
FENCE, FLAG OR FOUNDATION – THE ROLE OF A DOCTRINAL BASIS

Fences and flags

Whatever the cause, there is always benefit to be reaped when Christian doctrines become topics of discussion. The doctrine of the cross became a matter for debate following the publication of Steve Chalke's 'The Lost Message of Jesus'. The language of 'models of the atonement' became freshly understood and debated by those who do not read theology professionally. How should we understand the cross? Is it a propitiation, or is expiation a better description? Redemption, ransom, victory... various characterisations merit consideration. But is there one which is fundamental, one on which all the others depend?

Now of course old-fashioned liberalism ducked the whole issue, marginalising the cross to the point that it functioned solely as some kind of exemplary act, calling forth sacrificial service from followers of Jesus. Not so evangelicals; for them the cross sits necessarily at the heart of the faith. However, even here there are differences. For some, one model or other seems objectionable, offending against their sensibilities. For others, all the models have their place in an interlocking network of concepts and metaphors. For many, including John Stott¹, the Cross is at heart substitutionary, and its redemptive power, its victory, its propitiatory effect, rest on this critical aspect of its nature.

A similar problem exists in relation to understandings of doctrinal statements. There are, of course, those who see doctrinal statements as simply unhelpful. At the time of the Reformation Anabaptist experience of the use of doctrinal statements as tools of exclusion led them to question whether the New Testament offered any sanction for such formularies. The Brethren movement of the 19th Century was likewise suspicious of creedal statements. Groups of American Baptists today will be found to affirm their non-creedal heritage.

¹ J R W Stott, The Cross of Christ, p202f

Yet even amongst those who gladly subscribe to some statement of faith there is debate about their proper purpose. In 2007, the leadership of the (American) Evangelical Theological Society faced a challenge from a group of members to amend its (very minimal) statement. The ensuing debate centred around the statement's purpose. In the late 1990s the emergence of Fusion, a direct rival in student ministry to UCCF, arose in part because of issues surrounding UCCF's doctrinal statement. Fusion itself had adopted the doctrinal statement of the Evangelical Alliance. Yet it seemed evident that the heart of the difference over UCCF's confessionalism was not to be found in the differences between the two statements. It lay rather in the perception² held by Fusion leaders that UCCF's statement was intended primarily as a tool of conservation and exclusion, a fence to keep out disapproved views and people.

It is certainly the case that creedal statements are modelled in different ways, not simply in their construction but in their avowed purposes. Berkouwer addressed this in a chapter on Apostolic Confession in 'The Church'. In thinking about the purpose of the church's confession he says, 'No matter what words were used - essence, core, centre, fundamental - questions always arose about such words.'³

In more recent years, mathematical concepts were pressed into service in order to attempt to resolve some of the tensions surrounding the in-out dimensions of using doctrinal statements as fences. Following Paul Hiebert, there has been a move towards defining Christian groups as centred rather than bounded sets. Bounded sets are relatively easy to describe. Lay a rope in a circle in a field of sheep. Certain sheep find themselves inside and others outside the circle. It is possible for them to move between the one domain and the other, but in principle there is a clear distinction between the two groups of sheep.

The concept of centred sets is less easy. Perhaps again a physical illustration will help. The sun is the centre of the solar system which one might consider to be a centred set. The set is held together by the gravitational attraction of the sun. The set has some definition. There are celestial entities that are held in the sun's orbit (e.g. the earth) and others that are not (e.g. Alpha Centauri). On the other hand there are particles that pass through the physical region of Solar system which are not part of that system. Despite it being possible to say of some entities that they are part of the system, there is no boundary in the normal sense.

From such a perspective a doctrinal statement may be envisaged as the attractive centre of the set, that which holds the set together. To change the metaphor, a statement of doctrine acts as a flag, that around which the members of the set gather.

² In my view a misperception.

³ G C Berkouwer, 'Studies in Dogmatics - The Church', p282

As Berkouwer notes, all attempts to define the purpose of creedal statements in a single word fall short. I want, however, in what follows to explore a metaphor which offers some assistance in this matter: It is that of a foundation.

