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## CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE, YESTERDAY AND TODAY.

John Thompson

In an article in the Reformed World John W. de Gruchy writes "Doctrine is that which the Christian community believes to be true arising out of its reflection on the Apostolic tradition in relation to the situation in which the believing community exists today. It is not the product of any one theologian or school, but the Church giving an account of its faith." By apostolic tradition the writer obviously means Holy Scripture. the testimony of the prophets and apostles to God's revelation. If we make that change, this is fine and comprehensive definition. It says five things which I wish to take up elaborate and expand.

1. Doctrine is bound up with faith, with believing.
2. It raises and seeks to answer the question of Christian truth.
3. It is based on the original witness of the prophets and apostles to God's action in Israel and in Jesus Christ as we find it in Holy Scripture.
4. The understanding and interpretation of doctrine is carried out within the context of the believing community, the Church.
5. It is not an isolated body of belief but a living dynamic content intimately related to life both in the Church and in the world.

### 1. The Nature of Doctrine.

Doctrine is the essence of what we believe based on God's self-motivation and cannot really be understood or interpreted if we take it out of this context or apart from it. The older theology in the Protestant tradition said that this act of believing, which gives us the content of doctrine, has three elements, notitia (knowledge), assensus (acceptance of certain things as true, and fiducia (trust), to know, to accept and to trust, though not all theologians put them in this order. John Calvin, for example, states that all knowledge begins in obedience. In other words, if one thing comes first, it is an act of obedient trust in the God who comes, speaks and acts for us men and for our salvation in Jesus Christ. This has been taken up and made the starting point for the whole of his Church Dogmatics by Karl Barth, who repeatedly quotes Calvin at this particular point. Faith

is not primarily acceptance of certain dogmas with the mind, but the committal of one's self to God in Christ. It does, of course, imply a certain form of knowledge at the same time. Or to put it otherwise, we cannot think about and know the faith except from within, as believers, as those whom God in his sovereign lordship and grace has called and brought into fellowship with himself through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. It is out of this believing response that the mind knows, confesses and expresses. Barth has put the order in this way; we acknowledge by faith Jesus Christ as Lord: anerkennen. In this acknowledgement we know who he is: erkennen, and as such we confess him in the Church and world: bekennen. All these are forms of kennen, all forms of knowledge, but it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. Our doctrine, our expression of the content of revelation is therefore a form of obedience, a form of trust and knowledge, a prayer, an act of worship. It is doxological.

P.T. Forsyth in his cryptic but illuminating way states that doctrine is 'the theology of the twice-born', and Emil Brunner says, it is 'believing thinking'. It is thinking about our faith from within the act of believing in all its compass of trust, knowledge and confession. In this God is always the Sovereign over our acting, believing and thinking; we cannot simply treat him as another object, but as a subject who always addresses us.

If therefore it is within the faith itself that doctrine can be rightly understood and interpreted, then three consequences follow. First there can be little place for apologetics. The duty of the Christian, the Church and the theologian is clear; it is not just to acknowledge and to know but to confess, to bear witness. It is a belief seeking to understand and to give others to understand. It is to confess Christ before men. Secondly, a limitation is put upon dialogue with others. If we can only understand our faith from within and if others indeed are the same, then to speak about and to listen to others' beliefs while a right and proper thing

nonetheless has its limitations. And these limitations are imposed not by an unwillingness to learn of or from others but by the very nature of faith as more than statements, as in fact involving a life commitment. Yet true dialogue can and indeed must take place as a form of mutual witness, a personal meeting of people in what they believe and are.

Thirdly, all speaking about God is speaking about him in the presence of God. All our statements of faith come under his judgment and, however right, proper and orthodox we may think them to be and must seek to make them, they are all limited, human and relative.

Both Karl Barth and T.F. Torrance have pointed to the inadequacy of our human language to convey the divine revelation and have stated that this language can only be made suitable and true as God himself takes it and uses it to channel and convey himself as the Truth.

