrines are therefore the same, and second- and third-order doctrines correspond to nonessential doctrines. The point of theological triage is to reveal the complexity among nonessential doctrines, acknowledging that not all nonessential doctrines are equally important. Gavin Ortlund in *Finding the Right Hills to Die On* agrees that "we should distinguish between the gospel and secondary issues," but then "we risk obscuring the significance of secondary doctrines."[160] The solution? Add more categories.[161]

Ortlund goes a step ahead of Mohler and creates four doctrinal categories, rather than three or two. He lists the categories out and defines them:

- First-rank doctrines are essential to the gospel itself.
- Second-rank doctrines are urgent for the health and practice of the church such that they frequently cause Christians to separate at the level of local church, denomination, and/or ministry.
- Third-rank doctrines are unimportant to Christian theology, but not enough to justify separation or division among Christians.
- Fourth-rank doctrines are unimportant to our gospel witness and ministry collaboration.[162]

We can map these categories onto a Venn diagram (*see* Figure 2) with circles representing different Christian groups. Where they all converge, we can place first-rank doctrines, while second-rank doctrines belong to respective groups in their circles, and third- and fourth-rank

[158] Mohler, "A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity."
[159] Mohler, "A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity," emphasis added.
[160] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 47.
[161] Ortlund writes that for the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction, "a weakness . . . is that it is working with only two categories: essential and nonessential." Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 47.
[162] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 19, emphasis in original redacted.

doctrines can be mapped at various other points. This model of doctrine is an intuitive way of mapping out where certain doctrinal controversies may be located, and its semblance to the idea discussed in Wesley's "Letter to a Roman Catholic" is evident.

Ortlund's book makes a case for theological triage in a careful and nuanced way. But it is the amount of nuance that puts the very approach of categorizing doctrines in doubt. First, Ortlund acknowledges that his taxonomy is not the only possible one, that "there are all kinds of ways to distinguish doctrines" from each other.[163] As Rhyne R. Putman in *When Doctrine Divides the People of God* points out,

> these taxonomies are human theological constructs, efforts on the part of fallible believers to make sense of what is most important in the word of God and the Christian tradition. Because Protestants and evangelicals have no magisterium for dictating doctrine, *what counts as a primary, secondary, or tertiary issue may vary from person to person or tradition to tradition.* These rankings are somewhat subjective. . . .[164]

Theological triage perpetuates disagreement the same way that the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction does. Instead of unifying the Church on first-order doctrines and local churches on second-order doctrines, theological triage simply moves disagreement to which doctrines are first- or second-order, and how to tell.[165] Second, it is Ortlund's discussion of second-order doctrines that puts the very *approach* of categorizing doctrines into question. Ortlund sees doctrines as existing along a "spectrum of doctrinal importance,"[166] rather than fitting neatly into categories. He points out that there is always "a danger inherent in any system of categorization. It is not a reason to avoid the use of categories; it just means we must recognize that they are somewhat clunky and inexact and therefore do not convey all that must

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[163] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 18.
[164] Putman, *When Doctrine Divides the People of God*, 218, emphasis mine.
[165] "Theologians still squabble over which doctrines should be classified as first-tier, second-tier, and third-tier matters." Putman, *When Doctrine Divides the People of God*, 218.
[166] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 97, emphasis in original redacted.

be said about a doctrine."[167] But what if using categories for approaching theological disagreement is not the best that Christians can do? What if there is a better, more imaginative, and more fruitful way? To push past categorizing doctrines, we now turn to the American ecumenicist, George Lindbeck.

Rule Theory

George Lindbeck's "main task" in *The Nature of Doctrine* is ecumenism.[168] Bruce D. Marshall in his introduction to the book's 25th anniversary edition makes explicit that Lindbeck's own theory of doctrine, rule theory, is designed to avoid the pitfalls of propositionalism (which does not allow for ecumenism) and experiential-expressivism (which does not allow for orthodoxy).[169] Rule theory seeks the same middle way that the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction and theological triage do: to "combine commitment to the search for Christian unity with faithfulness to historic creeds and confessions."[170]

Whereas propositionalism focuses on the cognitive aspects of religion, and experiential-expressivism its, well, experiential aspects, rule theory focuses on the cultural and linguistic aspects of religion.[171] Under rule theory, religion

> is not primarily an array of beliefs . . . (though it may involve these), or [a symbolization] of basic attitudes, feelings, or sentiments (though these will be generated). Rather, it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments. . . . [I]t is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals. . . . [J]ust as a language . . . is correlated with a form of life, and just as a culture has both cognitive and behavioral dimensions, so it is [with a religion].[172]

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[167] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 97.
[168] Marshall, Introduction to *The Nature of Doctrine*, xii.
[169] Marshall, Introduction to *The Nature of Doctrine*, xxiii.
[170] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, xxx.
[171] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 3-4.
[172] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 19.

Doctrines in Lindbeck's view function "not as expressive symbols or truth claims, but as *communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action*."[173] Doctrines regulate how Christian communities speak and live.

A word must be said on doctrine and truth, since rule theory has been received by some as being "soft on truth," relativizing doctrines and the Christian faith,[174] or "anti-realist."[175] This is largely due to Lindbeck's "unusually intimate connection between practice and belief"[176] and how Lindbeck understands doctrines *as doctrines*. Doctrines *as doctrines* regulate a community's speech, feeling, and action, setting the boundaries and identity of a community.[177] A doctrine can symbolize an experience—not as a doctrine but as a symbol, and a doctrine can be a truth claim—not as a doctrine but as a proposition.[178] A doctrine *can* be a symbol or a proposition, but *as a doctrine* it regulates a community's pattern of speech and action. The doctrine that 'God is Love' as a proposition corresponds to God's *being* Love, and as a symbol it expresses one's experience of God *as* Love, but as a doctrine, it plays a role in regulating "a total pattern of speaking, thinking, feeling, and acting" because God *is* Love.[179] Doctrines as doctrines are communally regulative.

The way doctrine regulates speech, feeling, and action is exactly like orthodoxy, allowing for a diversity of right views but uncompromising on what it forbids.[180] As with orthodoxy, we can compare the function of doctrine to the function of the Nicene Creed, itself a source of both

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[173] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 4, emphasis added.
[174] Marshall, Introduction to *The Nature of Doctrine*, xii-iii.
[175] Putman, *When Doctrine Divides the People of God*, 26.
[176] Marshall, Introduction to *The Nature of Doctrine*, xvii.
[177] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 60.
[178] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 66.
[179] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 50.
[180] "Doctrines regulate truth claims by excluding some and permitting others, but the logic of their communally authoritative use hinders of prevents them from specifying positively what is to be affirmed." Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 5.

doctrine and orthodoxy. The Council of Nicaea took great care in wording the Creed to make it "very difficult for the defenders of Arius to impose on it their own meaning."[181] Arian interpretations were explicitly and intentionally barred. What the Creed affirmed was not exactly specified, because the Creed held "no fixed meaning."[182] (That is not to say that the Creed means nothing at all, only that it allows for interpretation.) The Nicene Creed allowed for a multiplicity of acceptable interpretations, "leaving room for theological speculation"[183] while simultaneously being expressly clear in prohibiting 'unorthodox' interpretations. Doctrines likewise can be formulated in a variety of acceptable ways. For example, the commandment of giving to the poor can be formulated (or applied) in many ways, such as interpersonal generosity, as conservatives tend to practice, or structural change, as liberals tend to practice. One might be more effective or impactful than the other, but both formulations stay true to the core content of generosity.

By viewing doctrines as rules, we can see how different denominations can reconcile their differences without compromising on their diversity. Rule theory frames doctrine as something which allows for diversity in interpretation, formulation, and application.[184] (This is like how 'What are you doing?' can be formulated as 'What are you up to?' or 'wyd?' and yet retain the same content.) This opens up the possibility that different Christians can be speaking the same language but in different dialects. Using Lindbeck's terms, various denominations communicate the same concepts but under different formulations. The diversity within Christianity is thus accounted for as different Christian communities face "changing situations"

[181] Abogado, "The Anti-Arian Theology of the Council of Nicea of 325," 279.
[182] Abogado, "The Anti-Arian Theology of the Council of Nicea of 325," 285.
[183] Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, 10.
[184] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 79.

in which their doctrine must be formulated differently.[185] Orthodoxy can change in its formulation, but its core content remains the same across culture, time, and worldview.[186]

But why believe that starkly different formulations of Christian orthodoxy are in fact formulations of the same content? The answer for Lindbeck lies in how Christians live. Orthodoxy and life—one is dead without the other (cf. Jas. 2:20). Lindbeck writes that the "right use" of doctrine "cannot be detached from a particular way of behaving."[187] Being a truly orthodox Christian is not merely about believing the right things, but also living a distinctly Christian way of life. A Christian is one who interiorizes Christianity in part through their belief in doctrines. "The primary knowledge [one gains] is not *about* the religion, nor *that* the religion teaches such and such, but rather *how* to be religious in such and such ways."[188] Being a Christian is not about learning that Christianity is true, but about learning what is Christian.[189] This 'skill of the saint', to use Lindbeck's phrase,[190] enables a Christian to discern faithful and unfaithful formulations and interpretations of one's faith. In the context of Christian diversity, Lindbeck's saints can tell whether different formulations of orthodoxy are all in fact formulations of the same content. If Lindbeck was asked how to discern the limits of Christian diversity and unity, he would kindly refer the questioner to the saints.

Rule theory allows for an ecumenical orthodoxy. It shows how Christians can believe different things, but still be united. Theological diversity comes from formulating orthodoxy in different ways, but amidst the diversity, the same core content is retained and preserved through the shared Christian way of life. However, there is one key problem with rule theory. In his

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[185] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 25.
[186] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 68.
[187] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 50, emphasis mine.
[188] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 21, emphasis in original.
[189] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 87.
[190] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 22.

review of *The Nature of Doctrine*, Colman E. O'Neill writes that "no Christian will dispute . . . that doctrine is purposeless if it is not incorporated into a way of life. But normally this is called sincerity, commitment, authenticity or something of the sort."[191] Indeed, the idea that belief should be connected to practice is nothing new. John Calvin believed that "if one does not speak the truth in love, one has not really spoken the truth at all."[192] Gavin Ortlund, in advocating for theological triage, "considers doctrines in their 'real life' influence on actual people and situations and churches."[193] But O'Neill's most provoking remark is that Christians still sin.[194] Try though they might, Christians cannot always live in full accordance with their beliefs. Luther's doctrine of *simul iustus et peccator*, O'Neill avers, reveals "that there is too often a dichotomy between what one holds with genuine conviction and what one actually does."[195] Even Lindbeck's saints, indeed, "even the most holy saint is not completely free of sin in this life."[196] Lindbeck's model does not make much account of what Christians call backsliding, when saints sin. Simeon Zahl writes that rule theory

> places a weight on language and discursive practice that they cannot bear. . . . *[T]ext, language, and culture are not all-powerful in shaping religious life.* [I]f we seek to alter some problematic attitude or situation in religious life, *it is not enough to change which doctrines we subscribe to or to revise the practices through which religious ideas are inscribed into habit.*[197]

It is at this point we turn to a theory that brings the quest for ecumenical orthodoxy to a very intimate level.

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[191] O'Neill, "The Rule Theory of Doctrine and Propositional Truth," 431.
[192] Hesselink, "Calvin Oecumenicus," 112.
[193] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 77.
[194] Sproul, *Everyone's a Theologian*, 233.
[195] O'Neill, "The Rule Theory of Doctrine and Propositional Truth," 432.
[196] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 84.
[197] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 147-148, emphasis added.

Transformation Theory

My own theory of doctrine, transformation theory, is one which I believe is a biblically rich and easily applicable resource for Christians wishing to navigate their doctrinal disagreements. Like Lindbeck's rule theory, transformation theory recognizes that there is a link between what one believes and how one lives. However, my theory recognizes the messiness of the link between belief and practice, acknowledging that being a true Christian does not require being a perfect one. Under transformation theory, doctrines are beliefs that the Holy Spirit uses to transform the heart, and only from this inward transformation does a Christian finds herself living differently than before. Doctrines facilitate a transformative journey towards what Christians might call 'godliness', 'righteousness', or becoming 'Christ-like'. This journey is not a linear progression. It is one of ups and downs, progress and regress, victory and struggle. Transformation theory proposes that Christians should examine how their respective doctrines have led them on their own journeys of transformation; learn about the journeys of those who believe differently than they do; and finally, find unity in how they are growing spiritually despite or because of their doctrinal differences. My work draws primarily from Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* and affect theory as explicated by Donovan O. Schaefer in *Religious Affects* and as applied to theology by Simeon Zahl in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*.

Lindbeck's view of doctrines as regulations of speech, feeling, and action falls short in some important ways. Christians frequently face the issues of backsliding, hypocrisy, and apostasy. Backsliding is when those who earnestly believe in something live contrarily to their beliefs. Hypocrisy is when one claims to believe in something, but does not truly believe what they say they believe in. The nature of hypocrisy is given an analysis in Appendix II. Recently brought to bear by the exvangelical movement, apostasy is when people who once believed fall

away from their faith, often due to problematic or intolerable doctrines (purity culture being one stark example).[198] These three cases demonstrate that nothing about doctrine guarantees that it produces a certain way of life, although rule theory accounts for the fact that doctrine *can* regulate such things, and that it is at its best when it *does*. Rule theory presupposes that doctrine is or should be "intrinsically compelling,"[199] when in fact doctrines fail to produce the ways of life that they ought to. Another model must be considered that shows "how discourses [and doctrines] attach to bodies and get them to move," a model which is not "baffled when bodies sincerely 'believe' one thing and do another."[200] Even Lindbeck admits that "church doctrine is inevitably imperfect and an often misleading guide to the fundamental interconnections within a religion."[201] Why do saints sin? How can liars speak truth? Why do angels fall? These questions can be speculated on under the cultural-linguistic model but are far better discussed, I argue, through the lens of affect theory,[202] which can move us toward an ecumenical orthodoxy that is not built around shared belief, nor shared practice, but around shared transformation. "[I]t is one

[198] Apostasy, it should be noted, is not always caused by doctrines *per se*. People leave their respective traditions often due to philosophical problems such as the existence of God or the logical problem of evil, allured by naturalist worldviews which seem much more liberalized and rational. There are also much more emotional problems such as the emotional problem of evil, or the hypocrisy of the Church, or even perhaps the failure to live up to one's idea of being Christian. Yet even these things are *related* at least to doctrine. The problem of evil is related to doctrine as it draws a contradiction between the doctrine of sin, hamartiology, and the doctrine of God's goodness, omnibenevolence. Hypocrisy is also doctrinal, as it relates to doctrines of how Christians should act in accordance with Christian doctrine.