Gospel ministry means building on a foundation

I chose it for a reason. For it is arguable that doctrinal statements in the historic Evangelical tradition have been used as bases out of which Christian ministries grow, and that this fits with the New Testament's own foundationalism.

Paul uses the notion of a foundation in 1 Corinthians 3 as he explores Christian ministry in terms of construction work in which a number of labourers play their part. His point is very simply that ongoing building will be based on a pre-existing foundation. In the flow of his argument, the notion of Christ being the church's foundation is used to call the Corinthian church together. To be sure, it is possible to build badly on that foundation using wrong materials, but to build elsewhere than on the foundation is to erect something entirely different.

A foundation functions, then, as a boundary marker. Yet for all that it defines a boundary, its function is far more dynamic than that of a fence. For a foundation is that out of which a building grows. It provides structure and shape to the whole building.

Indeed, this notion of shape is incorporated in other features of New Testament foundationalism. For whereas in 1 Corinthians 3 the foundation is Christ, in Ephesians 2 the house is built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets. That is to say, it is built on the ministry of those who provided for us the written Word of God, with a chief cornerstone, namely, Christ, the incarnate Word of God⁴. So the foundation is pictured as a corner, a key architectural, structural point. It is a point so crucial to the shape and construction of the building that the cornerstone of Ephesians 2 can be spoken of in 1 Corinthians 3 as comprising the whole foundation. That these foundations are essentially fashioned out of revealed truth is evident in the language used around the metaphor⁵.

Doctrinal Statements as foundations

Inasmuch as the doctrinal statements adopted by churches and Evangelical organisations are statements of fundamental Gospel truth finding their focus in the person and work of Jesus, they function as brief outlines of our understanding of

⁴ Paul's foundationalism has its antecedents in Is 28:16, Matt 7:24-27 and parallels. These passages which refer to the Messiah and his revealed words fit entirely with Pauline the imagery of the foundation of the Church and of Christian ministry.

⁵ Note especially the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders, and compare Eph 2:20 with 3:5

the Gospel foundation on which we build. They intend to affirm nothing other than what has been laid out by the Apostles and Prophets in summary form.

Where a confession of faith is conceived of primarily as a protective barrier against infection with heresy, it may easily be divorced from the ministry it seeks to protect. Like a fence, it sits at some distance from the building.

The best evangelical agencies adopt a significantly different approach to confessionalism. Our doctrinal bases are foundational documents upon which our ministries grow. We are able to derive our ministry goals, our values, our methodologies, our programme aims, our selection of worker and leaders either directly, or by deduction, from our confessions.

Why? What gives doctrinal bases such authority in classical evangelical movements? A good doctrinal basis will affirm the ultimate authority of the Bible, deriving its content from the Bible, be Trinitarian and Gospel-shaped, reflect salvation history, and centre on Christ, his cross-work and its application.

A foundational statement

I want to illustrate these features from a doctrinal basis with which many readers will be familiar, that of UCCF⁶. Illustrative of the fact that it is a foundational statement, the UCCF Doctrinal Basis appears in the opening paragraphs of the charity's governing document⁷.

Derivation

The UCCF Doctrinal Basis' formal principal is a statement acknowledging that its content is derived from the Old and New Testament Scriptures. In so doing it follows Ephesians 2:20 in making the ministry of the Apostles and Prophets to be foundational for the building of Christ's church⁸. God's trustworthy Book is the point of derivation of all that follows in the doctrinal basis. It thus submits itself to biblical critique. It affirms the Bible as entirely trustworthy and the sufficient, authoritative source of the doctrines which it sets out.

Shape

Moreover, its theological shape is governed by Scripture. So the Doctrinal Basis is Trinitarian, both in terms of its affirmations about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (clause a), and in its consideration of the structure of the Gospel (e-i). Whilst evangelicals may at times slip into Christo-monism such an error is excluded by the very strong affirmations of the work of the Spirit in applying the work of Christ to the objects of salvation (h, i).