## 2. The Necessity of Doctrine.

It is necessary because, according to our definition, it raises the question of the truth of revelation. Now when we speak about Christian truth we must be careful how we use the term. We are not using it simply in the ordinary understanding of it as correct statements of facts or beliefs though it includes that, but in the way in which it is used in the Hebrew-Christian tradition of 'doing the truth', as John's Gospel puts it, doing the will so that we may know the doctrine. Nonetheless, even with this understanding of the practical and living nature of the biblical idea of truth, within the pages of the New Testament itself it was found necessary to state what the apostolic tradition was and what it was not, what was the centre and what the circumference of the faith and what was altogether outside that circumference. To put it in the language of the Rule of Faith there was a need for a statement of doctrine "as a testimony for truth and against error and serve as a bond of union for the members of the Church." Already within the New Testament itself there was a tradition or there were traditions of

central affirmation, a kerygma, a preached message centering around the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Already within the New Testament there was teaching that in these events God acted once for all for our salvation and other views which threatened these truths like Docetism which said Jesus was not a real man, or Gnosticism that said there was a secret Gnosis or knowledge known only to the elite, are false. These views threatened central teaching. There was already then a tradition of true apostolic teaching (however varied) which faithfully reflected the significance of the events surrounding Jesus Christ.

Nor was it long into Christian history before great men like Irenaeus and Tertullian were obliged to seek out and state what was called a regula fidei, a rule of faith saying what the apostolic tradition was, in other words, what was the essential truth of the faith as given in Holy Scripture. This is what doctrine is and tries to be. In every age it seeks to state as De Gruchy said, what the Christian community believes to be true.

It is still necessary to argue this in some quarters, for there are still those who seem to think that it doesn't really matter what we believe, it is what we do that counts. As if the question of truth were irrelevant or if what we believe did not touch us at the very core of our being and did not influence profoundly the whole of our actions. De Gruchy states that this sort of thinking and this way of speaking should be discarded as quite untrue. The equally real danger from the other side is that a simple acceptance of a set of doctrines is itself a proof of one's soundness, not to speak of one's acceptance by God and one's fellow-members in the Church. The two dangers to be avoided are on the one hand an undogmatic Christianity and a too dogmatic one. Perhaps one might also add a third view here, that Christian truth is also not to be equated simply with a particular type of religious experience, a far too subjective view of the faith. It is based on and continues to be judged by God's personal revelation and reconciliation in Jesus Christ his Son.

### 3. The Standard of Doctrine

This is quite simply the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments or rather, to put it more correctly, God himself as he reveals himself in the history of Israel and in Jesus Christ, testimony to which one finds authoritatively given in the Scriptures. The supreme standard of the Church and the sole source and judge of doctrine is God himself speaking in his word; the sola scriptura of the Reformers must stand. There is only one source of authority and that is the living, redeeming God himself as he comes and speaks and acts in and through his word by the renewing, internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. This is over against the view that Tradition separate from the Scriptures has a binding authority in the same way as the Scriptures. It is also over against the view that the Spirit has an immediate and not a mediated authority.

Here it must be said that Vatican II made a noble, even if not entirely successful, attempt to state something like this, to return to what is known as the one-source theory of revelation and authority, not Scripture and tradition as before "to be received with equal affection of piety and gratitude" as the Council of Trent said in the 16th century, but God as He reveals Himself to man in redeeming action in Israel and in Christ. The qualification that the Magisterium, the Hierarchy of Pope and Bishops is the sole guardian and the authentic interpreter of this revelation puts somewhat of a distance between the Roman Catholic and the Reformed position in relation to Scripture and seems to me not to subordinate sufficiently Church teaching to Holy Scripture.

Granted that we acknowledge the supreme authority of our canonical Scriptures in all matters of faith, doctrine and life the question arises how were these recognised? Why and how choose certain books as Scriptural and not others? We must exclude the view that there are human yardsticks above the Word which prove it to be the Word and other writings not. The chief answer that the Reformed tradition has given is that it is by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit that writings are seen and proved to be the Word of God and so authoritative for the

Church and Christian life. The view that the Church decided what books were canonical and what not is a half-truth. To be sure certain human criteria were advanced by the early Church like apostolicity etc., and later ages tried to show the Scriptures to be authoritative on rational grounds and largely paid the price by leading to rationalism. But neither the Church nor human reason in fact did choose ultimately however active they were and are in all our Christian decisions.