[199] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 35.

[200] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 35.

[201] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 67.

[202] I must qualify this application of Schaefer's critique of the 'linguistic fallacy'—the notion that language is the only medium of power—as if Lindbeck falls under that fallacy. Certainly, the cultural-linguistic theory is not purely linguistic. Lindbeck holds that religion and experience (and perhaps religion and affect) interact dialectically (Lindbeck, 19), and that language is only one aspect that is only emphasized, not singled out, among the various aspects of religion. Lindbeck even acknowledges that the "affective character of doctrines" supports conceptualizing doctrines as rules rather than merely propositions (the latter conceptualization would more properly fall under the 'linguistic fallacy') (90). Thus, Schaefer would not be going against Lindbeck, but rather supplementing his theory to add more materialist concern for how religion is lived by religious people. My main thrust in applying Schaefer's critique of the linguistic fallacy to Lindbeck is simply to reveal how Lindbeck's theory might be too normative and too enthusiastic about the nature of doctrine *being* regulative, and not only *potentially* regulative.

thing to assent intellectually to a doctrine, and it is quite another to be moved and transformed by it."[203]

Donovan O. Schaefer in *Religious Affects* argues that affect theory sheds light on how religion is actually lived out by people, and how religion feels, not on the private, but on the public, communal level.[204] Affects themselves are "propulsive elements of experience, thought, sensation, feeling, and action that are not necessarily captured or capturable by language or self-sovereign 'consciousness.'"[205] Anthropologist Kevin O'Neill describes affects as "similar to emotion or feeling."[206] Theologian Simeon Zahl in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* describes affect as "a mode of experience that is tethered to physical bodies and that encompasses emotion, feeling, and desire."[207] Affects are what Aristotle called 'the passions' (*NE* II.5). These passions, our affects, "[thwart] our best attempts at being perfectly rational agents,"[208] and are the "core dimensions" of Christian life "that are much more difficult to shift than doctrines or religious practices."[209] For our own purposes of applying affect theory to the nature of doctrine, we discuss four concepts: intransigence, compulsion, and accident, and the seeking system. These four notions frame the center of Christian materialist-phenomenology: the heart, which doctrines transform through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The heart figures heavily in transformation theory because of the teachings of Jesus. According to Him, it is from one's heart whence all else comes. The words one speaks, the things one does, come from what is inside a person; one's inward condition determines one's outward expressions (cf. Lk. 6:45). If one's beliefs should produce a certain way of life, then

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[203] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 2.
[204] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 8.
[205] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 23.
[206] O'Neill, "Beyond Broken," 1095.
[207] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 3.
[208] Rossano, *Supernatural Selection*, 17.
[209] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 150.

believing in something is not merely a matter of holding certain beliefs while trying to act as if one believes those beliefs. Without the inward change of the heart, there can be no true connection between belief and practice. On the Christian view, one who acts generously without a generous heart is not truly generous. But if someone has a heart that desires to be generous and loves to be generous, then that person, out of the abundance of their heart, will be generous unto others. True belief requires heart change, not behavioral modification.[210]

As important as the heart is for understanding who we are and what we do, there is a difficulty in Christian theology with emphasizing the heart. Jon Bloom in a Desiring God article cautions that the heart was "never designed to be followed, but to be led."[211] Some argue that the heart is merely "subjective, emotional inference," and that Christians should instead seek "objective truth" in God's Word.[212] Even when one's heart has been transformed by God, some insist that the heart remains unreliable,[213] since even the Christian heart is "not yet perfected."[214] The website Got Questions writes that "there is nothing more deceitful in all of creation than the heart of man because of his inherited sin nature. If we follow our heart, we follow an untrustworthy guide."[215]

This distrust in the heart seems to be a symptom of a uniquely Protestant timidity about the role of experience in doing theology. For Protestants (this paper assumes Protestant concerns, since it is written from a Protestant perspective), doctrines are derived from the Bible alone—*sola Scriptura*. Unlike Catholic or Orthodox Christians, Protestantism does not purport to draw from a magisterium or Holy Tradition. Without an authoritative source of doctrine other than the

[210] I attribute this formulation to a 'core concept' articulated by Taylor Bronisz in his early sermons.
[211] Bloom, "Don't Follow Your Heart."
[212] Got Questions, "Does the Bible say to follow your heart?"
[213] Got Questions, "Does the Bible say to follow your heart?"
[214] Troxel, "Don't Follow Your Heart."
[215] Got Questions, "Does the Bible say to follow your heart?"

Bible, Protestants, agreeing that the Bible alone should be the source of their theology, find themselves in disagreement over what the Bible says. Because of this, Protestants tend to avoid subjectivities when approaching the biblical text—feeling and experience included. Zahl observes that

> disagreement over the reliability and significance of Christian religious experience has been one of the most fundamental and enduring debates in Protestant theology from the 1520s to the present. Under the influence, first, of Martin Luther in his debates with "enthusiasts" in the 1520s, and then of Karl Barth in the early twentieth century, mainstream Protestant theology has long operated in the shadow of a deep distrust of subjective religious experience, viewing it as a phenomenon that is at best irrelevant to theology's task . . . and at worst a pernicious false substitute for genuine divine revelation.[216]

Any attention to the subjective is thus seen as "a chaotic and uncritical affirmation of the experiences of the human subject over and against God's objective Word."[217] This distrust has resulted in a false dichotomy that experience and feeling "must either be the primary ground of all theological claims or else excluded from theological method entirely."[218] Often for Protestants, the latter has been the preferential option.

However, it is important that Christians take affect and experience seriously. Experience is inevitable. "The event of being persuaded of a theological idea or position is rarely, if ever, a pristine 'rational' process."[219] Theology is embodied—it feels like something, it is experienced. It is subjective, not in the way that Protestants fear, but in quite ordinary and inescapable ways, such as finding an idea more compelling if it is sung in a hymn rather than murmured during a lecture, or how we accept criticism based on the tone and attitude of the person giving it, or how "psychological factors like mood states, anxiety, and depression appear to play a consistent and non-trivial role in how we process of [*sic*] information, including theological information."[220]

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[216] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 17.
[217] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 17.
[218] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 81.
[219] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 14.
[220] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 14.

Indeed, the chief target in Zahl's book is "a certain kind of complacency with *theological abstraction*"[221] in discussions of doctrine, "ontological language that may sound and even be theologically 'correct'" yet "[obfuscates] the question of how doctrines actually come to have experiential impact in human lives,"[222] "theological speech that gives the illusion of having said what needs to be said."[223] To avoid theological abstraction, to really take theology and doctrine seriously, we must recognize how doctrine is experienced and felt.

The sorts of experiences and feelings I am referring to are not only the extraordinary feelings experienced in religious ecstasy. Avoiding theological abstraction is not only about acknowledging how doctrines factor into mystical experience or moments of spiritual revelation, but rather "understanding the more mundane ways that 'religious experience' actually functions" in Christians' lives.[224] Keeping theology concrete means considering how we experience and feel in the day-to-day. Affects, the things we feel, are not always immediately recognizable. Rather, they "[flow] through the veins of our everyday experience."[225] Doctrines might not always lead to powerful moments of realization and spiritual formation, but they always function to shape, interpret, and generate Christians' inward lives, even when Christians do not notice it.[226]

The second reason that Christians should take experience and feeling seriously is that *taking affects seriously is nothing new*. In several debates throughout Church history, pointing out the affective consequences of doctrinal positions *accompanied* exegetical and rational arguments. John Calvin, for example, argues for the doctrine of election "not just because of

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[221] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 70, emphasis in original redacted; emphasis added.
[222] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 73.
[223] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 74.
[224] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 52.
[225] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 104.
[226] Of the doctrine of grace, for example, Zahl writes that it is "much more than just a theoretical *description* of an affective pattern associated with salvation. It is also a kind of structure for interpreting, shaping, and generating patterns of Christian experience, in light of the intransigence of sinful affects on the one hand, and the transforming agency of the Holy Spirit on the other. Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 143, emphasis in original.

exegetical-theological arguments . . . but because it is only through correct understanding of this doctrine that a certain kind of fear of God can be correctly managed and dealt with." Calvin's opponents at the Council of Trent likewise take an affective approach, asserting instead that it is proper to be fearful of God. Both sides are "attentive to the felt, emotional effects they expect belief in the doctrine to have in human lives . . . and in this they ground the effectiveness of their arguments to a significant degree in arguments about experience."[227] On the doctrine of the Incarnation, Augustine believed that believing that 'Christ has come in the flesh' is necessarily accompanied by love. "Whoever doesn't have charity, therefore, denies that Christ has come in the flesh." For Augustine, "affectively sourced behavior is more trustworthy than mere verbal consent to a doctrine, because, regardless of what a person says verbally, where the affection of love is not present, the incarnation is denied."[228] In contemporary times, purity culture has recently been criticized by both liberals and conservatives for its negative affective consequences. Rachel Joy Welcher, in an article for Christianity Today, reports "a growing movement of conversative Christians who *feel a holy discontent* with the way the evangelical movement has approached the topics of sex, marriage, and gender. We have seen harmful and unbiblical teachings perpetuated for far too long, and a needful reckoning is taking place."[229] Got Questions notes that "others have claimed that purity culture instills *a dread of mistakes* and becoming 'damaged goods.'"[230] Marshall Segal at Desiring God writes that "while teenage pregnancy and STDs did decline over the next couple decades . . . , many testified to *experiencing more shame than freedom*."[231] Carlie Cleveland in a blog post for Christian

[227] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience,* 38.
[228] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience,* 39.
[229] Welcher, "What Comes After the Purity Culture Reckoning," emphasis added.
[230] Got Questions, "What is purity culture?" Emphasis added.
[231] Segal, "Did We Kiss Purity Goodbye?" Emphasis added.

Parenting avers, "When we talk about 'purity culture' in the Church, it's often followed by *stories of hurt, anger, and regret*."[232] A quick survey of popular discourse on purity culture reveals that not only is purity culture criticized for being unbiblical, but it is condemned for being affectively harmful. Even today, Christians recognize the importance of the affective consequences of doctrines.

Where doctrines meet believers is in the heart, rather than in the mind or in outward practice. The heart challenges dichotomizations of the person into the mind/body, the fleshly/spiritual. It is simultaneously a bodily organ and a spiritual seat of being. In this respect, it bears some relation to Incarnational theology. Within the heart are thought, will, and emotion. It is a radical inwardness, from which all else pours out. It is an inwardness only God can see, a deepness that others miss (1 Sam. 16:7). It is an inwardness that deceives even the one to whom it belongs (Jer. 17:9). From the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks, and the body moves (cf. Matt. 12:34). The intention behind couching this theory in the language of the heart is pragmatic. If the best theory of doctrine for the Church is one that "organizes the data of Scripture and tradition *with a view to their use in Christian worship and life*,"[233] then the theory and its terminology must be familiar to the Church. This method might exclude the theory's ease of use to other religious communities, but it might also exemplify a paradigm which theoreticians can utilize to serve their own communities.[234]

The heart might best be understood as an assemblage of affects. Affects are intransigent, compulsory, accidental, and seeking, and they reveal what our bodies are and what they do. That

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[232] Cleveland, "Reapproaching purity culture as a parent," emphasis added.
[233] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 92, emphasis mine.
[234] However, I should note two things. First, doctrinal reconciliation is an especially (though not exclusively) intra-Christian concern. Second, since Schaefer's affect theory is religiously neutral, my findings here if anything only *prima facie* exclude the theory's ease of use to other communities which face similar concerns.

is not to say that the heart is easily reducible to some vague monistic substance called 'affectivity'. It is rather the site of conflict and contradictions, with different affections, feelings, desires, and drives pulling the body to and fro and sometimes threatening to rip it apart.

To begin with, the heart is intransigent. Schaefer describes affects as "quasi-stable" and "semiplastic."[235] Affects come from "a long-term pattern expressing a slow-motion trajectory of change within an expansive evolutionary dynamic."[236] They are many, many years in the making. A person on the evolutionary level is not a *tabula rasa*, and people within and across groups share an affective and ancient 'essence'. The heart is stubbornly fixed, but not finalized; resistant to change, but not immutable.[237] In that respect, affects are like Legos: "hard shapes that can be moved around, combined, and rearranged in the life span of an organism but that will only be seen to fundamentally transform in . . . evolutionary deep time."[238] It is relatively easy to move ourselves around, like choosing to wake up a bit earlier than normal, or correcting our posture throughout the day, but when it comes to deeper parts of ourselves, some things do not change easily.

It is because of the intransigence of affects that the heart is "so stubbornly resistant to top-down efforts at transformation."[239] Intransigence is especially helpful in thinking about the theological concept of sin. N. Gray Sutanto in an article later posted by The Gospel Coalition wrote of what is commonly called the 'sanctification gap', "that chasm between the doctrine that we know and the ideals that we long for, on the one hand, and our concrete habits and behavior that are still so often mired in sin, on the other."[240] Sutanto correctly points out that it is a "false

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[235] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 37-8.
[236] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 47.
[237] Here, Schaefer is drawing from Silvan Tomkins' basic emotions hypothesis. Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 46, emphasis mine.
[238] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 49.
[239] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 151.
[240] Sutanto, "Transformed into His Image," 23.

belief that human beings can be easily transformed from the top-down, as it were, from propositional belief to behavioral transformation."[241] On our own, we can only change ourselves so much. It is because of the intransigence of our biases, triggers, prejudices, preferences, and desires that we are often so out of our own control.