⁶ <http://www.uccf.org.uk/about-us/doctrinal-basis.htm>

⁷ UCCF Memorandum and Articles, Clause 3

⁸ Of course UCCF is not a church, but it is nonetheless part of the Church.

The Doctrinal Basis follows the biblical shape in making the Holy Spirit's ministry critical. It affirms the regenerating ministry of the Holy Spirit in close relation to the work of Christ, just as Jesus does in John 3.

The strong emphasis on the sovereignty of God, with which the Doctrinal Basis opens, demands that the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit should feature strongly. No other doctrine so serves to consolidate the sufficiency of the atonement than that its application is divinely initiated. A high view of God's sovereignty allied to a high view of the Christ's atonement necessitates a high pneumatology.

However, the Doctrinal Basis is not merely shaped by biblical Trinitarianism, for it is not simply driven by systematic theology. The insights of biblical theology provide another dimension of shape. So the Doctrinal Basis follows the story-line of the Bible through creation, fall and redemption, to consummation. In drawing on the Bible's history of God's dealings with us, the Doctrinal Basis protects itself from the accusation of presenting a merely propositional, rather than fully personal, account of the Gospel. This Gospel is rooted in the actions of the persons of the Trinity in history. Those actions indicate sovereign responsiveness to the plight of humankind. That response plays out both in terms of wrath and grace (d, f, g & k) which meet at the cross.

Just as God's personal actions in shaping global history are traced, so also the histories of the redeemed and the impenitent are mapped out in terms of God's engagement with us. Regeneration leads to sanctification (i), incorporation into the Church and, ultimately, glorification (k). Like the Gospel it seeks to summarise, the Doctrinal Basis is not a set of disconnected statements but a coherent story-line, setting out the actions of a coherent and sovereign God in human history, in individual lives and amongst a body of people (j).

Centre

Even the most cursory reading of the Doctrinal Basis will reveal that this story has a centre. That centre can be viewed personally in Christ, and historically in the cross. The first four clauses of the Doctrinal Basis present to us the Bible's worldview - the reality we inhabit. The remaining clauses tell us what God's response to that reality is in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the unifying theme of everything that follows: the description of the human condition, both in terms of judgement and salvation. Moreover, whilst the incarnation is affirmed (e), the pivotal event in universal history is the death of Christ; here is the centre of the Gospel, the cornerstone of the foundation - Christ and him crucified.

The cross' central place is secured in that it is the death of Christ that uniquely accomplishes redemption from the guilt, penalty and power of sin (f). Nothing else

compares to this one act of righteousness (Romans 5:18). This one act is so replete with significance that it demands a multi-faceted description in order to portray it properly. Redemption is obtained from sin's guilt and penalty and power. It is liberation at a price. It is representative, substitutionary and mediatorial.

As the event demands exploration, so also the person. He is the cornerstone of the foundation. It is therefore no surprise that the Doctrinal Basis should incorporate a high Christology. The deity and humanity of Christ (e) are prerequisites for the mediatorial role ascribed to him (f). His sinlessness (e) is likewise essential to the availability of his righteousness to be imputed to the sinner (g). His resurrection (e) is vital to his present accessibility as a mediator (f), and as one in whom it is plausible and possible for us to trust (g, h). And whilst the linkage is not as obvious, it is more than possible to trace a necessary connection between the present reign of Christ (e) and the formation of his Body of which he is the head (j).

Building on the foundation

We have explored the Doctrinal Basis as a Gospel foundation; it has derivation, shape and centre; there is boundary and perspective; there is coherence and beauty. Those who build here, build safely. But what does it look like to build on this foundation?

A Gospel worth telling

The approach to biblical confessionalism we have been outlining provides a foundational understanding of the Christian message that should drive our commitment to evangelism.

In the first place, a mission built on such a foundation, will necessarily express itself evangelistically. For it is undeniably the case that the story we have rehearsed is one which has to be told; it is global in its scope, and eternal in its significance; it deals with the past, present and future of the universe; it encompasses the individual stories of all people, everywhere; it is the grand meta-narrative, and however, much Western culture may wish to bury meta-narratives along with modernity, this truth cannot be suppressed.

