
THE IMPORTANCE OF SOUND DOCTRINE

by

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Doctrine is certainly not a popular term these days. To many, the mere mention of the word evokes the idea of narrow-mindedness, adherence to strange and peculiar beliefs, which encourage sectarianism and a ghettoized approach to life. Seen in this light doctrine is thought to be divisive and thus harmful to Christian unity. Since unity is held as an ideal of superior value, it is deemed justifiable to dispense with doctrine whenever it clashes with the pursuit of unity.

There are others who go even further. One does not need to establish the "guilt" of doctrine in order to set it aside. The prevailing mindset, the concern of the present age has declared its irrelevance. While at one time it was alright to pursue right doctrine, today this is no longer the case. The concern is no longer with right belief, but with right doing. Orthopraxis has superseded orthodoxy. What matters first and foremost is the quality of one's action, not the soundness of one's belief.

It must be acknowledged that the unsympathetic attitude being displayed toward doctrine is not devoid of basis. The history of the church is replete with evidence which shows the devastating effects an unhealthy preoccupation with doctrine can have. It also shows the inadequacy and indeed the bankruptcy of an approach to Christian life which is content in affirming the sufficiency of the doctrinal. Such an approach truncates genuine Christian faith, robs it of its transforming ferment, and compromises its practical relevance. "Faith without works is dead" (*James 2:17*).

Now it should be evident to all reasonable people that a thing should not be discarded simply because of the wrong and misguided use that has been made of it. This is a simplistic approach which mistakenly tries to solve one wrong by another wrong! To acknowledge that

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a thing is insufficient is not to say that it is useless or unnecessary. If doctrine has been abused in the past and is being abused in the present, the responsible stance to adopt is not to disdain it but to approach it in a healthy and sound way.

Doctrine may have been mistakenly pursued at the exclusion of praxis in the past, but the way to remedy this is not to declare the ousting of doctrine and the enthronement of praxis, but to affirm the co-regency of orthodoxy and orthopraxis. The pursuit of right belief and involvement in right doing are not antithetical enterprises. They are complementary and mutually enriching endeavours. Christian faith can dispense with neither. Its authenticity depends on both.

Why then should right belief and sound doctrine be pursued in an age of theological pluralism and epistemological relativism? The New Testament, and particularly the writings of Paul, takes the view that sound teaching is essential to Christian faith and practice. Four summary statements, all deduced from, and corroborated by the Biblical data, set forth the case of the essentiality of sound doctrine.

First: Sound doctrine is essential to the preservation of the truth of the Gospel.

One cannot claim to take the New Testament seriously and fail to realise that there is a doctrinal standard which is connected with the gospel; there is a standard which needs to be preserved if the faith itself is not to become distorted and perverted. There seems to be a doctrinal core, a theological minimum and basic essentials that must be understood, adhered to, defended and preserved for posterity. These essentials are non-negotiable. But for the moment they are tampered with, and the integrity of the gospel itself is compromised.

In Galatians, Paul could not be more emphatic about the necessity to keep intact the basic content of the faith: "Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preach to you, let him be eternally condemned" (1:6). And a "gospel" which is emptied of the basic elements of the faith is no gospel at all. These elements constitute a sacred trust, a deposit that must be safely kept and then passed to others. "What you have heard from me, keep as a pattern of sound teaching... Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you..." (II Timothy 1:13, 14).

The need to treasure, that is, to "safe keep" the faith is as urgent today as when it was first expressed by Paul. The list of counterfeit Christianities which now crowd the religious marketplace is a long one! The counterfeiters of today are no less cunning than their counterparts of

yesteryear. They have learnt well the art of couching their doctrinal perversions in attractive and nice sounding language.

Sometimes, the counterfeiters' message so resembles the gospel that often even astute Christians are persuaded of their "veracity". In times like these, the preservation of the pure faith must be pursued vigorously. We must critically sift through today's rubble, rescue the precious gem, and safeguard it for posterity.

Second: Sound doctrine is essential to the Integrity and Mission of the church.

The church is called to be many things these days. It is called a haven for the weary, a friend of the outcasts, a defender of the oppressed, a servant of the world, a place of fellowship and nurture, and it should be all of these things. But there is another aspect of the church's life that is often overlooked, and yet it is essential to its integrity. The church is called to be a place of truth—truth understood ethically, but also theologically.

