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**DOCTRINE, WORSHIP, AND ETHICS:**  
**KEEPING THE CHURCH IN DYNAMIC BALANCE**

What is at the heart of being Christian? At many points in the life of the church, believers sense the need for a way of understanding Christianity that identifies its crucial elements and holds them in appropriate balance. How can our congregation reflect the biblical wholeness of what it means to be the church? Do certain denominations emphasize some important Christian priorities to the neglect of others? Are we neglecting a basic claim or challenge of the gospel? Is my personal Christian life well-rounded?

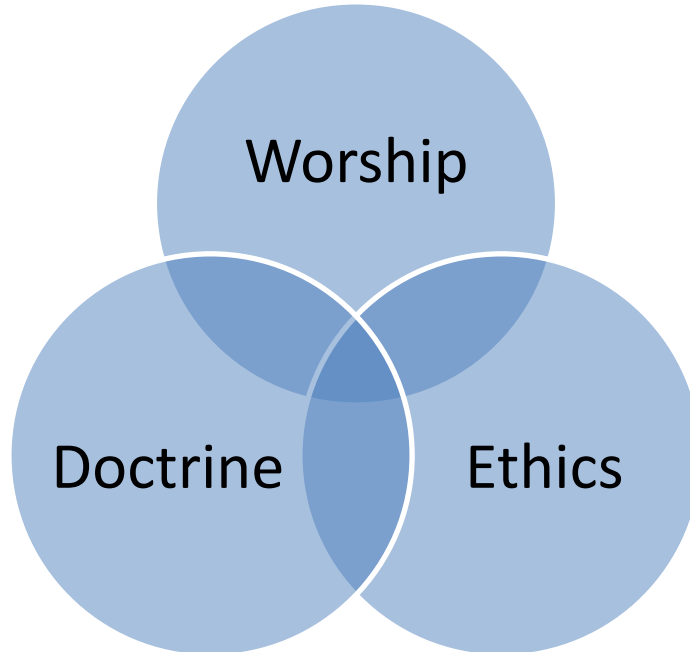
Various New Testament writers help us identify certain basic, irreducible elements of authentic Christianity. For example, the Pauline letters seek to establish faith as the way we appropriate God's grace. Paul asserts that even if we could consistently do what is right, "works" alone would still not rightly relate us to God through Christ. Rather, *belief* in the gospel, which is given by the Spirit, must have priority (cf. Romans 3-5, Ephesians 2:1-10). The epistle of James, on the other hand, reminds us forcefully that simply believing the right things is not sufficient, until our belief leads us to *active obedience* (cf. James 2:14-26). Finally, the Johannine writings take us a step further, stressing both belief and obedience, but going on to affirm the crucial importance of yet a third basic element of genuine Christianity: a *personal and corporate relationship of love and devotion towards God* the Father, through the Son, Jesus Christ, and by means of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 14:15-15:10).

One way of maintaining these crucial biblical elements of authentic Christianity in appropriate balance is to discipline ourselves to think consistently of the wholeness of Christianity in terms of a threefold rubric of *belief, spirituality, and action*. If we state this rubric a bit more formally and corporately, we can speak of the balance of *doctrine, worship* and *ethics* in the church's life.

*Doctrine* is the church's articulation of what it believes. It concerns our belief in God the Father, in Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit (God's presence and work in us as the church) as set forth in the Christian scriptures and the church's historic creeds and confessions. *Worship* encompasses all the ways the church and its members glorify, love, experience, and communicate with God. *Ethics* is a term here used to refer to the action of the church, as we obey God by following through in life and deed on what we say in doctrine and what we experience in worship. It indicates the church's discipleship and love of others: our service, witness, and mission.

The intrinsic interconnection of doctrine, worship, and ethics has been noticed and affirmed throughout the church's history. The Catholic church's historic concern to govern its life with the threefold rule: *lex orandi* (prayer), *lex credendi* (belief), *lex bene operandi* (good works) is one notable example of a Christian tradition's attempt to hold these three facets of the church's life together in an appropriate and mutual inter-relationship.<sup>i</sup> More recently, Methodist theologian Geoffrey Wainwright has called attention to the importance of properly emphasizing these three elements of Christianity in shaping a theological vision in his suggestive book, *Doxology*, which is significantly subtitled: *The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life*.<sup>ii</sup>

It is eminently helpful to think of these three aspects of the church's existence as essential, irreducible, and complementary areas, which must be held in a dynamic balance with one another if the church or one of its particular denominational traditions is to express the fullness of what it means to be Christian. Thus the appropriate relationship of these basic elements might be diagrammed by means of three interlocking circles:



If the church is to move effectively forward, it must guard against either the neglect or the over-emphasis of each of these areas in relationship to the other two. To the extent that it fails in challenge, it will tend towards either *heresy* (misconstrued belief), *idolatry* (misdirected worship), or *disobedience* (misguided ethics).

