

Does Doctrine Really Matter?

By Micah Hackett
www.insidethebible.ca

Christianity without a passion for doctrine should really be an oxymoron in our minds, because it simply does not make sense. We would not trust a scientist who claims, "I don't study science; I only practice it." We would not trust a doctor who says, "I don't study anatomy; I just operate." Yet when it comes to Christianity, somehow this claim is accepted: "I'm not really a great Bible student or versed in doctrine; I just love Jesus." Something is inconsistent here.

Doctrine, simply put, is teaching – or in our case, what the Bible teaches. So then, the gospel is doctrine. Truth is doctrine. What Scripture calls "the faith" is doctrine. The Bible itself is doctrine, since Paul says, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine..." The reality is, if we are Christians who do not invest in doctrine, all we have is morality based on feelings and hope based on blind faith. Every single system in the world is marked by two things: what it believes and what it practices. These cannot ever be separated, lest the system cease to be coherent. So with Christianity, to live it we must believe it; to believe it we must understand what we are believing. This is why doctrine matters.

Is Doctrine Important? If So, How Important?

Doctrine is how we know God; therefore, it is important. Doctrine is the essence of Scripture's teaching; therefore, it is important. Christians are commanded to believe and defend doctrine; therefore, it is important. Simple logic demands we have a high view of this subject, assuming we begin with a high view of God and a high view of Scripture.

But its importance becomes clearer when its nature is understood. Scripture describes doctrine as being *exclusive*. Paul said to Timothy, "I besought you to abide still at Ephesus... that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine." (1 Tim. 1:3). Believers do not exist to form their own ideas; they exist to perpetuate the knowledge of God. That demands a commitment to *all* of God's truth and *nothing* but God's truth. If it is so exclusive, it is obviously vital. He further says to Timothy in chapter four that Timothy would be a "good minister" if he was "nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine." Clearly, a commitment to truth is *commendable*. It isn't only commendable, however; it is *necessary and central*. For Paul says later, "Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine." This is a clear command that puts doctrine at the center of assembly activity. Doctrine by its very nature is indisputably vital.

Doctrine is also proven to be vital by what happens when it is missing. The people who are ignorant of true Biblical teaching will be the first to embrace pseudo-Biblical teaching. Thus, when Scripture warns against false doctrine, it establishes the importance of knowing it, not superficially, but intelligently. This alone will allow us to "mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which [we] have learned; and avoid them." (Rom. 16:17). False teachers are some of the most dangerous enemies of the believer. They know how to manipulate believers when mental guards are let down. Thus our obligation is two-fold: the avoidance of

the false and the full embrace of the true.

Paul said to the Ephesians that the ultimate aim of the Body of Christ is full knowledge of Him, "that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive." (Eph. 4:14). In the mean time, we have teachers of the Word to prevent this. In other words, our goal as believers, whether in this life or in the next, is to have stability in our doctrine. It is no virtue to waver in the truth by succumbing to false teachers.

In fact, lack of solid doctrine reflects Godless Christianity. Paul wrote to Timothy of a time that would come when "they will not endure sound doctrine, but after their own lusts shall... heap to themselves teachers, wanting their ears to be tickled." (2 Tim. 4:3). A Christianity that can only listen to what sounds easy, light, and entertaining is a Christianity that is dead. So then, to combat this, Paul further told Timothy, "Take heed unto yourself and to your doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this you shall both save yourself and them that hear you." (1 Tim. 4:16). Many rightly condemn dead orthodoxy; but we must also be quick to condemn dead vibrancy, that is, zeal without any doctrinal foundation. Doctrine is priceless in its value. When we lose it, we lose everything.

Doctrine and the Believer

At this point, someone may ask, "But isn't doctrine mainly for seminary students and preachers? After all, I can't understand prophecy and decipher all the controversies; I'm just an average Christian." If this is you, there is good news! *Every* believer has the ability to know and understand Bible doctrines, because every believer has the Holy Spirit to guide them. John puts it this way, "But the anointing which you have received of Him abides in you, and you need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teaches you of all things, and is truth and is no lie, and even as it has taught you, you shall abide in Him." Essentially, the point is this: we understand truth by the Holy Spirit and His work of illuminating it to our minds. We are not dependent upon a supreme Clergyman for our knowledge; we have God Himself, Scripture's Author, abiding in us constantly. The only excuse for ignorance of the Bible is that we haven't taken the time to study it, or that we are missing something in our fellowship with God.

That brings up a more sobering point: since every believer has the ability to know doctrine, every believer has the obligation to know it. *Every* believer is called to be a Bible student. The Bible is not just a facet of our lives; it is the essence of our lives. The division of Christians into "clergymen" and "laypeople" has devastated our understanding of what "average Christianity" should look like. *All* believers are called to thorough knowledge of Scripture. This is what first-century Christians believed. Peter could say confidently to his audience, "Wherefore I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though you know them, and are established in the present truth." John said to his audience, "I have not written unto you because you know not the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth." Paul said in Romans, "And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another." In other words, if every believer in the Roman assembly were given special ability to teach, they already would have had the material to teach with. This was "average Christianity": it was filled with

knowledge and able to discern right from wrong. A good question to ask ourselves would be this: "If I was suddenly endowed with either writing or speaking skills, would I have anything to say about the themes of the Bible? If so, would there be depth?" Or perhaps we could ask, "If a heresy arose in my assembly, and I was called upon to address and refute it, would I have anything to say?" These sound like questions that only seminary students would have to ask themselves; but Scripture says these are questions *every* Christian must ask.

So then, is our goal merely to attain knowledge? Is Christianity really only about getting an A+ on Bible trivia? Not in the least. We study Scripture to know God and obey Him. We study Scripture, because we want to understand our duty. And what is the basis for obedience? Doctrine is. Look at Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Hebrews, for instance; they all begin with deep truth and then explain how that will translate into practical Christianity. We do not only learn doctrine: we obey it. Thus, our reception of truth is seen as obedience. And when we conform to false teaching, we are seen as disobeying. Truth is not simply knowledge; it is a walk. And when we are walking in the truth, we will emphasize its beauty by our actions (Tit. 2:10).

But the issue goes further, because doctrine also provides the basis for fellowship. In 2 John, the apostle begins by saying, "The elder unto the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth; and not I only, but also all they that have known the truth." It was the common sharing of truth that made their bond so strong. It was the same in Acts 2. The people continued in the apostles' doctrine and only after that "in fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers." Doctrine is not mere knowledge, though it is that; but it is the basis for godliness and communion.

In conclusion, we cannot but see the dignity and necessity of a Christian's commitment to the study of God's word, regardless of his academic ability, career, or concentration capacity. There are 1,001 reasons to hinder our commitment to understanding the Bible (as with any other form of obedience), but once we bring it to the fore in our priority list, we will find those hindrances losing significance. The Lord gives strength where it is needed, and He will certainly help us study His freely-given revelation. So then, does doctrine really matter? We can answer with a confident "YES!" And we can leave this question with a renewed passion to study our Bibles as we realize that we actually can understand them. With this ability comes immense responsibility. God has given us minds to comprehend His truth; we will be accountable should we fail to use them to their full potential, whatever that may be. Doctrine matters. Let us know it. Let us stand for it. Let us live it.