In I Timothy 3:15, Paul defines the church as "the household of God, the pillar and foundation of the truth". That he has theological truth in view is clear in the very next verse, where he offers a succinct but all-encompassing exposition of the doctrine of Christ. In one stroke of the pen, the apostle affirms Christ's incarnation, resurrection and exaltation. He gives credence to Christ's humanity and divinity. This, for him, is the great mystery of godliness—"the truth" of which the church is the guardian.

If the church is anything at all, it must be a place where the truth about Christ and the redemption he accomplished is found and expounded. To the extent that the church distances itself from this cardinal truth, it compromises the integrity of its being and mission. Ronald Ward (1974, 62-63) expresses it well in his commentary on this passage:

"The church is not a twittering little bird to sing the Redeemer's praise. It is not a gentle breeze to waft the message over the countryside; it is not a kindly cloud to rain refreshing mercy on the earth beneath... It is the pillar and bulwark of the truth... [It] is the means to the continued presentation of the truth to the world... The world must be told the gospel and the church is the means chosen by God for this purpose."¹

Third: Sound doctrine is an essential qualification of the Minister of Christ.

In our time this is minimized. If people are asked to identify the qualifications considered essential for the work of ministry, few would place adherence to sound doctrine high on the list—if they mention it at all. Things like intellectual acumen, professional competence, moral uprightness would outlist commitment to sound doctrine. Many see a virtue in doctrinal “wishywashiness.” It is seen as evidence of broadmindedness. But the New Testament does not see it that way.

Those who aspire to ministerial leadership must adhere to the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience, “and must be able to teach them to others” (*I Timothy 3: 2, 9*). The minister is required to watch his lifestyle as well as his doctrine closely (*4:16*). Adherence to sound teaching marks him out as a “good minister” (*I Timothy 4:6*), but lack of interest in sound and wholesome teaching and opposition to it is a mark of professional incompetence (*I Timothy 1:7*), and an indication of moral and spiritual defects (*I Timothy 6:3*).

One may have a good heart, one may be gifted with extraordinary abilities and skills; but with all of these one is not quite ready to take care of the flock of God until one has a solid grasp of the fundamentals of the faith. A good minister of Christ is one who is brought up “in the truths of the faith” (*I Timothy 4:6*).

Fourth: Sound doctrine is essential for the protection of the people of God.

One of the things that those who downplay the importance of sound doctrine fail to realise is that at issue here is not simply a question of theological correctness, but the very well-being of people. Sound doctrine is not merely academic. It is a down-to-earth matter, with far-reaching implications for life here and now. Paul’s counsel to Timothy is that by watching both life and doctrine, “you will save both yourself and your hearers” (*I Timothy 4:16*).

Sound doctrine is a much needed protection for the people of God. It protects them against distraction. It makes us less vulnerable to new teachings (*Eph. 4: 14 ff.*) and participate in worthless and irrelevant discussions. Knowing where we stand makes us secure and stable. It makes us more tolerant and less contentious, too; for it gives us the ability to distinguish between what really matters and what does not—between the essential and the incidental. In a sense, sound doctrine promotes unity!

Further, sound doctrine protects against deception. The reality of deception is readily acknowledged by the New Testament writers. But they know no better antidote against it than the teaching of the truth. Knowing that believers at Ephesus would be targets of deception, Paul drew the attention of their leaders to the fact that he has acquainted them with the truth of God's will and that they have to draw on this resource to protect the church of God against the impending danger. (*Acts 20:25 ff.*)

Deception is no benign matter. It is deadly. Those who entrust themselves to deceiving gurus and false messiahs do not only shipwreck their faith but they endanger their very lives spiritually and physically. Throughout history, millions have met a tragic end in this way. So, when the people of God are protected against deception, they are protected against destruction.

If there is any truth at all to what has been said, it follows that we cannot, we dare not, dispense with sound doctrine. At stake is the future of the faith. At stake is the integrity of the church. At stake is the fitness of the minister as a servant of Christ. At stake is the very life of the people of God entrusted to our care. Sound doctrine should not be discarded. It is critically essential. □

SOURCE

1. Ward, Ronald. 1975 Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians WACO, TX.: Word Books.