Second, the heart is compulsive, in the driver's seat of the body. So not only is it difficult for us to control it, but it is the thing which controls us! The influence that affects have on us poses a grave challenge to the notion of self-sovereignty—that we are self-made.[242] (This challenge is not so new as it might seem. Christian theology has long recognized that we do not fully control ourselves.)[243] The heart makes us

> obligatorily affective: . . . in every moment, seeking, desiring, and flowing in anticipation of all kinds of things. . . . Affect theory . . . corrects the presupposition . . . that we can dictate to our bodies how to feel about our world. . . . It shifts the focus from religion as an ensemble of well-thought-out rationales to *the animal religion of endless chase*, being en cavale: our fragility, our compulsion, and our need.[244]

Religion is pursuit, and the heart is the driver. Affects "are their own imperatives, . . . pulling our bodies behind them."[245] Sometimes we have a sense that we are in pursuit of some unknown purpose or threshold in life, without being able to give a name to it. Other times, we might desire something for days on end, but upon attaining it, we are only left disappointed. But always, we live for our desires. We speak up in class from the desire to show others what we know; we drive safely on the road from the desire to live; we get out from the desire to not be alone; and we stay in from the desire to avoid the scrutiny and ruckus of the outside world.

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[241] Sutanto, "Transformed into His Image," 24.
[242] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 94.
[243] Zahl writes that "the critical power of contemporary discourse about affect in the humanities seems to lie in part in its unknowing rearticulation of the Lutheran doctrine of the bondage of the will under the guise of critique of the post-Enlightenment 'fantasy of sovereignty.'" Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 153.
[244] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 100, emphasis mine.
[245] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 101.

Schaefer writes of affects themselves as possessing agency, like "a herd of animals moving through us."[246] The heart itself has a will, but not in the liberal sense of autonomy (self-law). It is a *nomos* that is deeper than the self that we recognize as us. The compulsion of affects reveals a pre-autonomy that sometimes wills things that we do not want nor anticipate. The heart drives us to look at things we do not intend to look at, to say things that we do not mean to say, to do things that we would not have done had we our wits about us. It is as if our affects, feelings, and desires "have a simple mind of their own."[247]

Third, each heart is uniquely unpredictable. Schaefer refers to this as 'accident'. Each person has had such wildly different experiences that we are stubborn in different ways, prone to different habits, and we react to things differently than others do. The paths that our bodies have taken are hard to map, and because of this, our hearts can be utterly unpredictable—we surprise ourselves. Schaefer illustrates accident with a discussion of evangelical Hell Houses, events that operate during Halloween season. Hell Houses are like haunted houses, but with a theological agenda. They scare people from sin by depicting the consequences of sinful living. However, Schaefer brings up a curious phenomenon. Some Hell House operators do not depict sex scenes (these scenes would be intended to show the 'horrors' of adultery and fornication), fearing that the actors in these scenes might become more than actors; that the audience might not be horrified but titillated.[248] As Hell Houses show, our bodies are not easily contained, and our hearts do not always follow the programs we want them to. This is what anthropologist Kevin O'Neill means when he writes of "affective misfires."[249] There is an unpredictability to the heart.

[246] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 109.
[247] Panksepp, *The Archaeology of Mind*, 96.
[248] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 168-9.
[249] O'Neill, "Beyond Broken," 1103.

"Affects easily crash through the barricades of discursive apparatuses,"[250] and our journeys in life "[lead] to highly individualized patterns of arousal" and response to our environment.[251]

Here is another example of affective misfire. A White Methodist minister once preached a sermon to a Black congregation in the late 19th century. He preached about liberation and freedom from slavery in Egypt, that God would arise and scatter His enemies. There was 'yes' and 'amen' from the congregation, and the minister, who was speaking figuratively of slavery to sin, only found out later that the congregation took his words literally. The intention of the preacher did not match the reception of the people. He was preaching a pie-in-the-sky message while his audience was enraptured by the thought of real liberty. This story testifies to the fact that our hearts lead us to see the world differently, to bear witness to certain truths differently, to take certain words differently than others—it is not only about a whole congregation happening to misinterpret a preacher.[252]

The unpredictable uniqueness of the heart upsets "the metaphysical presupposition that a *logos,* a fundamentally intelligible form of rationality, permeates our bodies and worlds."[253] Each heart is unique in its affective makeup, unpredictably acting and reacting to the world it is in.[254]

The fourth insight comes from Jaak Panksepp's work in neuroevolutionary science, what he calls the 'seeking system'. This is a system in animals (including humans) that sustains us in the in-between of things: the search for food in-between hunger and satiation; the search for meaning in-between despair and fulfillment.[255] The heart is conceptually, if not biologically, a

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[250] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 169.
[251] Panksepp, *The Archaeology of Mind*, 107.
[252] Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 268-9.
[253] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 164.
[254] O'Neill, "Beyond Broken," 1102.
[255] Panksepp lists other examples: while setting up a surprise party we are propelled by our anticipation for the surprise to be had; when we are scared, we run as fast as we can to safety because we anticipate safety. The seeking system animates us through the various tensions in our lives, and the seeking itself has a certain pleasure even before we have found what we are seeking. Panksepp, *The Archaeology of Mind*, 99.

seeking system. It is always in pursuit of something.[256] Some pursuits are simple biological needs, like attaining food or sleep.[257] But beyond the basics, the system is also concerned with "more complex social needs" like our desires for fellowship, solitude, or religious experience, needs that cause "affective distress."[258] It is this system that drives Christians to encounter God in worship services, when they are in-between loneliness and fellowship. This system is what keeps faith sustained even when the thing one hopes for has not yet arrived, or even when one's beliefs do not quite make sense. The heart is forward leaning. It "participates in all appetitive behaviors that precede consumption; it generates the urge to search for any and all of the 'fruits' of the environment" and of the Spirit.[259]

When it comes to the "more complex social needs," the heart can get quite messy. It is not always guaranteed to seek out what is best for us. It "responds to greed as well as to need . . . sensitive to any and all rewards that are within one's grasp."[260] Sometimes, these rewards can even become addictive.[261]

> [I]t is easy to understand how this system can engender various excessive activities in modern societies that offer so many temptations. We are prone to overeat, smoke when it is unwise, and drink to excess. Many of us are workaholics. Drug addiction is rife. We are overeager to check our emails, to gamble, and to indulge in ill-advised sexual dalliances. In short, our seeking systems can all too easily urge us to indulge in a wide range of activities without our stopping to carefully consider what we are doing.[262]

Even our intellectual activities (among which theology and doctrine are numbered) are spurred on by the heart, "a complex knowledge- and belief-generating machine."[263]

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[256] Indeed, the heart seeks even if we are unawares of it. Panksepp: "We are always on the lookout for something that we might need or want, or something that might simply interest us and satisfy our curiosity." The system "keeps us in a general state of engagement with the world." Panksepp, *The Archaeology of Mind*, 102.
[257] Panksepp, *The Archaeology of Mind*, 100.
[258] Panksepp, *The Archaeology of Mind*, 100.
[259] Panksepp, *The Archaeology of Mind*, 103.
[260] Panksepp, *The Archaeology of Mind*, 100.
[261] Panksepp, *The Archaeology of Mind*, 101.
[262] Panksepp, *The Archaeology of Mind*, 101. Note on this and following citations: in the original, Panksepp writes 'seeking' in all capitals. As such, any occurrence of 'SEEKING' in the text is rendered in lower case letters here.
[263] Panksepp, *The Archaeology of Mind*, 103.

The seeking system also sheds light on the religious nature of our hearts. "One driving force behind human religions is our affective nature, especially our desperate need for nurturance and understanding, to ward off grief through community, and often with the desire to seek a higher good."[264] Since the heart is always seeking, it is very demanding, and hardly ever satisfied. A core insight from popular apologetics is that worldly things will never be enough to satisfy a person's desire for fulfillment. Sex, drugs, money, clout, attention—these things are limited and insufficient, and they will never be enough.

> As Augustine argues, . . . objects in the world are not designed to provide lasting satisfaction or to help us in our deepest needs. They are meant to be "used" for the sake of enjoying God, from whom their goodness derives, rather than to be "enjoyed" as ends in themselves. The ontology of creation is such that created things will always fail us when treated as ends in themselves; the nature of sin is such that we will keep trying to treat them as ends in themselves anyway.[265]

As Panksepp writes, the seeking system is "calmed by consuming things that have been desired, but it will not be calm for long if the satisfaction does not last."[266] How rare it is that the satisfaction which we crave once attained lasts long enough for us to be satisfied!

Now that the theological concept of the heart has been examined, we turn to the nature of doctrine. Schaefer frames religion as "systems of practice . . . that reconfigure affects."[267] Though the contemporary field of religious studies tends to focus on religious practice to the exclusion of belief, Schaefer does not quite rule it out. In fact, affect theory views belief itself as a bodily practice, an activity just like praying, dancing, or reading are. Per the name 'transformation theory', I am arguing that doctrines, in the context of theological disagreement, must be understood primarily as transformative, designed to change the heart to produce more

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[264] Panksepp, *The Archaeology of Mind*, 116.
[265] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 174.
[266] Panksepp, *The Archaeology of Mind*, 107.
[267] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 56-7. This is a secular statement. Under the notion of intransigence, religion can only reconfigure affects, which are made stubborn to fundamental change through evolutionary timescales. Since I am approaching affect theory from a theological or pre-theological perspective, I differ from Schaefer in saying that affects *are* intransigent, but there is Someone who can transform them despite that fact.

Christ-like ways of speaking, acting, and feeling. As Schultz writes, there is a "dynamic capacity of discourse [including doctrines] to produce change in the world."[268] Life for Christians is colored by their beliefs in doctrines, as the doctrines they believe in "construct the world" and "materialize as feelings" in response to situations around them (such as 'God provides' during a moment of financial crisis, or 'God is good' in a moment of blessing).[269] Doctrines affect how Christians feel, governing the "limits of emotional possibility,"[270] making belief "a condition of feeling."[271] Belief in doctrine "is something that takes place in time, in the actual historical experience of a given individual."[272] To believe in a doctrine is not only "an acceptance of Christian logic," but "a relational process of self-articulation and transformation."[273]

Doctrines do not so much inform minds as they transform hearts. They are "designed to compel"[274] and produce certain affects within us.[275] But affects are not simply transmitted from doctrines to the heart unilaterally. If that were the case, believing in Jesus's command not to worry (Matt. 6:25-34) would simply result in one not ever worrying. In reality, we and our beliefs are in a back-and-forth relationship, a "queer recursion."[276] Just as our beliefs can change our hearts, so too do our hearts select what we believe in sometimes irrational ways. A Calvinist, for example, might believe in predestination because a sovereign God is more compelling to her than a God who is not sovereign. An Arminian might believe in free will because a God who predestines people to hell seems less loving than a God who allows people to choose. A Molinist may be a Molinist simply because choosing either side feels naïve, and that the middle ground

[268] Schultz, "How Does Faith Feel?" 510.
[269] Schultz, "How Does Faith Feel?" 510.
[270] Schultz, "How Does Faith Feel?" 513.
[271] Schultz, "How Does Faith Feel?" 516.
[272] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 127.
[273] Schultz, "How Does Faith Feel?" 515.
[274] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 118.
[275] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 119.
[276] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 66.

feels more sophisticated, nuanced, and intelligent. These three people select their doctrines based on how those doctrines appeal to their hearts, even as those doctrines once selected reinforce their already-held attitudes and feelings. The same holds for more difficult interactions between the heart and its doctrines. A person who is prone to gossip might find the command not to gossip rather hard to follow, even if he believes it. "It is true that theological doctrines and religious practices do shape and form affects, and it is no less true that affects tend to resist [and pattern] such shaping and forming."[277]

The interplay between the doctrines that one believes and the heart that one has ought to be a helpful concept for Christians. When approaching theological disagreement, it is helpful to acknowledge that one's beliefs are tied closely to who one is—one's beliefs are embedded in one's history. It is undeniable (though some will try to deny it) that "religious beliefs both arise and play out in a complex entanglement of arguments, feelings, social contexts, and practices."[278] "Affective and experiential factors do not disappear. They just go 'underground', and continue their work unrecognized and unexamined."[279] It would be fruitful for Christians engaged in theological disagreement to recognize how their positions have resulted from the pickings and choosings of their heart, recognizing that neither party in the disagreement is a brain on sticks that selects their beliefs objectively.

There must be something said about the 'truth value' of doctrines under a transformation theory of doctrine. For Lindbeck, the ontological truth of doctrines is beside the point, because doctrines as doctrines only regulate speech and practice in religious communities. Under transformation theory, the ontological truth value of doctrines is still relevant, though it is not the

[277] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Religious Experience*, 152.
[278] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Religious Experience*, 40.
[279] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Religious Experience*, 26.

only thing that must be considered when thinking about doctrines, especially in the context of theological disagreement. Truth, in the teachings of Jesus, *does* something. "'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, *and the truth will make you free*'" (*Jn.* viii.31-33, NRSV, emphasis added). But in terms of believing the truth, there is truth obtained and truth unobtained. Truth unobtained is when one gives superficial assent to the truth but is not set free by this truth (meaning, they are not transformed by truth). On the other hand, the truth of doctrines is obtained when a believer's heart is transformed in light of the truth that they know, and their heart becomes more like the heart of God. "Truth," Schaefer avers, "is a configuration of affect."[280] Doctrines *as propositions* are indeed concerned with propositional truth, but only as propositions. Propositions do not care about how you live. Doctrines *as doctrines*, however, do. To believe in a doctrine is to be transformed. "Theological doctrines are not just truth claims, but also function to shape and generate patterns of affective experience."[281] Doctrines are both/and, not either/or when it comes to truth and affective effects.

To further explore how doctrine transforms the heart, what happens when religion and doctrine do not work? Surely, doctrine is not inherently compelling. Seeds can be sown on the path, on rocky ground, among thorns, or on good soil (Matt. 13:4-8). Transformation theory must account for why doctrines are affective, and why they are at other times not.