Emil Brunner and Karl Barth have stated clearly the implications of our Reformed tradition's teaching in the phrase 'Only God can prove what is God's.' We decide in favour of these books and not others because it has already been decided for us. The Scriptures are to that extent self-authenticating. The central thing that made the Church accept these and not other books was the fact that they so impressed themselves upon the mind and life of the Church by the Holy Spirit that it was felt one couldn't do otherwise than acknowledge their authority. At the same time other writings were simply set to one side because they were not of the same standard nor had they the same relation to God's revelation as these. The ratification of the Church did not make it a judge over Scripture nor itself the authority but simply acknowledged the reality of the truth of the writings by which the Church actually lived.

In other words they were found to be an authentic testimony by the Spirit to God's action in Israel and in Jesus Christ his Son. 'These are they which testify of Me.' - a human testimony to revelation but at the same time one through which God continually speaks today. It is in this sense that the Scriptures are the Word of God. Here in a very special way the Church has found the standard and ultimate *raison d'être* of its life and doctrine.

#### 4. Doctrine in the context of the Church.

It has been said that as individuals we may get along for a time or even a lifetime with a little theology or doctrine, but a Church over its long history just

simply cannot. What a Church is is profoundly influenced in the short and in the long term by what it believes and what it believes it is the prerogative and duty of the Church to set out under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in the light of Holy Scripture. This it has done in the past and crystallised in creeds and confessions as guidelines for the life and work, for the faith and action of the Church. We look now at this particular point, at the question of the nature of a creed or confession, as a statement of doctrine, which is a vital and relevant one to our own situation here today. As statements of the faith hammered out in the heat of controversies and often in situations of crisis confessions are documents of relative authority and considerable significance. They are part of the Church's tradition, which, in the Reformed understanding, must always be subordinate to the supreme standard, God's word in Holy Scripture.

What then should be our attitude towards these traditional statements of doctrine? It can be summed up in this phrase "Respectful freedom in relation to tradition". The respect comes first; respect because here is the voice of the fathers and brethren who have gone before us in the Church. They were seeking in their own time and way to state as fully and clearly as possible the essence of the apostolic faith. To dismiss them as irrelevant, to by-pass them as simply antiquated is to do disrespect to great thinkers who wrestled with and sought to express the meaning of Holy Scripture. Respect too for the communion of saints as a living reality today and these not simply as dead voices, but as living ones in the Church of Jesus Christ who speaks to us both across the centuries and in the fellowship of faith, giving a testimony to which we must faithfully listen and give heed. Is it not a fact that it is from the perspective of our traditions, whether they are fully formulated in credal or confessional form or not, that all of us, perhaps more than we know, approach and understand Holy Scripture and its teaching and live our Christian lives. Those of us who are Presbyterians, for example, are still profoundly influenced by the



Thompson, Doctrine, IBS 9, July 1986.

Westminster Fathers, particularly by the Shorter Catechism, in the whole of our life and work, whether we react wholly positively to all they say or not.

Yet it is respect which is combined with freedom, not any kind of freedom, but a freedom to look at the past statements afresh today and to re-formulate them in the light of the Word. It may be that in most cases we will come to exactly the same conclusions as our forefathers. We may, for example be able to accept the Chalcedonian formula about the Person of Christ hammered out in 451, as a good and fair statement of Christology. Or, it may be, that at certain points we may find emphases and statements which do not fully accord with our present understanding of Holy Scripture. We have to have this freedom which a strict confessionalism that seems almost entirely tied to the past and almost absolutises traditional formulae would in fact deny. To take this stance is paradoxically to deny the basic position it attempts to defend, namely, the priority and supremacy of the revelation of God testified in Holy Scripture. It is to give to particular traditional formulations more than they were ever meant to have, even by those who originally formulated them. Karl Rahner has rightly said that a Confession of Faith is both an end and a beginning, both a relative conclusion of a period of reflection on the faith and yet the point from which we set out, on the basis of Holy Scripture, to think afresh. And we must think afresh if we are to relate the faith to life today.