Neither can we allow it to be culturally-marginalised or geographically-restricted. The Doctrinal Basis echoes the Bible in the universalistic nature of its claims - about God (b); humanity (d); the unique saviourhood of Christ (f); the Church (j); and judgment (k).

Secondly, just as the Doctrinal Basis points to the derivation, shape and centre of the Gospel these features will be evident in our Gospelling; it will be proclaimed

out of its source. It is God's message, made known to us by revelation. So, much of our evangelism will be expository. Where it is not, it will nonetheless be recognisably biblical in that both its content and argument will be biblical.

It terms of shape, the confession reflects the Bible in being analytical, descriptive and explanatory of the world as it is, and of the human condition. Likewise in our evangelism, we shall be confident in allowing the Gospel to engage with the world and its ideas. We will expect it to expose and answer the inconsistencies and dissonances of fallen human reasoning and experience. Thus our evangelism will carry a strong apologetic edge.

Yet, as we have seen, our Bible-derived confession also tells the truth as story. Likewise our evangelism will maintain the integrity of the Bible's story. The apologetic approach alone will not be faithful to the nature of the message; there is history to be recounted, a whole thought-world to be recreated in the minds of those we seek to bring to faith in the Christ.

Our confessionalism should make us faithfully daring in our application of the Bible to the world as it is; and it will lead us to drive right into the heart of the Gospel, to lead people to the person and cross of Christ. We will take whatever time is necessary to work from our point of departure to Christ and the cross. There is no benefit in so hurrying the journey that we lose those we want to draw along with us. That journey may take a long time in pre- and post-Christian cultures. Yet we will not aim anywhere short of the centre, for the repentance that the Gospel commands, pivots on the cross. Christ alone, in the cross alone, redeems us from the power of sin from which we must turn to God. And the faith to which the Gospel calls us is faith in Christ as saviour on the basis of his full and sufficient substitutionary sacrifice for sin.

Teaching the doctrines of the Bible biblically - the shape and sanity of sound teaching

Our commitment to disciple-making demands that evangelism is not an end in itself; we are committed to seeing people grow in likeness to Christ and Christian usefulness in the church and the world. Bible teaching is vital; we seek to inculcate 'doctrine' in the Biblical sense of the word. That is to say that what is taught will be applied to daily life so that those who are instructed in sound doctrine will be temperate, self-controlled, loving, endued with spiritual stamina, wise and disciplined in the family and workplace⁹.

Such teaching will result in soundness of life and healthy living, morally, ethically, and relationally. If it does not move the rich to generosity in Christ, if it does not enable the poor to be content in Christ, if it does not make more caring parents

⁹ Titus 2:1ff

and more obedient children, then it is not fulfilling its end. It will thus be marked by the Bible's own deeply contextual and realistic engagement with the lives of people.

Thus it is evident that a Doctrinal Basis is not fitted to be a teaching tool, so much as a syllabus guide. This is so for two reasons: A Doctrinal Basis is a summary of the headlines of the Christian gospel. It does not attempt to develop social, moral, or ethical implications. The Bible, by contrast, often works the other way around; Biblical doctrines are often taught in order to answer social, moral or ethical questions. Secondly, the Doctrinal Basis itself is insistent that it draws its contents and shape from the Bible. It thus points us away from itself to the Bible as the proper source of instruction.

Yet this is not to say that a Doctrinal Basis has no educational value. In short compass, it allows us to identify the balance of those key truths that a proper teaching of the Bible will cover. A church which devoted all its teaching time to the doctrine of creation, or to eschatology, would be failing those it fed. A doctrinal statement reminds us that the Gospel is a whole in which the parts are interrelated; they are interrelated logically and historically.

Thus, good Bible teaching will not so wrench biblical doctrines away from their whole Gospel context as to disguise the shape that allows them to fit into the whole. For example, the doctrine of election will not be isolated from the universal call to all people to repent and believe the Gospel; the doctrine of justification by faith will not be so taught as to make it seem incompatible with the doctrine of regeneration. Creedal statements provide a tool in enabling us to perceive and preserve this shape in our teaching.