Whole denominations can reflect broad tendencies to emphasize one or two of the elements under consideration, to the neglect of others. Thus institutional reform movements in church history can often be understood in part as the reassertion of either doctrine, worship, or ethics, when one has been neglected. Many reform movements have been responses to the perceived

need to refocus the church's *doctrine* on the teaching of scripture or tradition. A case in point might be the movement led by Athanasius and the Cappadocians in the fourth century to counteract Arianism, which culminated in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed. Various monastic, pietistic, and charismatic movements have furthered recovery of the experiential, devotional, and liturgical aspects of Christianity that we are grouping together under the rubric of *worship*. And Wesleyan Methodism, with its emphasis on social and personal holiness, as well as contemporary Latin American liberation theology, with its stress on right action or *praxis*, may be seen as significant reassertions of the importance of what we are calling *ethics*.

### **The Early Reformed Tradition**

Our focus will be on the inter-relationship of doctrine, worship, and ethics in the history of the Reformed tradition. The Reformed tradition has often-- perhaps even characteristically-- tended to emphasize the priority and importance of doctrine, or right belief. Reformed churches are fundamentally "confessional." But at their best, the churches which look to the Swiss Reformation for their origin have sought the dynamic balance of doctrine, worship, and ethics which alone could allow them to maintain the authenticity and wholeness of biblical Christianity.

Reformation criticisms of the late medieval church were often intended in part to counter a perceived overemphasis on-- or neglect of-- either doctrine, worship, or ethics. Bucer, Calvin, and other early Reformed leaders understood the mutuality and complementarity of these three areas. They were aware that problems in one aspect of the church's life spilled over into each of the others.

In many instances, the focal point of Reformation criticisms was medieval worship. Liturgical reform efforts were aimed at such worship practices as offering the eucharist as a sacrifice, withholding the cup, venerating the saints and their relics, and adoring Mary. But when such practices were rejected, criticism flowed from questions not only about their liturgical appropriateness, but also as to their doctrinal sources and their practical ethical consequences.

Similarly, there was concern about late-medieval doctrinal positions on such issues as the nature of the ministry, the authority of the pope, the role of Mary and the saints, and the meaning of and access to grace. But Reformation theological critiques recognized that worship practices had often reinforced the positions in question. And they assumed that specific ethical teaching and practice had often contributed to the development and solidification of these doctrinal stances.

Likewise, a part of the Reformation critique was fundamentally ethical. The reformers argued that sexuality had been twisted when celibacy was valued over marriage, that sin had been trivialized through the elaborate penitential system, that the clergy's immorality and political

intrigues had been condoned, and that the poor had been exploited through the sale of indulgences. But these primarily ethical concerns included the awareness that the church's worship (with its sacramental system) and its doctrinal traditions (in particular its way of relating scripture and tradition) had affected and encouraged such practices.<sup>iii</sup>

The Reformation quickly grew beyond such critique, to pursue the constructive nurture of its supporters. In positive practice, too, 16th century Reformed leaders emphasized the threefold inter-relationship of doctrine, worship, and ethics. Perhaps most reflective of their recognition of the importance of this balance was the strong emphasis they placed on the traditional catechetical paradigm which had long been built on the Apostles' Creed (doctrine), the Ten Commandments (ethics), and the Lord's Prayer and the sacraments (worship). Calvin's *Geneva Catechism* (1542) and the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) followed this pattern. Many of the early theological attempts to comprehensively express the Reformed faith in its systematic wholeness, including Calvin's original 1536 *Institutes*, were also organized in this way.<sup>iv</sup>

