

418 Positively dogmatic

In my 20 years as an editor, I have learnt a lot about words and their meanings, and I learnt that, over the centuries, meanings can change – sometimes even reversing (**positive** <-> **negative**): ‘Terrific’ meant **causing terror, frightening** – now it’s **excellent, wonderful**; and ‘awful’ was **full of awe, awe-inspiring, worthy of reverence** – now it’s **very bad, terrible**. This is one reason we should be careful and humble when interpreting and applying Scripture – not dogmatic.

Look, that’s another example: dogma/dogmatics was once **positive** – the study of the church’s teachings – now it’s most definitely a **‘bad thing’**.

Recently, I googled ‘dogmatism’ and found an article about whether the Bible *itself* is dogmatic about anything. And there’s that ambiguity: it’s ‘dogmatic’ in the sense that it contains *teaching* that the church needs to take very seriously. But it was clear what the chap meant: Is the Bible really, really, **definite** about any issues? Which issues would you choose?

The article said: ‘*The Bible is dogmatic about certain things – like the deity of Christ, his substitutionary death and resurrection, and salvation by grace through faith – but there’s a lot that remains ambiguous.*’ Are those the (positively) ‘dogmatic’ things you would have chosen? (Do you hear his reformed slant; would it be judgemental to suggest that his main concern is ‘how I/we get saved’?)

But in the discussion that followed, someone said, ‘*Isn’t the Bible dogmatic about sanctity of life, sexual ethics and gender issues?*’ Interesting! (I think you can hear that writer’s agendas.)

Maybe we should ask, ‘What was Jesus (positively) dogmatic about?’ Perhaps I should read the Gospels and report back to you, but two teaching episodes (dogmatics) come to mind: the sermon on the mount and the last supper. Jesus was positively, definitely dogmatic that we should love (and serve) God and love (and serve) one another. (The Pharisees’ dogmatics were about sin!)

In theological discussions with a former vicar, he would say, ‘Oh, that’s apple pie and mother’s love!’, meaning, ‘That’s obvious; we don’t need a discussion or sermon about that topic.’ But we **do** need to hear about it; we need to obsess over it: *How* do we love God? *How* do we love one another? *How* do we put Jesus’ agenda into practice?

So what did I obsess about (especially at the start of my seven-year journey)? It was the rights and wrongs of penal substitution, a way of viewing salvation that is relatively recent and is, I feel, not too helpful. But there, you see! I’m off on my hobby horse: *how I get saved*. But Jesus’ clear teaching^{Mt 25:31-46} was that we’ll go to hell if we don’t serve others (says he, provocatively).

This isn’t the article I set out to write, but I think I may have stumbled across a hermeneutic for interpreting the Bible when looking for how it speaks to the issue of gay marriage: how can we all (gay or not) best love and serve God and one another?