There will be something deeply holistic about good Bible teaching. It is our authority for life as well as doctrine. It will not issue from the ivory tower but will both speak and demonstrate Bible truth; it will be experimental in the sense that it has been tested in the life of one disciple, and thus speaks to the experience of others; it will be sane in the sense that it produces health, and in the sense that it makes sense to its hearers in their contexts.

The living of sound lives - ethical implications of the Gospel

Thus sound teaching will lead to changed lives through appropriate application of the Gospel to the range of issues that Christians face in their varied contexts. However, it remains vital to explore this for it has been the consistent weakness of confessional evangelicals that we have been guilty of assessing spiritual health too narrowly in terms of the kind of doctrinal correctness that can be judged by affirmation of our doctrinal bases; evangelical doctrinal giants fall too readily in moral collapse; evangelical institutions seem too easily captivated by the mores of

capitalist enterprise, deploying marketing techniques, global conglomerate thinking, and finance-based power with little regard to critical engagement.

Moreover, this is not merely a feature of the rich West; the tragedy of Rwanda is that the country had seen a Christian spiritual revival of significant proportions in its recent history and yet still sank into genocide; the church in Kenya has grown strongly over the past decades and numbers of politicians have church backgrounds, yet Kenya is in the grip of corruption at all levels of society. In both these East African contexts the evangelical movements have recognised the need to be vigorous in addressing matters of ethnicity, reconciliation and justice. If the Gospel is so 'spiritualised' that it fails to change a culture in which it is growing, then Islam with its more vigorous and direct engagement with social structures will appear attractive, despite its willingness to use violence.

The shape of the Doctrinal Basis makes plain that the Gospel has ultimately to do with that which is unseen and eternal, but it must bite here and now. The UCCF Doctrinal Basis affirms the authority of the Bible in all matters of conduct. The notion that social and ethical engagement is marginalised by a Doctrinal Basis such as UCCF's reflects a tendentious misreading of it. Rather, proper confessionality will drive a church or Christian mission agency to critical engagement at the deepest levels of the culture in which it works.

Back to boundaries

It is in such critical ethical circumstances that the Gospel is seen sharply to distinguish between people. A foundation is inevitably a boundary marker. It tells us what will fall within the building and what falls outside. Indeed, as the foundation is built upon, what emerges is far more substantial than a fence. We should not therefore be timid in insisting that our doctrinal bases function as boundary markers for our ministries; others may wish to build elsewhere, but we are clear where we are building. We will not be deflected into building elsewhere. For some this smacks all too clearly of a desire to exclude. Not so; where applied well, a Doctrinal Basis is a powerful tool of unity. Indeed, it is entirely arguable that such a boundary marker is vital to enable thoughtful, mutual commitment. The value of this within a fractured evangelical world that divides on almost any issue is inestimable; wise confessionality is equally cautious of both narrowness and unbiblical breadth.

It is necessary that those taking responsibility for the strategic direction of a ministry and for delivering its Bible teaching should be those who have a lively and intelligent commitment to its foundational statement, its core convictions and values. Moreover, it makes sense that this should involve more than mere adherence to the Doctrinal Basis. Such nominal adherence, where the clear

implications of the Doctrinal Basis are not followed, represents an undermining of the foundation.

The Gospel draws lines and we cannot erase or ignore them, no matter how inconvenient they are to us. Yet to unite in building on solid Gospel foundations is a matter of joy and delight. Those who do so, build with a sense of confidence in the God of the Gospel: they have a purpose that is rooted not in themselves but in his revelation; they gladly follow the leading of the Holy Spirit who lives in them; they acknowledge both the imperfections of what they are accomplishing, and its significance in the light of their corporate *eschaton*. Above all, their eyes focus on the first-laid stone of the foundation on which they build. What the builders rejected has become for them precious: Christ and his cross-work stand as the defining centre of the building on which we work. The remarkable joy of working with others from different nations, cultures, even church-subcultures, who confess their love for this saviour and his Gospel above all else, is priceless.

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