

# Formation of Biblical Doctrine

## Determining a Method of Study

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### Preconditions to Studying

When establishing a method of theology, one needs to understand first and foremost that there is no such thing as “theological instant coffee.” In other words, there is no fail-proof method that guarantees 100% correct doctrine in one step. There is no place for presumption when studying doctrine. This does not mean we cannot confidently assert a doctrine. This does not mean truth is relative. Rather, it is an honest acknowledgement that fallen man will always be just that: fallible.

However, while man is fallible, God is not. When believers approach doctrine, they *do* have an anchor and a center of consistency: God Himself. Thus, the first precondition to studying theology is neither education in philosophy or history, nor a survey of theological methods; rather, it is sensitivity to the things of God which brings light to the believer. There is really no problem in admitting our limitations, as long as the focus is redirected to God and His Word. With this, there are three non-negotiable preconditions to Bible study.

1. *An Acknowledgement of the Spirit's Centrality.* From beginning to end, it is the Spirit of God that reveals the things of God. Full dependence upon His leading fully supersedes the most well-formulated method of theology. There is no substitute for this.
2. *Preparation of the Heart to Receive the Things of God.* In theology, God is not looking for PhD's, nor is He looking for seminary education. He is looking for committed hearts. “To this man will I look, even to him that is humble and of a contrite spirit, and trembles at My Word.” (Isaiah 66:2). “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge [and wisdom].” (Prov. 1:7, 9:10). Do you want to have good doctrine? Fear the Lord and tremble at His Word.
3. *The Illumination of the Spirit.* It is our part to acknowledge the Spirit's centrality and to tremble at God's Word. It is God's part to actually reveal the truth to us. Unless God is active in the midst of every study, those studies will only yield confusion. We must never take for granted the grace that opens our minds to Scripture.

Although God is our only source of confidence, method and tact are still essential when studying. God Himself demands this: “Strive diligently to present yourself approved to God, a workman that has no need to be ashamed, rightly/skillfully handling the word of truth.” (2 Tim. 2:15). In contrast to the false teachers who maligned Scripture and had no substance to their teaching, Timothy was called to be thoroughly Biblical – handling the Word rightly since the false teachers handled it wrongfully, and handling the Word skillfully since the false teachers made a mockery of reasonable teaching. So then, as we develop a method for studying doctrine, this will be our premise: Scripture must be handled rightly and skillfully. Our motives will not

be philosophical nor merely academic. Rather, we will strive to be thoroughly Biblical and thoroughly reasonable.

In all of this, there is one factor we must never forget: to the Christian, Scripture is life. Paul commanded Timothy, "Meditate upon these things; give yourself wholly to them; that your advancing may appear to all. Take heed unto yourself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this you will both save yourself and them that hear you." (1 Tim. 4:15-16). The phrase "give yourself wholly" is really one word in Greek (*isthi*), and it just means "be." Why is this significant? Because it tells us that the very sphere of Timothy's life, as a teacher, was doctrine: he was to "be [fully] in it." Timothy's call was really fourfold: (1) He was to constantly revolve Scripture in his mind (2) He was to live in the context of doctrine (3) He was to constantly and carefully attend to the doctrine (4) He was to abide in Scripture. To be a theologian on any level, Scripture must be life. Whole commitment cannot be negotiated when it comes to doctrine. The Christian's method matters nothing if he has not first decided to make the Scriptures the sphere of his life.

### **The Goals We Aim For**

While we need a foundation for our method, we also need focus. What are the main priorities of a Bible student? What is he looking for when all is said and done?

*Spiritual Transformation.* "...that you might charge some that they teach no other doctrine... Now the goal of the charge [both of Timothy and generically of the gospel] is love out of a pure heart, and a good conscience, and faith without hypocrisy." (1 Tim. 1:5). Doctrine is the basis of action. The idea of "less doctrine, more love" is erroneous when the doctrine is focused correctly. From this text we find that doctrine affects each of the believer's spheres of life: (1) In his relational sphere, love from a pure heart is increased, (2) In his internal sphere, a good conscience is procured, (3) In his God-ward sphere, genuine faith is established. While one may believe that doctrine is essential for action, however, he must never forget the converse: action is essential to doctrine. If we are not becoming more godly on account of our studies, our focus has been misplaced.