Again, is it not a fact that part of our Reformed tradition is that we are a reformed Church continually submitting ourselves to reformation in accordance with the Word of God and this reformation is not just in life but in doctrine. G.C. Berkouwer in his book on The Second Vatican Council, has put it in this way, 'The limitation of faith's answer does not mean that the answer is untrue. It only means that it cannot exhaust the truth and that it knows it cannot. Because truth and revelation have a personal, human character, every formula of faith can be surpassed; on principle it can

be exchanged for another formula that says more and yet says the same thing.' <sup>2</sup> Should we not be trying to do that today, to say the same thing better? Karl Barth has written, 'If divine infallibility cannot be ascribed to any Church's confession, then in practice we have to recognise that every Church confession can be regarded only as a stage on a road which can as such be relativised and succeeded by a further stage in the form of an altered Confession. Therefore, respect for its authority has necessarily to be conjoined with a basic readiness to envisage a possible alteration of this kind.'<sup>3</sup> So Christian doctrine yesterday must not be a fetter to bind us merely to a tradition or particular historical time and expression but a pointer beyond to God and his Word, to him who, while having acted decisively in the past in the history of Jesus Christ, is the Lord over our life and our thinking today and calls us afresh to obedience in life and thought in his service.

##### 5. The Relation between Doctrine and Practice.

In this final section I want to try and show how doctrine and practice are related, how what we believe influence what we are and what we do. Doctrine is not simply a body of belief which one may accept with the mind but has a living dynamic character which has practical implications for our lives.

Let me illustrate by two modern examples, first of all Christology, and, secondly, social and political life. First, Christology. The Person of Christ is at the very heart of our Christian faith and what we believe about him is of central significance and has far-reaching consequences. Today this whole question is at the centre of the modern debate where the ways are very much divided. There are two main views that are put forward, the one represented by John Hick and others in the book 'The Myth of God Incarnate' and by Don Cupitt in his most recent works. 'The Myth of God Incarnate' argues that Jesus is simply a man who represents God to man and represents man before God and that the various titles and attributes to him in the New Testament are later accretions which come from the Greco-Roman world and are applied to Jesus.

These have to be discarded so that we can get back to a Jesus without myth, whose influence and example bring us close to God, are an inspiration and a challenge to us. It is assumed in this view that we already in a sense know who God is without Jesus. Now if this is true it will naturally have very real effects on how we live and on what we believe. We will no longer see in Jesus the Incarnate Son of God, redeeming, reconciling, a Lord and a Saviour. We will have no need of an atonement from sin. Received doctrines like the Trinity will go out of the window and mainstream Christianity will be discarded. C.F.D. Moule has called this the evolutionary view.<sup>4</sup> This sees the picture of Jesus as evolving from that of a man to that of a man deified. Can one doubt that if this view prevailed the Church would become a very different one and the Christian life be impoverished, that in fact it would be a diluted or even a different faith with no real saving power?

Contrast with this the view which Moule calls the developmental,<sup>5</sup> that is the view that the picture of Christ as we have it in the earliest traditions in the New Testament, was fragmentary and not fully developed. From this there developed the views more fully stated in later N.T. writings. The titles and metaphors that are applied to Jesus in the New Testament really reflect and really state who He is, that He is Lord and Son of God, that He is true man in an act of saving humiliation, bearing our sins, not just representing God to man or man to God, but being very God and very man for us men and for our salvation. Now this developmental view shows the N.T. traditions as growing in perception but not altering their basic view of Christ. This is the one which commended itself to the mind and thought of Church throughout the ages, and is I believe the correct teaching of the New Testament. This of course brings before us a quite different view of Jesus and of God, of man and of the world, a different reaction, a trust, an acknowledgement, a knowledge, a confession of one who is on the side of God and who comes to us from that side to bear our sins, to reconcile us to God, to bring us

into fellowship with him. This living faith in a crucified and risen Lord who is one with the Father, is very different from the one put forward by 'The Myth', is in fact quite opposed to it. It is this view that I believe we ought to espouse and support. Only on this basis has the Church a real message and a worthwhile future. Here what we believe does affect intimately the nature and quality of our lives.

