

Creeds and Deeds

How Doctrine Leads to Doxological Living

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The gospel is not an imperative, but an indicative; not a program to follow, but an announcement to welcome for our own salvation and to herald for the salvation of the world.

"The first Reformation was about doctrine; the second one needs to be about behavior," best-selling author Rick Warren told a congress of the Baptist World Alliance last year. "We need a reformation not of creeds but deeds." Throughout the speech, as reported on the group's website, Pastor Warren announced that a new movement is underway in the church, shifting the emphasis from doctrinal issues to service in the world. "It's time to stop debating the Bible and start doing it...This is the new reformation I'm praying for."

I begin with this account not to suggest that we either jump on the bandwagon or burn it, but as a way to frame the challenging topic before us. As has been frequently pointed out, Paul often moves from doctrine to exhortation in his epistles. In fact, he is pretty obvious about it. In 1 Corinthians, he moves back and forth between diagnosis (division, strife, sexual immorality, lawsuits, mistreatment of the poor) and cure (God's faithfulness, justification, sanctification, and the unity of the saints in union with Christ, especially as engendered by the Lord's Supper). Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Romans exhibit an even clearer pattern. In each case, the first half or more of the letter expounds the riches of our inheritance in Christ by grace alone through faith alone, and then specific exhortations are given to realize the impact of these truths in the concrete relationships of believers between each other, in their homes, in their relationships with non-Christians in their vocations as neighbors, workers, and citizens, and so forth.

Not even in Corinth, where strife, immorality, greed, and the profaning of the Lord's Supper threatened the peace and purity of the church, did Paul seem to think that the problem was deeds rather than creeds. He always thought that when believers were "acting up," the first recourse was to preach the gospel again, to recall believers to their one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one Spirit. At the same time, even

where the focus of the problem was doctrinal (as in Galatians), he did not fail to point up the spiritual and ethical issues involved. And even where the focus of the problem was spiritual and ethical, he did not fail to preach the doctrine. Paul would have considered it inconceivable that a church might have its doctrine right but be uninterested in missions, evangelism, prayer, and works of service and charity to those in need-or, conversely, that a church might be faithful in life apart from sound doctrine. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy were inseparable and mutually dependent elements of Paul's message.

"In View of God's Mercies": From Indicatives to Imperatives through Doxology

Romans, as we have seen, is the apostle's most systematic presentation of the Christian faith. He has told us the bad news: everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, is "in Adam," under the condemnation of the law. Yet this merely sets the stage for the good news that everyone who has faith in Christ is justified. After holding up this shimmering, many-faceted gem to our wondering eyes, Paul meets the objection that this gospel of free grace has always met: namely, that it will lead to moral license. Yet even here, the answer is not to reign in grace as if it were too much of a good thing, but to explain how Christ is the answer to the power as well as the penalty of sin.

Moreover whom he predestined he called; whom he called, he justified; and whom he justified, these he also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen and is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? (Rom. 8:30-38)

Nothing. Absolutely nothing, Paul replies. Each ascent leads us to ever-higher vistas, all the way

through the purposes of God's electing grace in chapters 9 to 11, until Paul reaches his summit:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out! "For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become his counselor?" "Or who has first given to him and it shall be repaid to him?" For of him and to him and through him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen. (11:33-36)

We have moved from doctrine to doxology and only after this do we meet Paul's explicit transition to exhortation: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (12:1-2). For the next five chapters, Paul will be applying the teaching of the first eleven.

It is not insignificant that Paul moves from doctrine to application *through doxology*. As G. C. Berkouwer has said in summarizing the order of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, "Grace is the essence of theology; gratitude is the essence of ethics." There is a time to be a diligent student, to listen to the record of God's great accomplishment of our redemption and its logical inter-relationships. Yet in doxology we are caught up in it all. We put down our notepad and raise our eyes to heaven in joyful gratitude and wonder. Here is where the Spirit internalizes the message that we have heard and makes us to feel deeply that we are what the gospel announces: the ungodly who have been justified, the enemies now reconciled, the dead who have been made alive in Christ, the hopeless who now have a future. Doctrinal understanding, inflamed by wonder and praise, yields to "our reasonable service." That is why Paul's transition is so key: It is in view of God's mercies on display in the first eleven chapters that Paul makes his appeal. No longer being conformed to this world is not simply an act of the will. It is not the result of individual or collective effort, but the effect of sound doctrine that has been converted into thanksgiving. Apart from the renewing of the mind (i.e., the doctrine of the first eleven chapters), we will become like the world in our thinking and therefore also in our practice.

Doctrine is the Gospel; Deeds are the Law

I remember a meeting several years ago with the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. He told me that the old WCC slogan, "Doctrine Divides, Service Unites," had proven unworkable. "Actually," he said, "it's the other way around. Even when we reach agreement on the meaning of the Apostles' Creed, unanimity falls apart when we talk about political, social, economic, and cultural issues." We know where the WCC has ended up, although it began as a transdenominational, evangelical missionary movement attempting to wed evangelism to social concern. Along the way, it began to think that the gospel was about deeds, not creeds. *Despite its good intentions, the assumption that continually makes Evangelicalism a seedbed for liberalism is that doctrine is secondary to life.* Today, Evangelicalism is far less divided by doctrine, which is generally treated with indifference, than by the particular ideology that cultural transformation should take. "Deeds, not creeds" has already been tried-many times, and has simply led to ungodly strife and divisions in Christ's body even over matters that are not clearly addressed in Scripture. While church history (and contemporary experience) exhibits evidence of wrangles over doctrinal precision that do not lead to the peace and purity of the church in its mission, the church has demonstrated that it can find plenty of other things to fight about when it looks away from Christ.