*A Higher View of God.* God is both the substance and the goal of good theology. What we learn of Him redounds unto greater glory for Him. Was this not the case with Paul in Romans 11? It was his appreciation of God's sovereignty that prompted him to say, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! ... For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever." For us then, in terms of knowledge, the Bible student wants a higher view of Who God is. Because God is the highest by nature, the more accurate our view of God, the higher our view will be of Him. In terms of obedience, the Bible student wants a higher view of what God demands. In terms of relationship, the Bible student wants a higher form of communion with the God he worships. By studying Scripture, the Christian seeks the lofty Christian life – a life lived in a greater context than the "here and now," a life lived in light of God. We want lofty thoughts of God; we want lofty service; and we want lofty communion. This is our aim in theology.

*Accounting for All the Truth.* Scripture always demands completeness when handling the

Scriptures. The Lord said man lives by “every word” from God's mouth. Elsewhere we read of “the faith once for all delivered unto the saints”: it is a singular and complete body. Paul, in Acts 20, speaks of his efforts to declare “the whole counsel of God.” It is presumption and arrogance to divide the revelation of God into “essentials” and “nonessentials.” It is all of God; thus it is all necessary. Realizing this, when we study, we must be comprehensive in our studies, covering a wide range of Biblical topics, knowing that the entirety is of God. But on the other hand, we must also seek depth and attention in them, knowing that the most intricate detail is also of God.

Similarly, in defending the one body of truth, our aim is to keep that body of truth pure from error. Thus there can be no tolerance for a clear contradiction of Biblical truth: by contradicting Scripture the error contradicts God. Our motto as Bible students must be “The entirety of the doctrine, and only the doctrine.” We must account for all the truth and only the truth.

### **The Tools We Use**

Living in the third millennium A.D., we have the advantage of several tools to aid us in studying Scripture texts and topics. To depend fully on these tools is to be naive. But to ignore these tools is to be presumptuous. Both teaching and self-study are essential in the understanding of Biblical truth. To ignore the teaching of others and the resources they have provided is not noble, because God Himself ordained that we function in a community, both in practice and in doctrine. We do not need to re-invent the theological “wheel” every generation; this is both unhelpful and unbiblical. We must use our resources with intelligence and discernment; but we must use them nevertheless. So then, a brief survey of essential kinds of resources might be helpful.

*Didactic Tools (Resources that teach doctrine).* Ideally, the primary resource of the believer for doctrinal teaching is his own assembly. This must never be discounted, nor under-emphasized. But for personal study, various resources are available, primarily in the forms of books and audio. While specific resources could be given, it is really the responsibility of the reader to discern his best resources as to teaching. So then, the best approach would be to start with a few unquestionably solid resources by conservative teachers and slowly build a trustworthy library or media database from there.

*Linguistic Tools (Resources that help with words).* When studying the Bible, we will encounter words that need to be defined properly and comprehensively researched. For this, the Bible student will find a few categories of books helpful: (1) Concordances list the uses of a certain word in Scripture; some list English words, while some list Greek/Hebrew words. Both types of concordances will be necessary to compile relevant verses. (2) Dictionaries define words. There are dictionaries of theology, dictionaries of proper names in Scripture, expository dictionaries, etc. Probably the most helpful are the expository dictionaries, which give both the definition and the usage of the word. (3) Original language resources aid in examining and defining the underlying Greek and Hebrew words in our Bibles. To properly study a text, one must at bare minimum be able to interact with tools that explain the nuances or translation of an underlying Hebrew or Greek phrase. Lexicons and word-study commentaries are helpful in approaching an original language issue.

*Textual Tools (Resources that explain the Bible).* First and foremost, the Bible student must use a literal Bible translation that strives for exactness in its translation. He must also learn how to compare Bible versions to get the different senses that other Greek and Hebrew scholars have seen in the text. Secondly, topical Bibles are helpful in giving references according to topic, as opposed to a concordance which gives references according to words. Thirdly, we must learn to use commentaries, books that explain individual texts of Scripture. It is helpful to have both one volume commentaries that are straight to the point in explaining the text and commentary sets that take more time to deliberate about the meaning of a verse. Fourthly, we should familiarize ourselves with study Bibles – Bibles that contain the text of Scripture with explanatory notes as well.

### **The Scripture We Handle**

Doctrine, though topic-based, is essentially found by faithfully handling Scripture texts. And since Scripture contains many layers of truth and teaching, we need to be thorough in our investigation of it. That means interacting with several different factors. These factors are not meant to form a final checklist so much as to broaden our scope and excite our hearts in light of the richness which studying Scripture can have.

