Doctrine in the Presbyterian Church in Canada

Tim Purvis

Tim Purvis is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC) currently serving at Westview Presbyterian Church in Toronto. He has been the PCC's representative to the Faith and Witness Commission since 2006. He also represents the Commission as a member of the National Advisory Group for Emergency Planning (NAGEP).

The Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC) traces its history to the 16th century Scottish Reformation where John Knox, who was heavily influenced by John Calvin, was a key figure. Reformed (Calvinist) theology and a presbyterial (collegial, non-episcopal, non-congregational) system of church government are Presbyterianism's hallmarks. Presbyterians describe themselves as being a "confessional church", where public declarations of faith and statements of faith play a significant role.

So what is "Reformed theology?" One overly simple attempt to answer this question sets forth what is often thought to be its core doctrines using the acronym TULIP:

T = Total Depravity (the image of God in humanity has been so marred by sin that humanity is utterly incapable of good and is redeemed only by divine grace and the work of Christ)

U = Unconditional Election (God, by sovereign eternal decree, chooses who will be saved and who will be damned; also known as predestination)

L = Limited Atonement (Christ's atoning sacrifice was to save only the elect from their sins)

I = Irresistible Grace (God's grace will always have its intended effect on the elect who are predestined for salvation by bringing them to saving faith)

P = Perseverance of the Saints (those who are truly saved, the elect, cannot be lost; also known as eternal security)

Unfortunately TULIP narrows Reformed theology to a handful of static doctrines while leaving out other key aspects of Reformed tradition. Brian Gerrish, in his article Tradition in the Modern World: The Reformed Habit of Mind, suggests that instead of attempting to provide a convenient checklist of five central Reformed doctrines, we instead consider what he calls the five habits of the Reformed mind:

(1) A deference to the past in Scripture and tradition

(2) A critical approach to Scripture and tradition

(3) Openness to wisdom, insight and truth wherever it might be found

(4) Practicality: knowing what is necessary to know for personal and social change while avoiding speculation

(5) *Semper reformanda*: always being reformed by the Word of God.

(1) What is dogma or doctrine in your tradition?

"Doctrine" and "dogma" refer to authoritative teachings of the faith held as true and normative. The word "doctrine" is more commonly used than "dogma" among Presbyterians, though the latter is used – case in point, Karl Barth, arguably the most important Reformed theologian of the 20th century, called his theological magnum opus *die kirchliche Dogmatik*. A "creed" is a brief statement of what we hold in common with the whole church, while a "confession" is a typically lengthier statement that tends to arise from a specific historical context (for instance, the theological debates of the Reformation in the 16th century) and to emphasize denominational distinctives.

(2) What are considered to be doctrinal statements?

The preamble to the questions put to candidates for ordination in the PCC's Book of Forms lists the officially accepted doctrinal statements:

The Presbyterian Church in Canada is bound only to Jesus Christ, the Church's King and Head. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as the written Word of God, testifying to Christ the living Word, are the canon of all doctrine, by which Christ rules our faith and life. We acknowledge our historic continuity with the Holy Catholic Church and our doctrinal heritage in the ecumenical creeds and the confessions of the Reformation. Our subordinate standards are the Westminster Confession of Faith as adopted in 1875 and 1889, the Declaration of Faith concerning Church and Nation of 1954, Living Faith (Foi Vivante) as adopted in 1998, and such doctrine as the church, in obedience to Scripture and under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, may yet confess in the church's continuing function of reformulating the faith (Book of Forms 447).

The "ecumenical creeds" mentioned here are the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. The Westminister Confession of Faith also includes the Larger Catechism and the Shorter Catechism. Generations of Presbyterians easily recall the first question of the Shorter Catechism they learned as part of their confirmation classes: "Q: What is the chief end of man? A: The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." (Inclusive language obviously was not an issue for the 17th century Westminster divines).

(3) Who can make doctrinal statements?

The General Assembly (GA) is the highest decision-making body in the PCC's system of church government, and it has the sole authority to make official doctrinal statements. The GA has a Church Doctrine Committee to which it refers issues and questions on doctrinal matters when they arise. The Church Doctrine Committee, after study, deliberation and consultation with the wider church, reports to GA with its recommendations; but the GA as a whole makes the final decision.

(4) What is the relationship between doctrine and revelation?

The Reformed tradition holds that doctrine is derived from revelation. The preamble to ordination above sets forth the hierarchy of revelation:

> (1) Jesus Christ = the Living Word of God, the ultimate revelation of God;
> (2) The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments = the written Word of God, which bear witness to Christ the Living Word; and
> (3) Subordinate Standards = the Westminster Confession, Declaration Concerning Church and Nation, and Living Faith, all derived from (1) and (2) and affirmed as authoritative by the General Assembly.