As aforementioned, Lindbeck's rule theory does not easily account for why doctrines fail to regulate speech and action. If the unity of the Church is to be found in a shared Christian way of life, what are we to make of those who fail to live up such a high standard, even when they try? And what about hypocrisy? Apostasy? If doctrines should produce a certain way of life, then what use has doctrine served Christendom throughout its long and bloody and hypocritical

[280] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 119.
[281] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience,* 146.

history? One who accepts rule theory might speculate about doctrine's failure, but ultimately rule theory assumes that doctrines guarantee a certain way of life. Not so. Bodies do not ask doctrines how high when doctrines tell them to jump. *Something* makes doctrines work. The best theory of doctrine must account for why doctrines function as rule theory says they ought to (in producing certain ways of life, speech, and action), but also for why they fail. I have previously listed the anomalies for rule theory: backsliding, hypocrisy, and apostasy. For our purposes here, I only discuss backsliding.

Why do saints sin? If doctrines are not inherently compulsory—for if they were, backsliding would not occur, and the Christian life would be an easy one—then what ties doctrine to practice? If doctrines are supposed to be transformative, how do we address "the problem of moral non-transformation in Christians?"[282] In his discussion of the compulsory nature of affects, Schaefer brings up Lauren Berlant's notion of cruel optimism. An optimism is an attachment to something or some goal which can feel pleasant or dangerous, beneficial or detrimental.[283] Optimisms (synonymous with compulsions, for Schaefer) can be merciful, cruel, or somewhere in between, but are at all times "not necessarily well thought out."[284] Through cruel attachments, our hearts can lead us away from the person we want to be, from the God we want to love, from the people we want to serve.

> Cruel optimism appears when you ask yourself why you can't be the person you want to be, or when your thoughts and desires and the look on your face come out wrong. Or when you try to talk yourself out of something, but your words only echo in the room, leaving faint etchings on the surface of your body, which then does whatever the hell it wants. . . . Cruel optimism is the incoherent but binding mess of our plural desires, attachments, tetherings to worlds in ways that exceed a fresh and orderly arrangement of affects as indicators of health or well-being.[285]

In another age and place, St. Paul wrote something of the like.

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[282] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 81.
[283] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 103.
[284] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 104.
[285] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 105.

> I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me (Rom. 7:14-20).[286]

Cruel optimisms show that affects are at work on us "even when the self is looking away,"[287] and when they flare up, the "nonsovereignty of the self blazes through."[288] Cruel optimisms are not overcome by repeating psalms and prayers or remembering doctrines. Doctrines *can* shape our cruel optimisms, but often times they do not.

So, how does doctrine transform the heart, despite its inability to transform hearts by itself? The answer given by Simeon Zahl is pneumatological. Christian transformation is the work of the Spirit. The Spirit first convicts a person of their sins, their "existing problematic and painful affects," their cruel optimisms. This conviction brings "greater awareness . . . to forces and feelings that are present in the body but which have hitherto been shrouded, misinterpreted, or numbed."[289] Suddenly, it becomes even harder to break bad habits or detrimental demeanors once we know what we are fighting against. Christian theology makes just as good sense of human nature as Berlant's cruel optimism does, but it also goes further. The Holy Spirit through doctrines reveals problematic, sinful affects and attachments for what they are, and might even make them worse,[290] but through doctrines is offered "*the possibility of hope* for a

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[286] I must note that Paul's bifurcation of flesh/spirit may *prima facie* pose problems for our notion of the heart, which resists such dichotomizations of the person into the body/mind. I think Paul could be read in an interesting way, which is outside the scope of this paper. Recall that the heart is both bodily and spiritual. Carrying this into the text, we might ascertain a complexity to the heart, made of both flesh and spirit, always at war within itself, unified yet divided. This would make sense under affect theory, since affects, some worldly and others godly, can coexist inside the same bricolage, effecting mass internal angst, conflict, and struggle.
[287] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 103.
[288] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 105.
[289] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 172.
[290] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 174.

deliverance."[291] Augustine's view is especially fruitful in thinking about the work of the Spirit as the transformation of the Christian's desires.

> The transformation of desire does not take place simply by divine fiat, or through a mysterious ontological implantation of a new capacity for desiring God. Rather, *it happens through a providentially ordered process of God attracting and persuading the sinner to hate sin and love righteousness in the context of the particularities of their life.* God sanctifies by operating in the life of the Christian to make himself delightful and by causing sin to delight no longer.[292]

For Augustine, transformation is a process by which Christians learn to live in light of and in love with God. This transformation is facilitated through many means, and doctrine is but one.

The doctrine of justification, how a person comes to faith in Christ and is counted as righteous before God, illustrates how "a shift in doctrine . . . might in fact have a strong and plausible connection to particular emotional, psychological states."[293]

> When the "doctrine" changes . . . from something like "God judges sinners like me" to "in Christ God accepts me fully and will judge me no longer"—this entails a change in the "cognitive basis" of the emotion of terror. Such a change, if it actually takes place, cannot but result in . . . the dissolution of feelings of fear and the kindling of feelings like peace, joy, and gratitude.
> . . . Indeed, we might say that it is psychologically *necessary* for some such deep affective response to take place, *if* real belief . . . is involved. [294]

Real belief is like what Lindbeck calls learning how "to feel, act, and think in conformity with a religious tradition that is, in its inner structure, far richer and more subtle than can be explicitly articulated."[295] This richness and subtlety is more on the part of the Spirit rather than the religious tradition. And "[becoming] a new creature through hearing and interiorizing the language that speaks of Christ,"[296] under Zahl's view, is not so much due to hearing and interiorizing the Christian religion, but rather due to the Holy Spirit who gives the hearer ears to hear and eyes to see (cf. Matt 13: 9). Here, Zahl carefully stays within the lines of Protestant

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[291] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 175, emphasis added.
[292] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 190, emphasis added.
[293] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 134.
[294] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 134, emphasis in original.
[295] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 21.
[296] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 48.

sensibilities about grace, describing "the Spirit's saving work in such a way that . . . does not ultimately exclude . . . the radically unconditional and unearned character of grace."[297] It is not by our own efforts that we transform, but by the work of the Spirit.

> To speak of the work of the Spirit in the transformation of human affects and desires is to . . . make sense of real bodily change without needing to appeal to the deliberate and conscious cooperation of the one in whom the Spirit is working. It is thus theological attention to affect and desire that . . . [preserves] the unilateral quality of grace and the correspondingly more pessimistic view of natural and graced human powers . . . without having to evacuate the body and its experiences from theological description of salvation.[298]

This transformation does not always follow a rigid protocol. Each heart unpredictably unique and so too is the Spirit's work within those hearts.[299] Each Christian experiences the Spirit in different ways, at different times, and is transformed to different degrees. "All we can usefully say is that it is God the Spirit who works upon us to foster delight in him and his ways and dismay over sin. We can know that we have experienced renewed delight in God, or new regret over some particular sin, without being able to understand and explain" it with absolute precision.[300] In addition to working within people in different ways, the Spirit works within the same person in different ways. There is "short-duration" transformation in the case of "specific emotions," like the Spirit turning mourning into dancing (cf. Ps. 30:11), and there is "long-term dispositional change" in the case of "desire and its transformation," such as a grumpy person slowing changing into a more joyful and grateful one.[301] In the lives of Christians, "the regenerating work of the Spirit . . . constitutes a real change in the believer that begins with changes in the affections and results in new behaviors."[302] Transformation moves from the inside to the outside.

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[297] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 109.
[298] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 143.
[299] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 202.
[300] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 205.
[301] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 77.
[302] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 129.

Through Zahl's theological retrieval from the Reformers and Augustine, we can make sense of the journey towards godliness as an affective and embodied one. Unlike rule theory, transformation theory recognizes that it is not doctrines that transform a person—it is the Spirit that does. And it is the freedom of the Spirit and the peculiarities of the heart that explain the messiness of the Christian life.

This brings us to the climax of transformation theory, what makes it the best approach towards an ecumenical orthodoxy. Under transformation theory, the Christian life is one of continual, foundational, nonlinear transformation of a Christian's heart to become more like the heart of God. Being Christian means that the Holy Spirit kindles certain affects (such as love, joy, peace, and so on, Gal. 5:22-23) and desires (such as desiring God instead of the things that God has made for their own sakes) within a believer's inner life. If doctrines are affectively transformative, it could be that *different doctrines can be used by the Holy Spirit to kindle similar or complementary affects within different Christians*! Perhaps the most important line in Schaefer for this study: "Affect theory proposes that we need to consider the possibility that although the distribution, significations, and permutations of bodily practices (*including discourses*) are varied, *they nonetheless can yield more or less consistent effects and affects across bodies*."[303]

The Holy Spirit for Christians brings about affective common ground. This means that Christians will find themselves feeling the same love towards Jesus, desiring the same things of God. For example, a Christian who holds to young earth creationism will have affective common ground with a Christian evolutionist: both feel committed to making sense of the world in light of science and Scripture. But it does not stop at affective common ground. The Holy Spirit,

[303] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 57, emphasis added.

through doctrinal diversity, brings about *complementary* affects, dispositions, emotions, and desires among Christians. A Calvinist who believes in God's utter sovereignty will live out her Christianity feeling, acting, and speaking in light of His sovereignty. An Arminian who believes that God gives free will to humans will live out his Christianity feeling, acting, and speaking in light of God's loving generosity. One Christian feels God's power and reign, while the other Christian feels God's love and generosity. God is all of these at once, but these two Christians, perhaps because of their personal histories and because of the will of the Spirit, are energized and transformed by certain attributes of God more than others. This is perhaps why Paul writes of the Church as a body.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes to the church at Corinth that there are different spiritual gifts, services, and activities, and that they all come from "the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses" (1 Cor. 12:11). He then goes on to compare the Corinthian church to a body:

> Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. . . . If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? *As it is, there are many members, yet one body*. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." . . . But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it (1 Cor. 12:14-26, emphasis mine).

Paul's notion of the body helps us to see how Christians can have different gifts, emotions, feelings, ways of being, and hearts, and yet receive them all from God. They can have common ground, but they can also complement one another, not despite but because of their theological disagreements. Therefore, Christians who disagree should find how the Spirit has used their respective positions to shape them more like Christ in either similar or complementary ways.

Thus, we have discussed affect theory and how it can shed light on the Christian theological-anthropological notion of the heart, as something that is resistant to change, compulsory, unpredictably unique, ever in pursuit, and hardly ever satisfied. I have argued that doctrines are transformative, not in and of themselves, but by the power of the Holy Spirit in producing new ways of life. Doctrines as such reconfigure and regenerate one's affective makeup to make hearts of flesh out of hearts of stone (cf. Ezek. 11:36:26). This transformation is difficult and nonlinear. It is a transformative journey that looks different for everyone. And it is this very transformation around which Christians should rally around.

Discussion

The Christian Life – One in the Spirit, Many in Witness

I believe we have arrived at a faithful and applicable way of thinking about doctrine that can help Christians navigate their many disagreements. Under transformation theory, doctrines are tools that the Spirit uses to transform the hearts of Christians. To believe is to be transformed. Transformation theory reveals what the Christian life is like (*see* Figure 3), giving deeper meaning to unity and diversity, counseling Christians on how to navigate their theological disagreements. The Christian life is a journey in search of godliness, and along that journey, Christians learn more and more about what it is they are seeking for (cf. Matt. 7:7). The way forward is difficult. Christianity is a journey in which Christians have the intransigent stubbornness of their hearts fundamentally subverted and transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our hearts are intransigent, lest anyone boast (Eph. 2.9). It is a journey that, because of

the uniqueness of each Christian's heart, and because of the freedom of the Spirit, looks different—sometimes incredibly different—for each person.

It is a journey that is nonlinear. Hearts are lamentably difficult to be changed. Christians face backsliding, grace, difficulty, and the overcoming of those difficulties, throughout their lives. It would be a mistake to think of the Christian life as a simple journey of growth without struggle and failure.[304] For each Christian, transformation is unique because the Spirit, as well as hearts, is quite unpredictable.[305] Some Christians grow at different paces, others flourish in certain capacities. A cradle Christian might not have had a dramatic experience of God that they can pin down as the moment when they got saved. Another Christian might have had a very dramatic experience of God the moment they became Christian.[306] One Christian might never have had trouble with spreading gossip, while gossip might be a never-ending struggle for another. The journeys of transformation which Christians are led through are always entangled in the Spirit's will and their own personal histories.[307] But always, Christians must remember that it is the Spirit, not themselves, that saves and changes them for the better, that "even the most untransformed Christian sinner can and must still be treated . . . as a justified Christian, and that even the most transformed Christian must still be treated . . . as a sinner in need of overwhelming divine grace."[308]

The life of a Christian is a bit of a mystical one. In some areas, it seems within a Christian's control, such as practicing certain habits (like praying for one's enemies) to gain

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[304] Zahl concurs, as he writes against a "fundamental orientation towards progressive growth in holiness that I am not convinced is borne out in Christian experience." Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 188.
[305] "It is no surprise that experiences of salvation and sanctification can and will exhibit the sort of variation, and the resistance to being definitively pinned down to a precise moment . . ." Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 202.
[306] Listen to such a story in this interview with former gangster Johnny Chang. Under The Influence Show, "Ex-Gang Member Saves Us From A Life of HELL ft. @Johnny-Chang of @SoftWhiteUnderbelly."
[307] See Zahl's discussion on Peter and the three cock crows. Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 207.
[308] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 230.

certain virtues (being more loving of one's enemies). But other times, habituation simply does not work; there is still more work to be done that belongs more to the Spirit than to the Christian, although the Christian has her part to play, too.[309] "Whether a given practice or exhortation will be transformative" for a particular Christian is something that only the Spirit knows, and something that one must simply see and find out.[310] Will a Bible study grow a Christian more, or will joining a small group? Or perhaps both? The Christian should try them out and see how the Spirit wants to teach him (Ps. 34:8).