*The Big Picture We Acknowledge.* The faith which we are committed to is a unified whole; it is part of a singular purpose. God is working out His purpose through the ages to glorify Himself and manifest His righteousness in His interactions with man. Thus, no doctrine or text is fully separate from one another; rather they will find their place in relation to the rest of the body of truth. The more we understand the big picture, the more coherent our understanding of its parts will be.

*The Books We Survey.* At times, entire books in the Bible will be stamped with one or more key doctrinal themes; when we find these books, we must take time to develop their significance in our minds so that the doctrine can be developed as well. For instance, if we want to know something about the local assembly, 1 Corinthians and the pastoral epistles are necessary to understand. If we want to know about the Body of Christ, we go to Ephesians. If we want to know about the destiny of Israel, we go to Zechariah. For reconciliation, we go to Philemon. For salvation and related doctrines, we go to Romans. For the rapture, we go to 1 Thessalonians. In studying Bible books, also taking into account the setting, the audience, and the structure will greatly enhance our appreciation of the doctrine it emphasizes.

*The Texts We Exposit.* While there may not be an entire book devoted to a subject, often there are key texts that hold a storehouse of truth in them concerning a certain topic. Philippians 2:5-11 is an example of a key text surrounding the humiliation and exaltation of Christ. John 1:1-18 is another such text concerning the incarnation of Christ. With passages like these, we will not appreciate the doctrine unless we appreciate the depth of the Scriptures that develop them.

*The Verses We Cite.* Aside from books or large passages that develop a doctrine, we must also take into account all the verses that contain reference to it. An example of this is John 10:35 – “the Scripture cannot be broken.” This is a key statement about God's Word, though it is not the primary topic of the passage. When handling an individual reference, a number of things must be done: (1) its context must be determined, (2) the best translation of it must be

determined, (3) its significance in relation to other verses and/or passages must be considered.

*The Implications We Derive.* Upon finding a verse with an obvious statement, we must look for implications that flow from that statement. An illustration of this can be seen in Hebrews, where the writer says "In that he says, 'a new covenant,' he has made the first old." (Heb. 8:13). Obviously the text didn't say the foregoing covenant was old, but embedded in its statement was that implication, which the writer to the Hebrews could legitimately capitalize on. Now, we must be careful when finding implications on account of human bias being possible, but when true implications are found they are certainly legitimate.

*The Presuppositions We Identify.* Sometimes, similar to an implication in a verse, there will be an assumption made by the author embedded in the text that gives legitimacy to what he is saying. For instance, in Matthew 9:3, the Lord forgave a man's sins. The Pharisees responded by saying "This man is blaspheming" as if Christ claimed to be God by that. The Lord did not directly claim to be God, but His statement assumed it, meaning two things: (1) True forgiveness of sins can only be granted by God (2) In that the Lord forgave sins, He acknowledged His deity. Learning to identify a text's presuppositions will give a richer understanding of its force and a wider application to other doctrines.

*The Comparisons We Make.* A comparison is examining a certain object in light of something else so as to shine light on its distinctiveness and true meaning. For us, there are three main types of comparison that need to be done:

(1) The Use of Practical Illustrations: these give a relatable word picture for easier understanding of a concept. Paul used illustrations many times, whether in Galatians 4 with Sarah and Hagar, or in 2 Timothy with images of a soldier, an athlete, etc. With illustrations, the truth isn't the illustration itself; thus we must be careful to distinguish the limitations of the picture as well as its strong points.

(2) The Comparison of Similar Texts. Many texts have counterparts which approach the same doctrine, but from a different angle (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 4-5 and John 14). As well, some passages have parallel texts, such as Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3 on the topic of singing. A tool like *Treasury of Scripture Knowledge* can be immensely helpful in finding these. Scripture is the best commentary of itself. Learning to correlate Scripture texts enhances our comprehension of the topic as well as our appreciation for God's design.

(3) The Comparison and Contrast of Similar Topics. For a richer understanding of a doctrine, we must also determine how it relates to other doctrines. This means contrasting where necessary as well as comparing where necessary (Heaven v. Hell, saved v. lost, 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> comings of Christ, sovereignty and responsibility, grace and truth, etc.)