It might seem controversial to identify doctrine with "gospel" and deeds with "law," especially since these days we often hear calls to "live the gospel." However, the gospel is not an imperative, but an indicative; not a program to follow, but an announcement to welcome for our own salvation and to herald for the salvation of the world. Does that mean that we do not have imperatives or that we do not follow Christ? As Paul would say, "May it never be!" It simply means that we have to distinguish indicatives and imperatives. The law gives us something to do, and the gospel gives us something to believe. Christians are no less obligated to obey God's commands in the New Testament than they were in the Old Testament, but they are *commands*, not *promises*. The imperatives drive us to despair of self-righteousness, the indicatives hold up Christ as our only Savior, and then the imperatives become the "reasonable service" of believers "in view of God's mercies." There is a lot of wisdom to the order

of the *Heidelberg Catechism*: Guilt, Grace, and Gratitude. The commands tell us what we are to do; the gospel tells us what God has done. "Deeds, not creeds" leaves the sinner with the tattered garment of fig leaves rather than robed in the righteousness of Christ.

If doctrine is rightly understood, however, not as dry and dusty speculations, but as the biblical indicatives of God's work in creation, providence, redemption, and consummation of all things in Christ, then the doctrine is the gospel. In her book, *Creed or Chaos*, mystery novelist and playwright Dorothy Sayers wrote,

Official Christianity, of late years, has been having what is known as 'a bad press.' We are constantly assured that the churches are empty because preachers insist too much upon doctrine-'dull dogma,' as people call it. The fact is the precise opposite. It is the neglect of dogma that makes for dullness. The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man-and the dogma is the drama....Now we may call that doctrine exhilarating or we may call it devastating; we may call it revelation or we may call it rubbish; but if we call it dull, then words have no meaning at all. That God should play the tyrant over man is a dismal story of unrelieved oppression; that man should play the tyrant over man is the usual dreary record of human futility; but that man should play the tyrant over God and find Him a better man than himself is an astonishing drama indeed.

Creeds Without Deeds?

It is certainly possible to have deeds without creeds-or, at least, without the Christian creed. There are quite decent people all around us, throughout the world. Because of the law written on their conscience and God's common grace which fans the embers of civic justice and morality in fallen humanity, adherents of other religions and of no particular religion at all are found at mass refugee centers in Sudan handing out blankets and food, inoculating children in Cambodia against smallpox, ministering daily comfort to dying AIDS patients in New York City. Christians are among them. Motivated not only by the ineradicable effects of being created in God's image, but by being forgiven and conformed daily to the image of Christ, believers will have all the more reason to invest their lives in their neighbors. It may not mean an end to

hunger, but working hard to feed one's family and care for extended relatives in need, contributing time, talents, and treasures to brothers and sisters in one's own local church, and giving one's time and resources to nonprofit service agencies that may or may not even be identified with any particular religious cause. Caring for our neighbor's welfare in this life is a human vocation, not necessarily the work of the church, which is entrusted with the commission of receiving and spreading, through word and sacrament, the good news of what God has accomplished in Christ.

So if deeds without creeds is possible, how about creeds without deeds? While it is certainly possible to have a church that is *formally* committed to Christian doctrine-even in the form of creeds, confessions, and catechisms, without exhibiting any interest in missions or the welfare even of those within their own body, I would argue that it is impossible to have a church that is *actually* committed to sound doctrine that lacks these corollary interests. With respect to individual Christians in their common vocations, the mercies of God in Christ propel a profound sense of obligation and stewardship. God has given us everything in Christ, by grace alone, so our only "reasonable service" is to love and serve our neighbors out of gratitude for that inexhaustible gift. In other words, there is no such thing as "dead orthodoxy." I take this to be the point that we find in James's letter. He does not say that faith without works is incomplete or insufficient for justification, but that a faith that does not bear the fruit of good works is *dead*--in other words, it isn't really faith at all.

Within my own circles, I have seen a difference between churches composed mainly of those who have come either from non-Reformed or even non-Christian backgrounds and churches that have come gradually to take their doctrine for granted. The former tend to be animated by doctrine freshly discovered, while the other tends to assume, in a variation of the rich young ruler's response, "All this I have believed since my youth." Losing the joy-the doxology-of our salvation is the result not of "dull doctrine," but of dull churches that have begun to forget the wonder of it all. They need to start over again with Paul's famous letter: moving from doctrine to doxology, yielding grateful lives. I think if Paul wrote a letter to churches today that are only formally committed to orthodoxy, he would not begin, "Now, I realize that you know the truth, so

I'm going to fast-forward to the exhortation." I think he would begin the letter, as he did all of his letters, with the assumption that if people understand the gospel better-which is to say, *doctrine* better, they

would get *caught up* in it all and it would *make a difference* in their lives, their relationships, their witness, and their loving service to their neighbor.

1 Dr. Horton's excerpt from Dorothy Sayers is from her novel *Creed or Chaos* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949), pp. 3, 7.

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