The second question is that of the social and political realm and whether or not our doctrine taken from the New Testament is related to this at all and if so, how. Now there are three views that are canvassed today in this respect. One is that the Christian message being a purely spiritual and largely a personal one, has little or nothing to do with social and political life except perhaps very indirectly. As Christians believe in Christ, live a Christian life, show an example to others in that way, indirectly they influence society. This is true as far as it goes. Another view represented by Liberation Theology states that by commitment to the poor and oppressed and to their liberation, one meets with God; meeting human need, particularly the need of the oppressed as they are unjustly treated by sinful structures, by tyranny and so forth, is meeting with God, though of course not all liberationists would put it in as simple a form as this. But in certain forms of Liberation Theology at any rate this is the kind of salvation they believe the Bible teaches. Incidentally it is unfair to identify the ecumenical movement with this stance. A third view is that the Scriptures have a doctrine of Church and state, that there is a political and social thrust in the Scriptures that should not be ignored. The Church and the Christian see the political powers as part of God's purpose for man, an area where, whether known and acknowledged or not, God is sovereign and Jesus Christ is Lord. This is part of the Gospel, with the need to witness to this reality and dimension of the biblical revelation and to try to see how it should be worked and in practice. Moreover the prophetic message of the Scriptures underlines the Church's obligation to seek righteousness and justice in society and true peace on earth. The spiritual and liberationist

views are either wrong or very one-sided, and the third is the more biblical and proper one, as it has been indeed the traditional Reformed position. There is a doctrine of The Church and the powers that be, of Christian involvement in social and political life. There is a Christian view of the State and we cannot simply ignore it. This is not to say that the Church should interfere directly in politics by setting forth social and political programmes but it does mean that where moral, religious issues come up, the Church should have a voice. It also means that it has a view of the political realm in the will of God for man as an aspect of its teaching, its doctrine. Here again our doctrine derived from the Scriptures will have a very great influence on how we relate or if we relate at all to society, to the political life in which we find ourselves at any given moment.

It can be seen from these examples that what we believe about these important matters has both immediate and long-term effects for Christian life and practice. In theory the spiritual view has as a consequence that we regard this world as largely under Satan and not, as Calvin said, the theatrum gloriae Dei - the sphere where God's glory is shown forth. In practice it often means an uncritical conservative acceptance of the Powers that be. In the Liberationist view in theory the vertical dimension is diminished, the change of society is the main goal, this life is almost all and that to come means little. In practice it tends to align itself with revolutionary movements and fails to see in the powers that be any kind of divine ordinance.

As against these our tradition has rightly stressed a fuller Gospel because a more scriptural one which both believes in the need for personal conversion and radical change in relation to God in the fellowship of the Spirit and at the same time sees man's life in society and the political realm as under God's ordinance and rule and subject ultimately to his will. Such a view will have its own practical consequences for the Church since it will avoid the non-involvement of the 'spiritual' view and the too great or wrong involvement of the Liberationists

It will acknowledge Christ, his Lordship over all however differently this Lordship is expressed in the State and the Church.

So that we believe in these and many other areas influences what we in practice do today.

Christian doctrine is then an essential aspect of the Christian community's response to God's revelation in Christ attested in the Scriptures. Each facet of doctrine not only influences life but coheres with and influences other aspects of the faith as well. Now this is not a static but, as we have seen, a dynamic, living form of truth that penetrates and co-ordinates life as a whole and gives it unity and integrity. Doctrine yesterday attempted this total sweep and integration. the same task, in a very different setting, lies before us today.

Union Theological College,  
Belfast.

John Thompson.

Notes:

1. John W. de Gruchy, The Role of Doctrine in the Church. Reformed World. Vol No. 1977 p.253
2. G.C. Berkouwer, The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism, Trs. Lewis B. Smedes, Michigan, W.B. Eerdmans, 1965, p.68.
3. Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics 1/2, p.658-59
4. C.F.D. Moule, The Origin of Christology, London: Cambridge University Press, 1977, pp.2ff
5. Ibid., p.2.