*The Words We Define.* Every text is made up of words that must be exactly defined and understood. Otherwise, an entire concept could be maligned due to sloppy definitions. This will require an accurate translation and knowledge of how to do word studies and study translation issues in a passage. As well, we must be mindful of words that differ in English but are in fact the same in the original language (e.g. justice and righteousness, sanctification and holiness, master and teacher in some cases, etc.)

Doubtless, months could be spent studying each of these aspects of Scripture. The fact of

the matter is, Bible doctrine is rich in its content. It has depths that take a lifetime to tap into, and it has breadth which baffles even the most learned of minds. While we strive for comprehensiveness in doctrine, we will never reach the limit of its depth. There will always be more to apply, more to worship from, more to compare, more to marvel at. A good theological method will never limit the depth a Bible student can delve into the Scriptures.

### **The Principles We Apply**

Every professional knows the boundaries of his field and dares not violate those boundaries. Scriptural principles act like boundaries for those who are willing to listen. In our field of study, we must exercise certain disciplines to keep us from surpassing what is appropriate for our field.

*We Employ Spiritual Intelligence and Discernment.* Whereas the world would say, "Believe what feels right" and the philosopher would say, "Believe anything, because truth is relative," God says His Word is Truth; and the conviction of this truth must be defended until the end. Our minds naturally gravitate toward ignorance, because that requires little effort. But the truth takes time and thought to find. It takes constant attention and effort to maintain. The Bible student must be a thinker – constantly assessing, constantly discerning, constantly comparing every claim to Scripture. The moment we lose spiritual intelligence and discernment is the moment we lose good doctrine.

*We Handle Scripture With Precision and Carefulness.* This principle operates upon the assumption that every word from God's mouth is deliberate and authoritative. Thus, we cannot afford to unite similar but distinct concepts (such as the "body" and the "flesh" or the "old man" and the "flesh"). But it also means we must pay attention to the exactness of Scripture's words and phrases. Every tense, every word, every structure, everything a text contains, and everything a text doesn't contain – these were all determined deliberately by God. This conviction must be reflected in our method of study. We cannot add words that don't exist; we cannot add a context that was not intended. We must approach Scripture understanding that God meant what He said.

*We Avoid the Tendencies of Human Pride.* Human pride operates by exalting that which is man-made. When man has an opportunity to display his own wisdom, where God's wisdom apparently has not spoken, he normally capitalizes on it. So then, we find in the world of Bible study a few problems that stem from this factor of human pride:

- (1) Novelty for Novelty's Sake. Proposing a new idea sets a man apart from those who had not thought of the idea. It makes him known for something. It makes him appear unique and perhaps more thoughtful than his contemporaries. Thus it can be our tendency to say something radical (yet false) just so people can marvel at our wisdom. But we don't necessarily want something new in theology; we want "that which was from the beginning," as John put it.
- (2) Speculation Outside of Scripture. To this issue that faced the early church, Paul said, "But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and arguments about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain." Some issues do not need to be addressed, either because they have no answer or because they are so blatantly wrong. We have no time for the hypotheticals of theology. We want to know what we can know and leave

the unknowable to God.

- (3) System-Based Defense. Again with man's wisdom, defending a system of belief can sometimes take precedence over defending Scripture. Though pride would urge this within us, we cannot afford this level of blindness in theology.

*We Maintain Balance, While Avoiding Compromise and Extremism.* Compromise waters down two factors and melts them together into a hybrid of sorts. Extremism dismisses one factor and holds entirely to its counterpart only. Balance holds two counterparts in their proper emphasis simultaneously. An illustration could be made of Scripture: it is fully of God, but also maintains the authorship of man. Throughout, human authorship and style are not infringed upon, neither is the divine origin compromised. Extremism would be to say it is only a man-made book. Compromise would try to reconcile the two by a multitude of unfounded theories.

Basically, we must let God speak for Himself. He has emphasized certain things in their places for a reason. We have no right to develop a “pet doctrine,” nor do we have a right to ignore clear Biblical truth because we are uncomfortable with it. It is ridiculous to have a “defining doctrine,” such as the sovereignty of God or the responsibility of man; that obscures the emphasis that God Himself embeds. God never calls us to define ourselves by our favorite doctrine; rather He calls us to be Christians – followers of Christ and of the whole body of truth He has committed to us by His authority.