Thorough liturgical reform was usually the first priority of the cities which followed the Reformed movement. In Zurich, Bern, Strasbourg, Geneva, and many cities of southwest Germany, liturgical reform was pursued according to Protestant doctrinal criteria derived from scripture. The retention of the practice of infant baptism represents a rare case in which liturgical precedent had a strong influence on the eventual doctrinal position adopted by the Reformed tradition (though of course it was not normally justified by appeal to prior liturgical practice *per se*, but by doctrinal argument). The influence of ethical concerns on worship practice is illustrated in the Reformed emphasis (Bucer, Knox, etc.) on *discipline* as a mark of the church, towards which the "fencing of the table" was held to contribute. A great deal of Reformed energy went into civic reform as well as church reform, and this, too, reflected the prominence of ethical concerns.

### **The Ascendancy of Doctrine**

However, a predominantly doctrinal criterion of authority quickly asserted itself in the Reformed tradition. Its prominence-- even in Calvin's Geneva-- is illustrated by the relatively greater strictness with which doctrinal heresy was punished, in comparison to ethical deviations. This was not only-- or perhaps even chiefly-- an outworking of the sola scriptura principle, since the scriptures themselves, and the teaching of Jesus, show at least as much concern for worship and ethics. Rather, as Steven Ozment has suggested, this shift can helpfully be understood in light of the complex blending of humanistic and scholastic impulses which fed the Reformation movement. Under these influences, Protestantism tended to amplify both the humanist

confidence in the authority of ancient texts and the power of the spoken and written word, and the scholastic penchant to synthesize various viewpoints logically. As a result, Protestants followed Luther in their "disinclination to subject their teaching to moral critique."<sup>v</sup>

The fruit of this resurgence of doctrinal authority was such that even Calvin's progressive revisions of the *Institutes* illustrate the growing ascendancy of doctrinal criteria. The balance between doctrine, worship, and ethics which had been reflected in the structure of the original *Institutes* of 1536 soon shifted. By 1559, though Calvin presented his final revision as a kind of guide to the exegesis of scripture, the *Institutes* had taken on a shape which was much more thoroughly controlled by doctrinal considerations.<sup>vi</sup> It soon came to be regarded by his followers as a definitive "systematic theology," in good scholastic fashion. The comprehensive concerns of the 16th century Reformed came to be expressed in a multitude of Reformed "confessions," but though the earlier of these especially addressed issues of worship and ethics, their increasingly scholastic form contributed to their eventual reduction in practical authority to "statements of doctrine."<sup>vii</sup>

English and American Puritanism was one stream of the Reformed tradition where an intense concern for ethics and the Christian lifestyle flourished. The Lord's Supper continued to reflect this concern liturgically. Individual ethical examination before participation, and an emphatic ethical admonition, normally loomed large in what was still called a "eucharist."

But the authority of historic and participatory Reformed liturgical patterns continued only in limited strands of the tradition in this period: largely among the German and Dutch Reformed. In much of the Reformed tradition, worship had become more and more doctrinally controlled. In the popular perception, "worship" came to be practically synonymous with listening to doctrinally or (less frequently) ethically-oriented preaching, with a few preliminaries and concluding exercises.

### **The Reformed Tradition in America**

Because of its close alignment with emerging American culture, American Presbyterianism provides a particularly interesting ethos in which to illustrate the complex way in which doctrine, worship, and ethics have inter-related in American expressions of the Reformed tradition. In American Presbyterian history, strong doctrinal control continued to predominate on the "Old Side," which advocated strict and literal adherence to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms as the primary test of authentic Christianity. On the other hand, a "New Side" arose in the spirit of American independence, which elevated devotional experience and moral reform to great prominence. This difference of priorities divided American Presbyterians many times in the

18th and 19th centuries. Several such divisions spawned separate Reformed denominations of national scope, though some of these have since been substantially healed through reunions.