The Christian life is also not a private ordeal. If that were so, the Church would have never been instituted. As Schultz puts it, "belief-as-non-proposition [that is, true belief which shapes the heart] is accordingly always political, as collective desires develop in relation to shared beliefs."[311] The affects, emotions, and desires that the Spirit transforms tend to be social ones. That is, whatever inward transformation that a Christian experiences invariably affects how they treat or perceive themselves, others, and God. The abundance of the heart makes a splash in the world (cf. Matt. 12:34). As Zahl puts it, "the transformation of desire is implicitly a political event, not just a [private] psychological one."[312] The kindling of love within the Christian heart is an ample example:

> to participate in divine love by loving our neighbor . . . will draw us to see the world through the eyes of those around us, feeling their joy and as well as their pain, and compelling and inspiring us . . . to restore relationships, to seek forgiveness, to foster flourishing, and to meet others in the context of their particular needs and desires.[313]

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[309] "A major weakness of accounts of Christian transformation that depend primarily or exclusively on the processes of habituation is thus their one-sided notion of the chronology of salvation. A compelling account must . . . make sense of the more rapid and disjunctive dimensions of Christian experience of the Spirit, not just of the long-term changes wrought by the slow inscription of habit upon bodies and hearts." Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 212.
[310] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 215.
[311] Schultz, "How Does Faith Feel?" 529.
[312] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 223.
[313] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 224.

Love, like all the rest of the Christian affections (joy, peace, patience, kindness, and so on), reaches out to others. Love is political, even though "love cannot be legislated," as Falwell once said.[314]

It is such that the Christian life looks different for every Christian. Since doctrines are a part of the Christian life, in that they are instruments that the Spirit uses to transform Christians, Christians in their uniqueness, by the Spirit in His freedom, will inevitably arrive at different doctrinal positions and opinions. These positions nonetheless teach them about some real aspect of God or of the world, and some positions might be more effective tools of the Spirit than others. Still other positions might be detrimental to a Christian's walk with Christ because it brings about too much shame or pressure. But transformation theory is a gracious theory. It is a "theology of sanctification that sees grace as indexed to the very 'worst' Christians [and does not] try to establish who has and has not been transformed by the Spirit and how far."[315] Christians should be careful in judging who is 'in' and who is 'out' just because of how transformed another person has become, especially regarding the particular doctrines another Christian has come to hold!

The Gifts of Diversity and Disagreement

Theological diversity is a work of the Spirit. Because humans have an imperfect understanding of God and the world, and because of our cruel optimisms and attachments, theological diversity is equally a result of our limited understanding and imperfect thought processes. But the sort of diversity that is a gift of the Spirit should not be a diversity that divides, but a diversity that abides. Meaning, theological diversity can be a blessing.

[314] Falwell, "Ministers and Marches," 16.
[315] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 230.

Let us think about two cases, one in which diversity is a gift of the Spirit and another in which disagreement is a gift of the Spirit. In the first case, there is a Calvinist who believes in a fully sovereign God, and an Arminian who believes in a loving God who, out of His love, gives free will to humans. Let us say that the Spirit is at work within both, teaching one about the power of God, and the other about God's freeing love. This diversity, even before it surfaces as a disagreement, is a work of God. These Christians, rather than battling out an abstract debate over hermeneutics and theology, must first learn about the transformative nature of the other's position. Then, they can be blessed by each other, each learning how God has been at work in the other, and perhaps learning something for oneself.

In the second case, consider a Christian who is engulfed in shame because he has become 'impure' according to the teachings on sexuality as his church, and another Christian who has learned about the harmful effects of purity culture. In this case, theological diversity is a work of humans rather than the Spirit, and so the Spirit presents these Christians with a different kind of gift. Here, one Christian can share a more gracious understanding of sexuality that can lead to a more gracious journey of growth than the endless shame and regret that purity culture has dragged the other toward. Here, disagreement is a gift of the Spirit to mend unholy diversity and restore transformative unity, with the two Christians now transforming together.

These two examples are simple, but I hope they are sufficiently illustrative. In cases like the first, diversity is a gift of the Spirit because He chooses to work in different ways, according to His will and to the histories of those He works within. Diversity of thought and doctrine is a beautiful thing when it is done by the Spirit. As a work of the Spirit, doctrinal diversity itself has a transformative purpose. By learning from other Christians, one can deepen one's understanding of how the Spirit works in other people in different ways, and maybe even broaden one's own

understanding of God and the world. Relationships can also be forged between Christians who disagree. Theological debate can find a more loving and gracious starting point, rather than two disembodied talking heads rattling at each other with no end in sight (such is the nature of many theological arguments).

In cases like the second, disagreement is God's gift to the Church. There are times when Christians get it wrong, and harmfully so. This sort of wrongness is not only propositional. Getting a doctrine wrong also hurts one's heart and potentially those around oneself. Disagreement in these cases is an act of love, an act of holding other Christians accountable, pointing the other person toward the truth and away from a heart of stone, for that is the thing that false doctrines create. This makes disagreement incredibly important, especially on matters with political and social effects like sexuality, the prison system, racism, and war. A typical controversy that I have encountered again and again is over spirituality and mental health. Some claim that depression and anxiety are demonic, and that if only people had enough faith in God, He would 'heal' them. This doctrine leads to despair for those who have prayed to God to take their mental illness away in vain, even leading some to doubt their very status as Christians for having mental illnesses to begin with. In these cases, to disagree is to love, and controversy is a gift of the Spirit to correct harmful ways of thinking which lead people away from God and the Church. In the Christian life, with spiritual growth comes better discernment between when is the time to celebrate diversity, and when is the time to disagree on an issue. Both diversity and disagreement can be gifts from God.

A Higher Unity

When unity is brought up in conversations between Christians, it can sound abstract, but nice. The understanding that Christians have of unity is tied to their understanding of doctrine, since doctrine plays such an integral part in unity. Perhaps since doctrines have been viewed as merely propositions, it is such that unity has come to mean merely propositional consensus, whether on every point of doctrine, or on a limited set of essential ones.

To understand doctrine as transformative is to re-conceptualize unity. If the Holy Spirit uses doctrines to transform Christians, then doctrinal unity is the way in which Christians are made to transform together. This does not mean that everyone will be transformed the same way. Indeed, "the transformation of desire will never take place in exactly the same way twice."[316] Nor does this mean that everyone will be transformed in only similar ways. Rather, doctrinal unity is the shared transformation of Christians who both agree and disagree. It is because of their common ground and difference that Christians transform in similar *and* complementary ways.

Christians can take their similarities in transformation to be apologetical and evangelistic, and they can take their complementary journeys of transformation to be edifying and exhortative. Take first the similarity in transformation among all Christians. There is something beautifully unique about the transformation that the Holy Spirit leads all Christians on, across culture, time, and language. That is to say, there is something distinctly Christian that Christians and churches can tap into when placing their faith into conversation with other religious or intellectual traditions (as is the task of apologetics) as well as sharing their faith with others (which is the task of evangelism). It has been noted before that concerns for unity have tended to be

[316] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 215.

apologetical, that "we must have unity in order to make the gospel credible before a watching world."[317] That is, unity shows something about the truth of Christianity. Indeed, in Jesus's prayer that John records in his Gospel, He prays, "I ask not only on behalf of these [my disciples], but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, *so that the world may believe that you have sent me*" (Jn. 17:20-21, emphasis added). Christian unity is an apologetical argument.[318]

Second, consider how Christians transform in complementary ways. The complementary nature of Christian transformation, I argue, is edifying and exhortative. It is a joy to learn how other Christians think differently than oneself, and how their differences have taught them things about God that one might not know or have a good grasp on. Doctrinal diversity, at least the diversity that is a gift from God, is an opportunity for Christians to learn about one another and grow together. When it is disagreement that is a gift of the Spirit, so to amend the harmful disagreements that Christians have created for themselves, it is disagreement that is an opportunity for Christians to lovingly correct each other to ensure that they are on the right path of spiritual growth. Thus, whether disagreement is necessary or not, doctrinal diversity is cause for encouragement, mutual understanding, and growth.

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[317] The notion of the 'watching world' is an especially interesting one. It makes Christian unity into somewhat of a performative act and centers all the world's attention upon the Christian community. This seems to be the opposite of doctrinal paranoia (the constant fear of the inauthenticity of the other Christians one encounters). It appears to be a paranoia of how the Church on the whole is performing for the world, a paranoia of division that would make one's faith incredible to billions of people who are always watching. Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 106.

[318] Lewis writes, "Ever since I became a Christian I have thought that the best, perhaps the only, service I could do for my unbelieving neighbours was to explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times. . . . I think we must admit that the discussion of these disputed points has no tendency at all to bring an outsider into the Christian fold. So long as we write and talk about them we are much more likely to deter him from entering any Christian communion than to draw him into our own." For Lewis, the unity of the Church has apologetical use and Christian division accomplishes the opposite. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, viii.

This is a higher unity, a doctrinal ecumenism with a reason. It is not 'unity for unity's sake', but rather a continuing act of worship and thanksgiving to the Spirit from whom transformation comes. This ecumenical worship may look like learning about others' spiritual stories whether they share the same doctrines as oneself or not, or even stepping into another's story as it is still being written to correct or be corrected by them to grow better together.

Accounting for Doctrinal Distinctions

Transformation theory can also account for why sorting doctrines into different categories (such as essential/nonessential doctrines, or first-, second-, and third-order doctrines) seems intuitive for some Christians. Categories in themselves do not really exist. Rather, categories are things that we develop to make sense of the world around us. 'Essential' and 'nonessential' are labels that we create, and being able to create labels for different doctrines does not mean we are revealing or describing what doctrines are or what is going on.[319] As Ortlund avers, "real life is more complicated that neat categories allow."[320] However, the categories of the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction and theological triage *make sense*—that is why they are so popular and compelling. The affective nature of doctrine reveals why this is so.

The Spirit works in total liberty, and what He does looks different in everyone. However, it seems that there are certain doctrines which the Spirit tends to use, because, when truly believed, these doctrines bring about certain affections and desires that are essential or at least really important to Christian transformation. It is the Spirit who "determines to a very significant

[319] I am grateful to Dr. Richard Wood for this brilliant insight. It corrected me from producing an incredibly extensive taxonomy of doctrines in the very early stages of my research.
[320] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 123.

degree which sorts of arguments or positions a given theologian or community of theologians believe to be most worthy of attention, repair, explication, attack, or support."[321] As we have said before, there are similarities amongst Christians of different types in how they are transformed by the Spirit, and this often manifests in similarity of certain doctrines. The doctrine of the Trinity, for example, is such a doctrine. Truly believing in the Trinity gives one a deep understanding of God as Three and One, with perfect fellowship and love between the Persons of the Godhead. Without this understanding of God, Christian transformation towards godliness is difficult. That is not to say that the ability to theologically articulate the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit's consubstantiation and identify all non-Trinitarian heresies is required for one to be Christian. As Gavin Ortlund points out, it is problematic to say that essential doctrines are essential for salvation, because sometimes "people experience salvation with very limited information." Ortlund gives the example of the thief on the cross. "It is not clear that the thief personally affirmed the Trinity. . . . [This] would not in itself exclude the Trinity from being a first-rank [essential] doctrine."[322] Perhaps the thief, and people like him, did not have a conscious, explicitly articulatable idea of the Trinity or divinity of Christ, but in some way, the Spirit instilled a pre-conscious, pre-discursive (that is to say, deeply affective) awareness or orientation towards God as Three in One in the thief and in others. And even this is an instrument by which the Spirit transforms a person in the Christian way.

Throughout a whole history of the Spirit's work, certain doctrines shared by nearly all Christians spanning space and time, doctrines which have been taught and defended by the Church, are those which have been most successful and essential in effecting Christian transformation. Without these doctrines, such as the Incarnation, the Virgin Birth, knowing God

[321] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 46.
[322] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 80.

is Love, the Trinity, forgiveness, and mercy, it is difficult to learn to transform and to surge after the heart of God. Ontologically, these doctrines communicate the truth of things: the nature of God, the world, and God's love for the world. Affectively, these doctrines are designed to fundamentally develop godly, righteous passions and desires and feelings in the hearts of those who believe them. After a whole history of the Spirit's work, it is upon retrospect that these doctrines have been recognized by Christians as those which have been "common to nearly all Christians at all times,"[323] because the Spirit has chosen to use those doctrines the most often—I daresay nearly universally.

Essential doctrines, at least, the intuitiveness of the idea of there being essential doctrines, is a sure proof of the 'intransigence' of affects. The way humans *feel* across time, space, and cultural, is not exactly universal, but neither is the affective makeup of our hearts purely determined by culture and language and history, as scholars such as Krister Stendahl have claimed.[324] Stendahl is among those who argue that Christians of different sorts in different places and at different moments do not actually experience the same things. Instead, our feelings are mediated "primarily [by] our particular cultural histories."[325] For Stendahl and company, the things that the first Christians experienced and felt to be true of Christ are virtually incommunicable to Christians in the twenty-first century, since we are separated by time, language, and culture. If this is the case, then the Christian life is something that not only *looks* different for everyone but fundamentally *is* different for everyone to the point that it becomes a

[323] As such, Lewis had strong apologetical motivations. In presenting the essence of Christianity (which had to do with doctrine but was not totally concerned with it), Lewis believed he could make the greatest case for the faith. Any expression of disagreement would only ward off any who might have had ears to hear. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, viii.
[324] Here, we turn to Zahl's discussion of Stendahl's 1963 essay "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the Modern West."
[325] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 156.

mere constructed artifact of history, language, and culture. However, affect theory offers correction to this sort of constructivism.

"Such accounts [like Stendahl's] of the power of discursive practice to shape experience and behavior are naïve."[326] The experience and affections of Christians throughout time and space "are very unlikely simply to reduce to artifacts of language and culture."[327] Take, for example, the fear of death. Schaefer avers:

> Do all human bodies fear death in the same way? No, but we all fear or have feared, and the reconfiguration of that fear can be accomplished using a set of practices that can span historical epochs, in the same way that we can find a carving transplanted from a different culture evocative and compelling even if we are not invested in the discourses of aesthetics of that time and place. Discursive practices of religious traditions intersect with animal embodied histories . . . and the systems of affect that have been carried forward by those trajectories to form complex, powerful linkages.[328]

Again, we should note that "although . . . bodily practices (including discourses) are varied, they nonetheless can yield more or less consistent effects and affects across bodies" and cultures and historical moments.[329] The feelings of the saints throughout Church history share a certain essence; the journey of transformation, though it looks different for each person, contains in it a substance that one can almost name.