The preamble also states that doctrine may develop and change as the Holy Spirit brings to the collective understanding of the Church aspects of the revelation of Christ it may not have been aware of previously.

One example would be the growing awareness of the implications of the meaning of Baptism ("There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus", Gal. 3:27-28) which eventually led to the GA's decision in 1966 to admit women to the office of ordained ministry and eldership. This decision, incidentally, generated a discussion about "liberty of conscience" and "liberty of action" in the early 1980s as male ordained ministers who disagreed with the GA's decision conspicuously absented themselves from Presbytery services where women were

ordained. The GA affirmed that those who disagreed with the decision to ordain women had the "liberty of conscience" to believe that the GA had erred, but did not have the "liberty of action" to refuse participation in services were women were being ordained. The GA stipulated that there would be a "grace period" during which those who felt they could not support the ordination of women should examine their consciences and decide whether or not they could remain in the PCC; when the "grace period" ended, refusal to participate in services where women were ordained became subject to church discipline.

An interesting shift occurred between the 17th century Westminster Confession and the late 20th-century Living Faith with regard to the functional starting point of revelation. The Reformed tradition's understanding of revelation makes a distinction between the Christ the Living Word of God made known in the written Word of God of the Scriptures, and subordinates the latter to the former. However, not much was made of this subordination by the Westminster divines who focussed on Scripture as the authoritative deposit of revelation and the starting point for doctrine. Not surprisingly, the Westminster Confession opens with "Chapter 1: Of the Holy Scripture" before moving on to "Chapter 2: Of God, and of the Holy Trinity." The advent of biblical higher criticism threw the distinction between Living Word and written Word into sharp relief. It led to a subordination of the Bible with its historically and culturally conditioned elements to the eternal and timeless Living Word manifested in the person of Jesus Christ. This shift is evident in how Living Faith begins with four chapters on God before dealing with the Bible and in this remarkable affirmation:

> The Bible is to be understood in the light of the revelation of God's work in Christ.
> The writing of the Bible was conditioned by the language, thought,
> and setting of its time.
> The Bible must be read in its historical context.
> We interpret Scripture
> as we compare passages,
> seeing the two Testaments in light of each other,
> and listening to commentators past and present.
> Relying on the Holy Spirit,
> we seek the application of God's word for our time.
>
> (Living Faith 5.4)

Brief Bibliography:

Book of Forms. The Presbyterian Church in Canada: Toronto, 2009. Available at http://www.presbyterian.ca/files/webfm/ourresources/officialdocs/2009BoF.pdf

Gerrish, Brian, "Tradition in the Modern World: The Reformed Habit of Mind." Undated; available at http://reformedtheology.org/SiteFiles/GerrishArticle.html; Internet, last accessed April 20 2010.

Living Faith: A Statement of Christian Belief. Kelowna, British Columbia: Wood Lake Books, 1984. Available at http://www.presbyterian.ca/files/webfm/ourfaith/officialdocuments/livingfaith/livingfaith.pdf

Westminister Confession of Faith. Available at http://www.presbyterian.ca/files/webfm/ourresources/officialdocs/Westminster_Confession.pdf

Westminster Shorter Catechism. Available at http://www.presbyterian.ca/files/webfm/ourfaith/officialdocuments/catechism/WestminsterShorterCatechism.pdf

License and Permissible Use Notice

These materials are provided to you by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) in accordance with the terms of ATLA's agreements with the copyright holder or authorized distributor of the materials, as applicable. In some cases, ATLA may be the copyright holder of these materials.

You may download, print, and share these materials for your individual use as may be permitted by the applicable agreements among the copyright holder, distributors, licensors, licensees, and users of these materials (including, for example, any agreements entered into by the institution or other organization from which you obtained these materials) and in accordance with the fair use principles of United States and international copyright and other applicable laws. You may not, for example, copy or email these materials to multiple web sites or publicly post, distribute for commercial purposes, modify, or create derivative works of these materials without the copyright holder's express prior written permission.

Please contact the copyright holder if you would like to request permission to use these materials, or any part of these materials, in any manner or for any use not permitted by the agreements described above or the fair use provisions of United States and international copyright and other applicable laws. For information regarding the identity of the copyright holder, refer to the copyright information in these materials, if available, or contact ATLA at products@atla.com.

Except as otherwise specified, Copyright © 2016 American Theological Library Association.