Still, in many of the most influential American Presbyterian educational institutions, doctrine continued as the ultimate criterion of Reformed Christianity throughout the 19th century. Just one example was the resistance encountered by the Mercersburg Movement, led by John Nevin and Philip Schaff in the mid-19th century. Mercersburg attempted to call the Reformed churches back to historic catholic forms of participatory worship, based on impressive historical research into the Reformation sources of Reformed worship. But the movement's constructive liturgical proposals were largely ignored or opposed, because influential theologians perceived it's doctrine to deviate from the current confessional orthodoxy.<sup>viii</sup>

A painful and traumatic reversal of priorities resulted early in the present century. As the 19th century came to a close, the delayed American impact of European philosophical ideas, biblical criticism, and evolutionary theory had initiated the tentative rise of American Liberalism among establishment Presbyterians. This reaction to traditional Reformed doctrinal authority began to seriously challenge existing priorities as it grew in influence. The rise of Liberalism provoked a last strong assertion of doctrinal authority around the turn of the century among Presbyterians, under the leadership of Archibald Alexander Hodge and B. B. Warfield at Princeton Seminary. In the complex theological and cultural transition which followed, strong doctrinal commitments often came to be associated in the popular perception with the Fundamentalist movement, which eventually established its own denominations, seminaries, and other institutions in order to continue this doctrinal emphasis.

For establishment Presbyterians and many other Reformed Christians, the early twentieth century consisted largely of a counter-reaction to the previous "ascendancy of doctrine," which had now come to be associated with doctrinaire dogmatism. While science and technological progress gained authority as measures of truth, another expression of Liberalism came to the fore, which sometimes seemed to reduce the Christian message to little more than ethics. Its worship centered in moral exhortation, while it sought, sometimes quite radically, to reformulate traditional doctrine, arguing that what was essential in Christianity was primarily its lifestyle or its socio-political implications. The continuing popularity of this perspective throughout the current century bears witness to the weariness many Reformed Christians have felt with doctrinal battles and with the traditional "imperialism" of Reformed doctrine over worship and ethics.<sup>ix</sup>

Another counter-balance to the Reformed tendency towards an exclusively doctrinal identity emerged in this period through the rise of the ecumenically-nourished Liturgical Movement. As many Reformed Christians gained socio-economic influence in America, they became increasingly interested in the style and aesthetics of worship. The dignity and beauty of

"high church" liturgy had considerable appeal to some. Among Presbyterians, several service-books were published, which showed significant Episcopalian influence. This trend gradually led a broad cross-section of Reformed Christians to place greater value on the restoration of historic ecumenical liturgical patterns and practices, which had largely fallen by the wayside where doctrinal concerns were predominant.<sup>x</sup>

### **Contemporary Directions**

Today in the Reformed churches historically aligned with the cultural establishment, the tendency to affirm ethical and liturgical priorities continues. Liberation theologies champion the gospel's ethical implications for societal and political structures. Church governing bodies focus a great deal of their energy on ethical position papers and public policy pronouncements. In the area of worship, renewed interest is reflected in a resurgence of contemporary Reformed hymnody, in the emergence of at least two national periodicals devoted to Reformed worship,<sup>xi</sup> and in the formal restructuring of traditional guidelines for worship along ecumenical lines in many Reformed denominations. Reformed expressions of the charismatic movement have sought to strengthen personal and corporate devotion through spiritual gifts and spontaneity in worship.<sup>xii</sup>

On the other hand, except in groups which have separated from older Reformed bodies over theological disagreements, strongly doctrinal agendas are still often viewed with suspicion, even though a deep but largely tacit respect for theological education and philosophically-oriented theology remains. Reformed expressions of the evangelical movement have worked in several older denominations to restore a broader balance in which piety and faithful Christian living are thoroughly integrated with profound doctrinal conviction. But this movement has only recently begun to apply ethics to the public sphere, or devotion to the corporate liturgy in any compelling way. More recently, encouraging signs of a more general commitment to the role of right doctrine in the life of the reunited Presbyterian Church (USA) have emerged with the adoption of "A Brief Statement of Faith" as a uniting and mobilizing focus for Presbyterian identity and mission, and the approval of new catechisms for teaching Christian belief in the church. And however it may ultimately be evaluated, the move in the early 1990's towards gender-inclusive revision of the confessional standards of the Reformed Church of America signaled a desire to continue to take that body's historic doctrinal commitments seriously in the present.

### **Conclusion**

The elements of a Christian tradition's life which have been considered above can, broadly conceived, provide a threefold paradigm which keeps an appropriate balance between that tradition's priorities. But doctrine, worship, and ethics must mutually reinforce each other if a

tradition is not to be reduced to a caricature of the church's biblical shape. While various denominational traditions have each had their characteristic emphases and reductive tendencies, until relatively recently, that of the Reformed was to allow doctrine to predominate, and worship to serve the advancement of doctrine, or to a lesser extent of ethics. The twentieth century has seen a pendulum-like reaction. The prospects of the Reformed churches for the future depend on their ability to maintain these essential elements in an appropriate and vital relationship of mutuality.