Testing the Theory – Abortion

One of my emphases in this project is to develop a theory of doctrine which can help Christians navigate their *many* disagreements, not only "specifically theological matters" to the exclusion of social, cultural, and political issues (which are also theological). As such, I wish to test the theory on a controversy that I have been wrestling with for a few years: abortion. The

[326] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 156.
[327] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 157.
[328] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 57. Found in Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 157.
[329] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 57. Found in Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 157.

purpose of this case study is not to outline my own personal solution to abortion for Christians, nor is it to present an exhaustive or empirically rooted account of what Christians think about abortion. Rather, drawing from my personal experience in Christian communities, I am offering a hypothetical case study in which two Christians, one pro-life and the other pro-choice, can navigate their disagreement on a profoundly consequential and contentious matter.

Consider two Christians. The pro-life Christian is not the stereotypical pro-lifer, nor is the pro-choice Christian the stereotypical pro-choicer (in that she is not the stereotypical pro-choicer according to conservative pundits). Both believe in the sanctity of life, and both agree that God has given humans free will. The two of them are concerned as to how their faith commitments should inform their engagement with politics, and neither can afford being apolitical or indifferent. On abortion, they have been led to opposite conclusions, with one holding the life of the unborn as the highest priority, and the other holding the life and liberty of the mother as the highest priority. Let us see what they have in common.

These Christians both believe that life begins at conception, and that all human life is equally sacred. They both believe that abortion is morally wrong, and thus something to be reduced or ideally stopped. The pro-life Christian is convinced that abortion must be stopped immediately. The pro-choice Christian chooses a more longitudinal approach to decreasing the abortion rate, as she has found that pro-choice policy does just that. Though they have different methods, they share the same goal. Both believe that mothers should be able to raise their children in safe environments, with the resources they need. However, they go about this in different ways. The pro-life Christian gives to charities which help families in need and helps mothers find housing with the other members of her church. The pro-choice Christian participates in and organizes rallies to better sexual education, and fights for policies which

allow for more accessible contraceptives and financial equity. Again, they have different methods but the same end goal.

These are two Christians (and I have met many like them over the years) who are trying to earnestly apply their beliefs to politics and are trying to do it in the most responsible way they can. They share the same goals, to decrease the abortion rate and to help those in need, children and mothers and families included. The pro-life Christian takes an interpersonal approach, while the pro-choice Christian takes a systemic approach. What might happen if they disagree?

These two Christians might approach the disagreement with some complicated emotions. The pro-life Christian, due to the cultural backdrop of the pro-life movement overall, might approach the other with a wariness, a skepticism of the other person's status as a real Christian. The pro-choice Christian, as someone who has probably left the pro-life movement, might carry some hurt left from past interactions with more close-minded pro-life Christians, accusing her of heresy and false doctrine. To be frank, she might also not take pro-life Christianity seriously. They might perceive each other as belonging to a tainted or corrupted version of Christianity. However, let us suppose that these two Christians are ecumenical enough that they will have a conversation with each other.

They will be edified when they find that they share the same commitments and goals. There might be some conflict over why one chooses the life of the child over the life and liberty of the mother, or why the other chooses the life and liberty of the mother over the life of the child (which in Christian discourse is often what the pro-life/pro-choice controversy gets reduced to). They will also discover how different their approaches are. As I said before, the similarity across Christians' transformative journeys builds up and encourages, and these two Christians will be more open to learning about each other's respective stances. Yet, navigating their

differences is where transformation theory finds its strength. The pro-life Christian is strong in seeing the importance of individuals, especially the unborn child. She desires that children who are born into financially unstable families, and into abusive households, must be protected and afforded the highest quality of life that they can. She works towards this by volunteering at non-profits and gets her church to work with children with absent or neglectful parents. Her works of love make lifelong differences to those she works with. However, interpersonal charity can only go so far, and the pro-life Christian has a weakness in actualizing all her goals due to a lack of political and structural adeptness. The pro-choice Christian is strong in knowing the dynamics of an inequitable system that keeps the poor in segregated communities in which there is poor sexual education and limited access to contraceptives. She works towards policies that are more effective than pro-life policies in decreasing abortion rates, and thus she is more effective in accomplishing the pro-life goal. Her efforts are also more beneficial to women overall. However, perhaps her one weakness might lie in the personal side of things, which gets overshadowed by only thinking in terms of systems and impersonal politics.

Both have strengths and weaknesses, but with each other, they can work together for the good of others, on both personal and systemic levels. The pro-life Christian still has much to learn about how to engage in politics more effectively and responsibly, while the pro-choice Christian still has much to learn about the faces behind the policies. Such cooperation across political lines might not be fathomable in a secular context, and even within the Church such collaboration between pro-choice and pro-life Christians is rare. But there is a possibility that Christians who are being transformed in complementary ways can work together without having to give up their distinctives. If this is a possibility at all, it is only because of the Spirit.

Conclusion

In this study, we have surveyed four ways of thinking about doctrine, each purporting itself to be the best way toward an ecumenical orthodoxy. The first theory of doctrine, the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction, has a rich history that goes back to the Protestant Reformation. It is a popular and pervasive distinction but has some conceptual problems. Chiefly, instead of uniting Christians on the essential doctrines, it divides Christians on what those essential doctrines are and how to tell. The second theory of doctrine, theological triage, is a sophistication of the first, with anywhere from three to four (and maybe more) categories of doctrine. However, as Gavin Ortlund admits in his case for theological triage, categories "are somewhat clunky and inexact and therefore do not convey all that must be said about a doctrine."[330] I have thus suggested that a better ecumenical orthodoxy can be developed that goes beyond simply making categories to define doctrines by, since doctrines are prone to resist such definition.

The third theory of doctrine, rule theory, connected doctrine to practice. It is intuitive that if someone believes something, that belief should matter to how they live their life. However, rule theory takes doctrines to be the thing which make Christians Christian, instead of the Holy Spirit. The Christian life, under rule theory, is simply a process of interiorizing certain truths, a linear progression of spiritual growth that is without difficulty.

The fourth theory of doctrine, which I develop here, takes doctrines to be tools of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit uses doctrines—amongst other things like prayer and worship—to

[330] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 97.

transform the heart of a Christian. To believe is to be transformed. This transformation looks different for everyone, and it is far from a straightforward process. Who one is determines what one believes, and what one believes determines who one is. Through it all, it is the Spirit who, like the wind, transforms what He wills when He wills (cf. Jn. 3:8).

This view of doctrine simultaneously makes doctrine very important and not important at all. Transformation theory makes doctrine important because doctrine is a tool that the Spirit uses to grow Christians and deepen their walk with God. Both true and false doctrines bear incredible weight. True doctrines bring Christians closer to God, teaching them to become more like Christ. False doctrines, however, pose real threats to Christians and churches, either allowing them to fall into a spiritual complacency, or leading them towards spiritual harm and corruption.

And yet at the same time, doctrine is not all there is to the Christian life. Doctrines are nothing without the power of the Holy Spirit (Ps. 127:1). They are only tools which the Spirit uses to disclose truths to humanity, and they are far from the only instruments which the Spirit uses in His transformative orchestra. The Spirit also uses liturgy, worship, prayer, going on walks in nature, loving others well, reading Scripture, listening to sermons, hugging loved ones, spending time with friends, suffering, seeing a beautiful waterfall, and I daresay everything else as instruments to bring His people closer to Him, trading the desire for sin for the desire for God, in an eternal and historical and embodied dance of desiring, emotional, passionate, affective love. It is a love characterized by both love and truth, both unity and diversity. It is this very love that ecumenical orthodoxy is all about.

Through the lens of transformation theory, Christians can navigate any number of their disagreements, and not only the ones that are “specifically theological.” By recognizing how the

Spirit uses doctrines in Christians' lives, both diversity and disagreement can be seen as gifts from God, and unity has a deeper meaning than just agreeing on the same things. Instead, unity is a joint journey, a shared sojourn, towards godliness. It is a unity that is always already present, one that needs only be noticed and realized and stewarded. It is a unity that is true in a way that can be seen and felt. It is a unity that makes a splash in the world, personally and politically. But most importantly, it is not a unity that belongs to Christians. Unity, like diversity and disagreement, like the Christian life, like doctrine itself, is a gift from God.

Approach

The main objects of study in this paper are theories of doctrine, theories which "[unpack] the meanings people ascribe to their lives" towards religious beliefs in the broad Christian faith tradition.[331] I draw on texts that discuss theories of religion and theories of doctrine. These theories highlight certain aspects of religion and doctrine, like cognition or experience, to "organize one's understanding of all aspects of religion"[332] to "show how doctrines can be both firm and flexible, both abiding and adaptable."[333]

The usefulness of theories, through a pragmatist lens, is evaluated by how well they can allow for the possibility of an ecumenical orthodoxy. Because an ecumenical orthodoxy must be concrete and not only abstract (most importantly, it must also be pragmatically feasible), I utilize a materialist-phenomenological lens to analyze these theories of religion and doctrine, bringing them closer to religion as it is lived and to doctrine as it is believed. This lens highlights "religion

[331] Leavy, *Research*, 124.
[332] Lindbeck, *Doctrine*, 16.
[333] Lindbeck, *Doctrine*, 65.

as a network of bodily practices"[334] and how religion feels, not privately, but politically.[335] In so analyzing theories of doctrine, I present an approach towards an ecumenical orthodoxy that is translatable to Christian communities, which theorizes doctrine considering how beliefs actually affect Christians.

I have constructed my methodology to re-ponder a question posed by ecumenist George A. Lindbeck: "How is it possible not to surrender or relativize historically church-dividing doctrines and yet maintain that these doctrines are no longer divisive?"[336] Following the affective turn, I offer a theory of doctrine that does not fall into paranoid anathematization, nor empty relativism, but allows for a substantial and open ecumenical orthodoxy. The popular solution of distinguishing between essential and nonessential doctrines, which holds that Christians agree on the essentials of the faith and disagree on the nonessentials, is vicious and leads to further disagreement as to which doctrines are essential. Nor does it account for what belief means and does, essential or not. The same holds for approaches that descend from the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction, such as theological triage as explicated by R. Albert Mohler and advocated by Gavin Ortlund. My underlying assumption is that if Christians are provided a framework that makes sense of what it means to believe, then they might better develop an ecumenical orthodoxy that does not unnecessarily exclude, nor is it too generously inclusive.

[334] Schaefer, *Affects*, 7.
[335] Schaefer, *Affects*, 8.
[336] Lindbeck, *Doctrine*, 126.

Figures

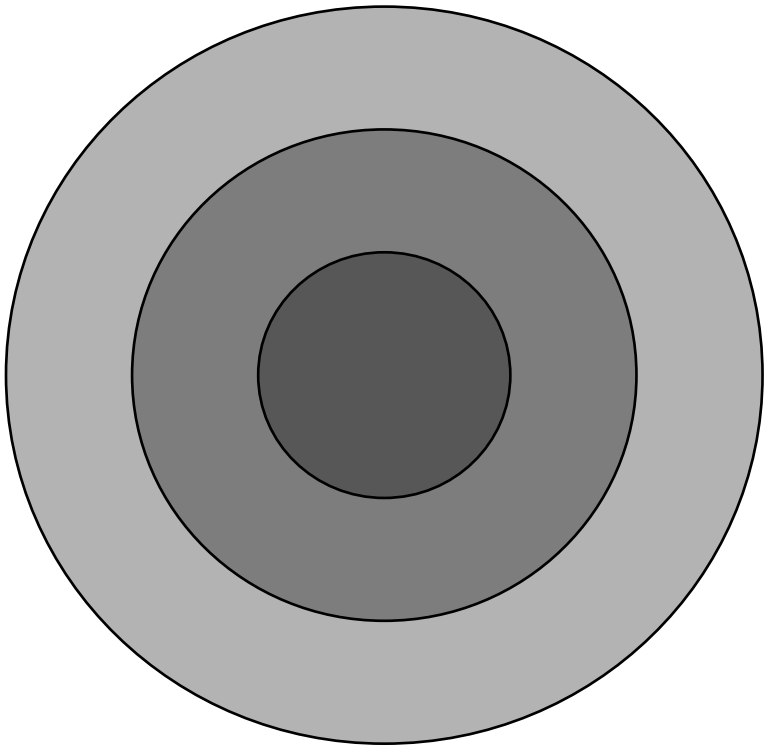

Figure 1: Target—Essential/Nonessential Beliefs

This figure illustrates how we might map essential and nonessential beliefs. Essential beliefs, which all Christians believe, are to be located in the bullseye. The bullseye for people who make the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction is the 'core' or center of the Christian faith. On the outer rings we can map nonessential doctrines. According to this multi-ring target, not all nonessential beliefs are equally important. It is that idea, the variation in importance among nonessential doctrines, which theological triage helps to understand. Under the theological triage taxonomy, first-order doctrines would be mapped on the bullseye, since these are the same as essential doctrines, while second- and third-order doctrines would be mapped onto the second and third rings respectively.

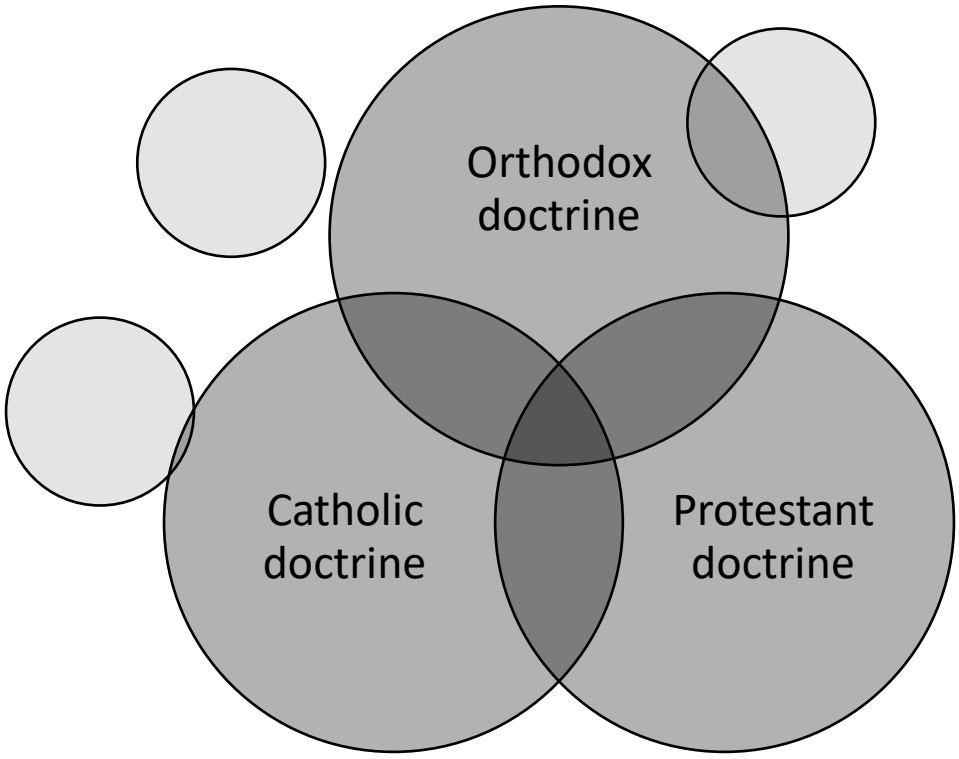

Figure 2: Venn Diagram—Orthodox and Unorthodox Communities

This Venn diagram shows the whole Church as well as her parts (Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox). It illustrates four things. First, that all three parts share common ground—this is where essential or first-order doctrines would be found. Second, that two parts might share ground that the third does not. Third, that each branch has its own ground shared by neither of the other two. For the second and third points, second- and third-order doctrines would be mapped, since second-order doctrines are those which define a single circle, while third- and fourth- and *n*-tier doctrines are mapped wherever. Fourth, it illustrates how we might understand unorthodoxy. Two unorthodox communities share ground with one part but does not share the ground that all three parts share—this community might identify as Christian but does not fit the definition given by general orthodoxy. Another community shares ground with two orthodox communities but does not quite share the general orthodoxy. The last unorthodox community

shares no ground at all with any of the parts—this community can be understood as another tradition which makes no claim to being Christian, or at least does not identify with ‘mainstream’ Christian orthodoxy.

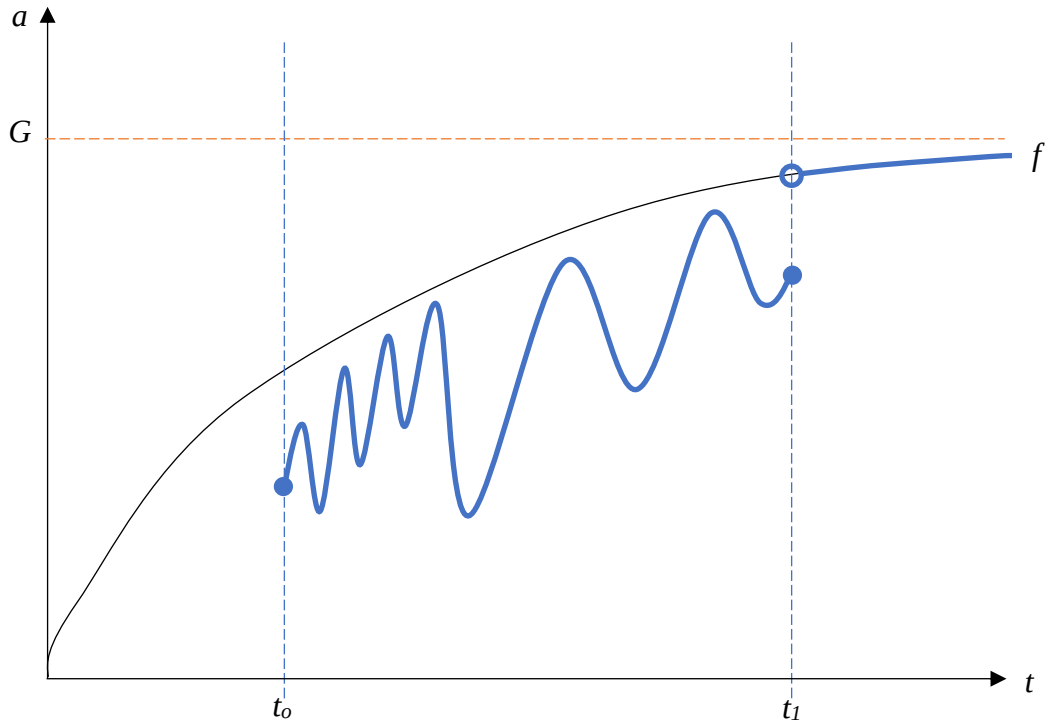

Figure 3: The Christian Life

This graph plots affects (*a*) against time (*t*). Line *G* represents the Divine affect, or the heart of God. The function of doctrine *f* illustrates the affectivity of doctrine which the Spirit uses to make the hearts of Christians more like the heart of God. This curve approaches but never reaches *G*, but its limit is *G* as *t* approaches infinity. The point t_o represents a person’s moment of conversion. In Protestant theology, this moment is called ‘justification’, the moment in which God declares one righteous. The point t_1 represents the individual’s moment of death. The graph in blue represents the actual heart of an individual. Note that for another hypothetical person, the graph could look different. From t_o to t_1, the person is undergoing what is called ‘sanctification’,

where one is being renewed to be more like God. This blue line between t_o and t_1 is the focus of this study of the work of the Holy Spirit. There is still more work to be done while thinking about the heart prior to conversion and after death. Sanctification is not a straightforward process of growth, but, guided by doctrine through the power of the Holy Spirit, one's heart is trending towards *G* even despite 'hills' and 'valleys'. From t_1 towards eternity, the believer's heart has perfectly aligned with the affective trajectory *f*. In eternity, one approaches *G*. This graph shows that doctrine is designed to function so that one's heart becomes like the heart of God. And from the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks, and the body moves (cf. Matt. 12:34).

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone for providing me with such rich conversations and epiphanies about how the Church might pursue a greater unity while honoring its wonderful diversity. Among these, thank you to my sister Toby for listening and giving feedback to the early process of my research, and for her encouragement; to my sister Stephany for keeping my work from the ivory tower, reminding me to keep the ideas biblical and familiar; to my mother Alma for her excitement and approval of my passion for this project; to pastor Taylor for his vital insights as to what exactly doctrines do and for his comments on the Fall 2022 version of this report; to my friends Jared and Ethan for their exhilarating encouragement and for believing in the importance of this work. Thank you to Father Jesse, who so graciously introduced me to the Orthodox faith and solemnly reminded me that 'if we were the same, we'd be together', and to Tyler, for pointing out that heresy is not just a deviation from the truth, but from the fold. Thank you to Maybree, my fellow roundtable participants, and Dr. Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana at the Student Conference on Religion in the Public Sphere 2023 conference for being such engaging and enriching dialogue partners. Thank you to the Wheatley Institute for hosting us all at Aspen Grove. A thousand thanks to Ethan and Dary at the Things You Don't Hear in Church podcast, who invited me on and allowed me to discuss my research with them. A million thanks to Amelia for teaching me the necessity of finding a good balance between academics and the rest of life.

My immeasurable thanks to the faculty and students at the University of New Mexico. Chiefly, my sincerest thanks to Dr. Richard Wood for mentoring my project throughout this academic year, for exhorting and reassuring me of my abilities and passions, and for reminding me to stay grounded in my faith; to Dr. Joachim Oberst for inviting me to make my first ever

research presentation at his seminar in Modern Christian Thought, and my thanks to those students at his seminar who lent me their ears and offered their reflections; to Dr. Daniel Wolne for introducing me to Schaefer's affect theory, Panksepp's seeking system, and the importance of studying where the 'rubber meets the road'; to Dr. Emily McRae for allowing me to write on the topic of hypocrisy in her Moral Mistakes and Moral Ignorance seminar; to Dr. Paul J. Watson for allowing me to present my research in his Evolution of Religiosity class and for the students therein for the amazing conversations that followed the presentation; to Jason for offering such engaging conversation in thinking of my own work critically and carefully; to Drew for his constant support and for helping me find presses in my hopes to make this research into a book; to Mohammed for his insights while I was still dabbling in semiotics and symbolics at the very beginning of this project.

I could not have conducted this treasured work on my own, without the help of these blessed individuals, nor without the support of my fellowships. Thank you to the El Puente Research Fellowship for teaching me what research is and for providing me with other hard-working and passionate undergraduate fellows. I am most grateful to my graduate research fellow, Natalia, for guiding me and encouraging me through the process and for helping to formalize the structure of my very first academic thesis, and to the program director, Alejandro, for making me feel welcome in the fellowship. A million thanks to the Arts & Sciences Support for Undergraduate Research Experience (ASSURE) for so graciously accepting me for both the fall of 2023 and spring of 2023. Thanks to this ASSURE grant, I did not want when faced with costs of articles, books, train tickets, and meetings. Special thanks to Vincent for his proactive support for all of us ASSURE fellows throughout the fall semester. Thank you to the Coffey

D+E+I Religious Studies Scholarship Fund, which ensured that I could afford to do research on top of the usual expenses of the semester and of living.

As for any mistakes and misinterpretations, I gratefully credit myself. I look forward to where this project will go and how it will be continually transformed in my heart and in the hearts of others.

All in all, I am deeply grateful for those that have found my work edifying, who have kept this project at the grassroots, and who have recognized just how important it is for the Church to be at once one and many.

Appendices

I. The Evolutionary Success of Transformation Theory

In the Spring 2023 semester, I took a course on the Evolution of Religiosity taught by Dr. Paul J. Watson in UNM's Biology department. Towards the end of the semester, we were expected to present an empirical paper on the evolutionary study of religion. During the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Conference (UROC), I invited Dr. Watson to my poster and oral presentations. We had previously discussed the possibility of presenting my research to the course. After the conference, we thought through some ideas of what I could present.

The idea we found was to explain from the evolutionary perspective why transformation theory would be more successful than previous theories and approaches in helping Christians to navigate theological differences. A successful account of transformation theory's effectiveness over and above previous theories and approaches would provide strong reason for me to publish this theory either academically or through general press.

In our first meeting, we discussed three aspects of doctrine and religious beliefs from an evolutionary perspective. The first aspect of religious belief is that doctrines are moral values or imply moral values. That is to say, beliefs function to support a certain way of living for an in-group. These morals facilitate a group's contractual reciprocity, governing the rules of social navigation between in-group members, regulating relations and perceptions of out-groups. Since morals are communal, doctrines support moral values, doctrines are communal, not simply an individual's private beliefs. To believe in a doctrine is to accept a group's moral program and demonstrate the willingness and commitment to participate in that program. The stronger group members believe in their doctrines, the better the group will function. The second aspect of religious belief is that strong belief in a group's doctrines signals strong commitment to one's

group. In a strongly pro-life Christian community, in-group members compete to articulate stronger belief in the pro-life position. This competition for demonstrating higher levels of belief is often expressed in action, such as members going to protest in front of abortion clinics rather than staying at home, and carrying bigger and more shocking signs to demonstrate how committed one is to the cause (further supporting the idea that doctrines are or imply moral values, which govern in-group members' actions). Strong belief in the pro-life position signals strong commitment to the pro-life community. That there are displays of strong belief, in the eyes of in-group members, is a sign that their group is flourishing, doing good, or is 'on the right track'. For group members seeing 'heroes' that demonstrate strong belief, like a YouTuber who gets thousands of views debunking opposing views, these heroes serve to reinforce the validity and cohesiveness of their group and their doctrines. For religious communities, this is exemplified by martyrs—heroes who signal strong belief and commitment to the group even to the point of death. Additionally, demonstrating strong belief preemptively limits one's social mobility in other groups. A strong believer becomes a "mystery" to out-groups. For example, a Christian who demonstrates strong belief in Young Earth Creationism (YEC) becomes a mystery in the eyes of non- and anti-YEC Christians, as this YEC Christian seems to be unintelligent, stubborn, or irrational. The YEC Christian's social mobility as such is preemptively limited, even before they encounter those they disagree with. In the case of abortion, it is significantly difficult for a passionate pro-choice person to befriend a passionate pro-life Christian, because their strong commitment to their respective groups has rendered them in large part socially immobile. The third aspect of doctrine, the one that resonates most with transformation theory, is that doctrines are emotional commitments. This is true on the personal level. Doctrines guide how one feels. If a person's beliefs are challenged, and these beliefs are strongly held, an attack on

one's beliefs is also perceived as an attack upon oneself, such as when a Christian is asked to prove the existence of God but does not know how. On the collective level, this means that commitment to doctrine shows an emotional commitment to others in one's group, especially one's relatives, leaders, and supernatural beings. In my own journey, I have experienced 'tests of faith', such as evolutionary theory, which countered my YEC views that I held at the time. Not only did evolutionary theory contradict my beliefs, but it challenged what I held to be a commitment to God and to my faith community.[337]

In my presentation to the class, I surveyed various attempts at reducing religious strife between in-groups. I presented an example which the class was familiar with, Karen Armstrong's Charter for Compassion. Armstrong, a prominent scholar of religion, set out to reduce religious strife. She correctly pointed out that much religious division is based on doctrinal differences, but she wanted to effectively toss out doctrines altogether and instead focus on something that all religions teach: compassion. The idea was that if all the religious teachers would just teach their people the Golden Rule, then all religious division would be solved. However, this idea did not work. In the course, we discussed why.

To sum it up, Armstrong did not take doctrine seriously. She saw it as nonessential to religion, something that can be discarded. She said that the big mistake that led to religious strife was that religious people were "concentrating solely on believing abstruse doctrines."[338] Yet, on the evolutionary level of analysis, doctrines are very important to religious communities. They are the things which hold the morals of a group together, and they allow for in-group members to show their commitment to the group. Forgetting every doctrine but compassion simply does not work.