The mutual accountability of doctrine, worship, and ethics that God intends for the church can perhaps be best maintained by means of an ongoing process of dynamic balancing. A down-to-earth analogy may serve to illustrate how this dynamic balancing process might be most effectively maintained in the contemporary church. Most drivers know that there are at least two ways to balance a tire, so that it can roll smoothly and evenly down the road with a minimum of impeding vibration. One method is called a "static balance." It is less expensive, and less effective. The wheel is placed horizontally on a stand, and weights are fastened to its rim until it will balance on the fulcrum in an approximately horizontal position. The other method is called a "spin balance." In this approach, the tire is placed vertically on a horizontal axle-like device which spins the tire in as close an approximation as possible to its actual use on a car. Weights are then carefully placed on the rim until the tire no longer wobbles when it spins. It is a dynamic process of balancing, because the use of the tire is a dynamic use. This method of balancing gets the best results.

Once the analogy is proposed, it is obvious that keeping the church in balance is a great deal more like spin-balancing than like static-balancing. This is because God's purpose for the church is not that it stay in one place, but that it constantly be moving towards its divinely appointed goal: the fulfillment of God's reign. It is possible for a church or denomination to be balanced in a static way, such that it is inclined to stay in one place and maintain the status-quo, rather than to move forward. But balance is not an "end" for the church. Instead, it is a means toward the dynamic fulfillment of God's call. Occasionally, if a crucial element of the church's life has been neglected, groups which seem for biblical reasons to be committed to either doctrine, or worship, or ethics in an extreme and unbalanced way will need to be heard if that element is to be restored to its proper place. When genuine listening takes place on all sides, the church will be able to continue to move constructively forward in that holistic and dynamic balance of belief, piety, and action that God intends.

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i. See the development of this threefold rubric in William Willimon, *The Service of God: How Worship and Ethics are Related* (Nashville: Abingdon) 1983, pp. 73-94.

ii. (New York: Oxford University Press) 1980. See esp. pp. 2-4; 218-283.

iii. Even a pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic history of the Reformation is frank in describing



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many of these phenomena in factual terms, see Philip Hughes, *A Popular History of the Reformation* (Garden City: Image) 1957, pp. 11-49.

iv. See F. L. Battles, ed., *Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1536 ed.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 1986, and my comments on this treatment in *Revelation, Redemption, and Response: Calvin's Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship* (New York: Oxford, 1995) esp. pp. 26-29, 107-113.

v. Ozment, "Humanism, Scholasticism, and the Intellectual Origins of the Reformation," in *Continuity and Discontinuity in Church History: Essays Presented to George Hunston Williams on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, ed. F. F. Church and T. George (Leiden: Brill) 1979, pp. 139-40, 147-8. At this point, as Ozment notes, Protestantism did not follow the humanist tendency to "judge ideas by their larger moral ends" (139).

vi. J. T. McNeill, ed. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster) 1960.

vii. This tendency can be observed by reference to the confessions compiled in A. C. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster) 1966.

viii. Cf. J. H. Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1961, 281-307.

ix. For a much more detailed treatment of these developments, see Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press) 1957.

x. I am indebted to Julius Melton for this interpretation of liturgical developments among Presbyterians in 19th and 20th century America. See *Presbyterian Worship in America* (Richmond: John Knox) 1967. The work of Howard Hageman in this same period (cf. *Pulpit and Table* [Richmond: John Knox] 1962), focuses more broadly on the Reformed tradition, including its Dutch and German streams, though it concentrates less on the American context. See also for the Reformed Church in America *Reformed Review* 30:3 (Spring 1977), "Studies in Worship and Liturgy."

xi. *Reformed Liturgy and Music*, which has been in circulation for almost thirty years and is currently published by the ministry unit on Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (USA), and *Reformed Worship*, a ministry of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

xii. A Canadian study represents a welcome effort at liturgical and theological self-understanding within this movement: see *In Spirit and in Truth: Charismatic Worship and the Reformed Tradition* (Ardmore, PA: Dorrance & Co.) 1980.