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[337] From notes taken during a meeting with Dr. Paul J. Watson on April 21, 2023.
[338] Armstrong, "Let's Revive the Golden Rule," 5:40.

I also gave an overview of other methods of resolving religious strife, such as the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction and experiential-expressivism. I presented transformation theory as the most effective method of reducing religious strife out of the current options. The first support was obvious, that transformation theory recognizes religious beliefs as emotional commitments. The best practice that I propose is that Christians should first recognize that doctrines are instruments that the Holy Spirit uses to effect heart transformation, then learn how someone else in a different in-group has been transformed through their own opposing doctrinal viewpoint, and finally find how they have been transformed by the same Spirit in similar or complementary ways.

There are a variety of ways to account for religious disagreement between two different people. The overarching explanation, however, is that these two people are emotionally attached to two opposing doctrines, and these emotional attachments have preset them to be antagonizing or aggressive to each other, recognizing each other as members of different in-groups. The attitude might not be one of hostility, but they each possess an attitude that is conducive to division. Transformation theory does not take a moment of religious disagreement and simply ignore the emotional attachment that these two people have to their points of view. However, it seeks to *reconfigure* the emotional attachment that each person has to their respective beliefs into an emotional attachment that is no longer conducive to division. Instead, they still hold to their doctrines emotionally, and their strong belief in their doctrines still signals strong commitment to their group, but now their emotional attachment increases their social mobility with those they disagree with once they recognize that a person of another group is on the same journey of transformation as they are. In the course, we referred to religion as a developmental program, and for transformation theory, that is precisely what religion is. If Christians in disagreement can

find that they are in the same developmental program, they can unlearn the divisive nature of their attachment to their beliefs and instead hold those beliefs with the same strength, but in a way that constructs wider community and cooperation.

This sets transformation theory above the previous methods. It takes doctrine seriously but reconfigures the way in which one is attached to doctrine. By discovering how those one disagrees with are in the same developmental program as oneself, one can learn to appreciate the different moral values and doctrines of other groups while still recognizing them as part of a meta-group, that is, the Church, instead of only being a part of one's in-group.

This might not work for groups which have, as part of their doctrinal and moral system, the belief that they alone are the 'true church', or that interaction with members of other churches is prohibited. There is less chance for transformation theory to work here, since it is built into that group's system to not even disagree with other groups in the first place (I am using the word 'disagree' here in a dialogical sense, in that these groups would not even be having conversations in which they would disagree with others, since they are so separationist and absolutely socially immobile from other in-groups which might share their doctrines). Transformation theory thus does depend on the group's starting doctrines in the first place. If dialogue with other denominations is not even a possibility, transformation theory probably will not work.

II. The Nature of Hypocrisy

For an upper-division philosophy seminar on Moral Mistakes & Ignorance, taught by Dr. Emily McRae, I wrote a final paper on the nature of hypocrisy. Usually, hypocrisy is understood as acting against one's beliefs, without truly believing what one claims to. Hypocrisy, in Jesus's

time, was an important issue that the authors of the Gospel addressed often. The Pharisees and other religious leaders were regular subjects of Jesus's criticism because of their hypocrisy. Hypocrisy, as a phenomenon that reveals that doctrine is not inherently compelling, stood out to me as an important concept to think about.

The main motto of transformation theory is that 'to believe is to be transformed'. Transformation is the work of the Spirit. Under transformation theory, hypocrites are those which are not being transformed, or resist transformation. As such, in hypocrites, the Spirit is not at work, or at least He is not at work in the parts of their hearts which is not being transformed and He is at work in other parts (or indeed, perhaps the hypocrite is a work in progress). This gives a deeper understanding to the notion of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is giving assent to a doctrine as if the doctrine itself makes one good, and not the Spirit who uses the doctrine to effect heart change. Hypocrisy is the refusal of transformation, but the stubborn will to hold onto the doctrine even if the doctrine is not doing its work within the hypocrite's heart.

I found in the paper that hypocrisy is a form or symptom of ignorance. Now, let us say for example that a person who believes that 'God is Love' does not live a life of love at all. We would not say that they are ignorant that God is Love, for indeed, there seems to be a sense in which people can know *that* something is the case, but not really believe in it in the transformative sense. What the hypocrite is ignorant about is the nature of what they believe. That is, they are not ignorant that God is Love, but they are ignorant of what that truth entails for their life. "Hypocrites are those who believe the right things, but do not believe the right things about the right things. That is, they deny the transformative nature of what they believe."[339]

[339] San Nicolas, "The Nature of Hypocrisy," 6.

This sort of ignorance is an active one, almost more like a refusal than a passive non-knowledge. Elizabeth Harman in an article on ignorance uses verbal language when discussing blameworthiness (and I am taking hypocrisy to be a blameworthy thing). A blameworthy person "has *violated* some moral norms that apply to beliefs themselves,"[340] and a person is blameworthy for "*caring inadequately*" about the moral truths pertaining to one's beliefs.[341] Hypocrisy, therefore, is an active force inside a person, a denial of the Spirit's transformative work. This was not an insight gleaned in the paper, but now I wonder whether hypocrisy as an active resistance of the Spirit is the unforgiveable sin that Jesus spoke of (Mk. 3:29).

A final note of caution to those who wish to resist hypocrisy. Reflect and self-examine. See whether your beliefs are being used by the Spirit to shape and re-shape your desires.

> One must not focus on any single doctrine, lording it over those who do not accept it, vainly repeating it to oneself, nor on any restricted set of doctrines, losing sight of the bigger picture of full Christian orthodoxy, but rather integrate these doctrines into the total pattern of one's faith. Most importantly, one must ask oneself whether what one believes in is truly transformative, truly inward, or whether it is merely an outward expression, a signal, a flare, fired up for others to see and applaud.[342]

III. On Whether Transformation Theory is Legalistic

One caution I highlighted in the introduction was that an ecumenical orthodoxy must not be too exclusive. For the essential/nonessential doctrines distinction, this was quite easy. One could simply name a belief, such as speaking in tongues, as essential to salvation, thereby unnecessarily excluding all other professing Christians who either do not believe in speaking in tongues, or do not believe that speaking in tongues is essential. Under rule theory, since doctrines are viewed as communally authoritative rules of speech and action, the legalism can come when

[340] Harman, 459, emphasis in original omitted, emphasis added.
[341] Harman, 460, emphasis added.
[342] San Nicolas, "The Nature of Hypocrisy," 9.

one's being a Christian is determined by how well they speak like a Christian, or how well they live like a Christian. This legalism is the danger with the view that it is orthopraxy that makes someone Christian. Indeed, those who one thinks of as 'genuine Christians' many times do not truly practice as genuine Christians ought to, and it is the hypocrites who act best as the real thing.

Transformation theory can potentially fall into legalism and unnecessary exclusion and anathematization of others. The base understanding of Christianity is that to believe is to be transformed. This makes sense on an intuitive level, I believe, for many Christians. After all, those that are thought of as 'false' Christians are those who are resistant to transformation, complacent in their journeys and immune to conviction, accountability, or change. Yet, there are a few objections that might be raised against transformation theory. I will address them here.

OBJECTION: CHRISTIANS DISAGREE ON WHAT THEIR GOAL IS

Christian transformation is the reconfiguring of the heart to look more like the heart of Christ. This objection states that Christians disagree on what the heart of Christ is like. This is true, but two responses can be raised. The first is that Christians themselves do not really know what the heart of Christ is like. They do not know precisely what they are being transformed to become. The moment one becomes Christian, she does not automatically and completely know what it is that she has gotten herself into. The same principle holds. Some years into her spiritual journey, she believes that she is becoming more Christ-like in some respects, such as honoring the dignity of people. Yet, perhaps some years later she learns that she has not been honoring the dignity of people as well as she thought. Perhaps she has been buying fast fashion and is now learning about how fast fashion exploits workers who are working for very little. She has not been respecting their dignity. She then seeks out the Christian way to live in light of this reality.

In their journeys of growth, Christians are constantly learning more about Christ. There is never a point where they have their full finger on Him. So, while they might disagree on what the heart of Christ is like towards which they are being transformed, they do not fully possess knowledge of their end goal.

The second response follows from the first. Over time, it is expected that Christians converge towards fuller agreement on what the heart of Christ is like. As in the case above, the Christian learns more about the heart of Christ as she goes. Such is the case for all Christians. They are always learning how to be Christ-like in ways they had not before. It may be that Christians disagree on what the heart of Christ is like *right now*, but tomorrow they may be in fuller agreement than they were previously.

OBJECTION: TRANSFORMATION THEORY MAKES SOME HOLIER THAN OTHERS

Under transformation theory, the Christian life is a journey towards becoming more godly. This objection states that this implies that some Christians are better than others, falling into a holier-than-thou legalism. However, the response to this is that it is not by a Christian's own efforts that one is transformed. Rather, it is by the work of the Holy Spirit.

OBJECTION: TRANSFORMATION THEORY IS UNNECESSARILY EXCLUSIVE

This objection states that transformation theory makes transformation itself a legalistic standard for telling who is a Christian and who is not. For example, there were pietists who Schleiermacher criticized for demanding too much of professing Christians, who claimed that "every true Christian must be able to demonstrate the beginning of one's state of blessedness in a penitential struggle—that is, in an upswelling of contrition bordering on hopeless self-loathing followed by a feeling of divine grace that borders on inexpressible bliss."[343]

[343] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 200.

Experiencing God, perhaps, could turn into a litmus test. One who holds to transformation theory could easily say, "I have experienced such and such, and I know that I am Christian. Person A professes to be Christian but has not experienced such and such exactly like I have. Therefore, Person A is not truly Christian." The mistake here is that the work of the Holy Spirit is unpredictable, as well as the hearts of others. As such, each person's journey of transformation will be different. One also cannot know someone else's story of transformation unless one gets to know the other person. Transformation theory encourages fellowship before judgement, the benefit of the doubt before doubting another person's Christian status.

IV. On the Question of Heresy

In April, the podcast show Things You Don't Heart in Church premiered an episode in which we discussed my research project from a non-academic perspective.[344] During the interview, the question of heresy got brought up. What is heresy, and does it have conceptual room under the lens of transformation theory?

Before the podcast, I read Paul J.J. van Geest's chapter in *World Christianity* on Augustine's approach to heresies. This chapter was influential in how I thought of heresy before I even applied the lens of transformation theory to the concept. For Augustine, heresy means more than just a position that one finds disagreeable. In the spaces I come from, 'heresy' in that limited sense is a term thrown about much too often.[345] Augustine took a much more holistic view of heresy. I found the desiderative characteristics of heresy most interesting. He "regarded arrogance as the motive behind breaking away from the Catholic church and thus behind

[344] Things You Don't Hear in Church, "Will the Church EVER be unified? with John San Nicolas."
[345] Rhyne R. Putman concurs that "[s]ome bandy the term about too frivolously, labeling any idea with which they find grievance 'unorthodox' or 'heretical.'" Putman, *When Doctrine Divides the People of God,* 205.

heresy," and found a connection between heresy, "physical uncleanness," and a heretic's "impurity of the soul."[346] More than getting doctrine wrong, "persistence in error—the evidence of pride—made the heretic."[347]

Just as being orthodox comes with a way of life, so too does heresy. On the basic level, we can consider heresy to be the rejection of orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is an instrument by which the Spirit transforms the hearts of Christians. Without a Christian orthodoxy (without obviously essential beliefs such as 'God exists' or 'Christ was crucified and rose again'), it is difficult to see how anyone could be transformed by the Spirit to become more like Christ. It seems that some orthodoxy is required for Christian transformation. That is not to say that orthodoxy is all that is required for one to be a Christian, since faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:26). That is also not to say that orthodoxy is necessary to salvation, as we have found with defining essential doctrines as essential to salvation. But nonetheless, orthodoxy is to be transformed and sanctified. Soteriology or justification is not really the question here.

Perhaps a comparison might help in this discussion. Whereas a hypocrite holds to orthodoxy and yet does not live like it, a heretic does not claim to be orthodox at all, and the resulting way of life is very much divergent from all other Christians who are being sanctified together. Heresy, then, is any doctrine that prevents or hinders the transformative work of the Spirit, and heresy leads one's heart to diverge from the Church. A heretic is not merely one who believes a harmful or counterproductive doctrine. Rather, a heretic persists in that doctrine (what van Geest calls "persistence in error") even if he is corrected or shown he is wrong.

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[346] Van Geest, "Augustine's Approach to Heresies as an Aid to Understanding His Ideas on Interaction between Christian Traditions," 261.
[347] Van Geest, "Augustine's Approach to Heresies as an Aid to Understanding His Ideas on Interaction between Christian Traditions," 252.

Heresy is therefore not merely holding to a false proposition. Heresy is more than that. Anything heretical is a hindrance to transformation, and it leads people to actively diverge from the rest of the Church. This brings to bear questions of whether people who believe in heresies (or, let us say, are themselves heretical) are saved, or if they are truly Christian. The answer from transformation theory is simply to stick around and find out for them. The beliefs that one holds changes over time. If one thinks that a person is a heretic, or believes that that person believes in heresies, and yet that person seems to be on the same journey of transformation as oneself, then stick around and find out. It is far too common that a Christian encounters someone that they vehemently disagree with that they shame and deride and condemn them, calling them a heretic or a false Christian. Transformation theory recognizes that a person's doctrinal life is not a stagnant one but one that unfolds over time. If someone is on that transformative journey, then it will do no use to judge and condemn and slander them. Even if they are not being transformed by the Spirit, what use will judgment have then?

Rather, stick around and find out. Stay there with that person. Maybe in five years, you will agree on what used to infuriate you. Or maybe you will find that their beliefs were not heretical at all, but that the diversity of your opinions were a gift from the Spirit to teach you about each other and about God. Over time, the Spirit will lead the Church and those within it towards convergence. This is especially true in the hereafter, but also in the present moment. Christians living side-by-side over time will learn how to navigate their disagreements better, even if it means reconciling themselves to each other without capitulating their positions. The same goes with people that you might think of as heretics—either the Spirit will lead them where He wills them to go, into truth and away from falsehood, or He will show you that orthodoxy is far more ecumenical than you previously thought.