In all of this, *there is no substitute for being thoroughly Biblical*. The Word of God is the essence of the believer's life. To throw one's self fully on it will cover so many principles and will benefit in so many ways that the believer will not even recognize all of them. There will always be oversights made by man and his teachings; but when we immerse ourselves in the timeless, life-changing, authoritative Word of God, we will adopt God's attitudes and will allow Him to give us the principles we need for the time. Enough with relying on man's wisdom: God has spoken! By default, let us go to Him.

## **5 Practical Steps We Follow**

*Step 1: Consideration – Preparing the Heart.* The Christian should always be self-reflective when approaching the knowledge of God. Though the Bible student may not always have time to spend hours in prayer before he studies (though, imagine if he did!), he can be constantly receptive of God's things if he is in a constant state of consideration. Whatever mode this takes on, there must be examination; if there is sin, it must be confessed and forsaken. But further there must be a prayerfulness about the believer. While enlightenment should be his prayer on a continual basis, it is ideal to pray specifically about the topic before him, immediately before studying it. God is the Giver of knowledge; we must seek His face. Finally, there must be a right approach taken – a humble attitude, a devoted heart, an energized mind which is ready to think, etc.

*Step 2: Collection – Deriving the Data.* After we examine our approach and make needed adjustments, it is time to collect the information we will need. We must find a few things: (1) relevant words: words related to the subject that will guide in the process of gathering information and Scripture references (2) key passages: the top few pinnacle texts that deal with the subject in significant depth or clarity. In this, one must keep in mind the context, setting, and

audience. (3) applicable references: this will be found by searching the key words in a concordance. If a topical Bible can be used to find theme-based references, that would be preferable to include as well. Basically, the goal is to find all relevant verses on a topic. (4) the factors of the subject: parties involved, actions involved, purposes involved, things involved, etc. (The who, what, when, where, why, and how). When we understand the factors of a subject, we will understand what areas to focus on in both collecting and studying the material.

*Step 3: Compilation – Organizing the Material.* Once a list of verses has been compiled, an outline of sorts must be developed. The goal is to have an organization of the material so as to aid the mind in thinking orderly. This will also help in describing the doctrine.

*Step 4: Clarification – Describing and Defining the Doctrine.* Once the outline is developed, the most intense part of these steps comes into play: actually describing and defining the doctrine. Because of our previous interaction on some level with verses and texts, we should at least have a general framework in mind. As to defining and describing the doctrine, there are five levels we can think in terms of:

1. We must define terms. With our list of key factors and key words, we should find what each of them precisely means. Terms must be carefully distinguished and meticulously defined. These will give us keys to think in terms of when interacting with texts and larger concepts.
2. We must find facts. Facts are determined by simple statements or obvious connections in Scripture. We can connect the facts later, but for now we just need to know what is absolutely true and undeniable in terms of the doctrine. An example of a fact would be “God created the heaven and the earth.” What that means and all that implies will be developed later.
3. We must understand texts. After defining all the obvious facts from the list of references, we should take the larger passages which we listed and thoroughly interpret them. These texts will help form a framework for miscellaneous verses that need a point to reference.
4. We must arrive at concepts. After dealing with concrete terms, undeniable facts, and well-interpreted texts, we come to the categorizing, harmonizing, and describing of a set of facts which have a definite interrelation to each other. In doing this, there must be comparison of Scripture with Scripture. At this stage, apparent conflicts may arise. If a contradiction happens on the level of two facts which deny one another, something must change with our interpretation of the facts. But it is possible that in harmonizing facts, we arrive at concepts which seem paradoxical. In this case, the issue may not be with the concepts, but with our limitation of understanding. For instance “Jesus is God” is true, and “Jesus is man” is true. They don't contradict one another, but in our small minds there may be issues involved in combining these two statements that confuse us somewhat. In this case, we must not deny the obvious fact, but rather trust that God knows the specifics which we are not entrusted with.
5. We must formulate coherent doctrines from these. After the concepts have been formed, the doctrine can be articulated as a whole after arranging the concepts in a reasonable order and presenting the relevant Scriptures in their respective



contributions.

*Step 5: Conclusion – Understanding the Implications.* Once the doctrine has been thoroughly defined, described, and articulated, there should be reflection. We should ask ourselves what the purpose of the doctrine is. Then we should ask how it applies to life. Then we should use it as basis for worship. Doing these things will both establish the truth in our minds as well as transform us closer into the image of Christ.

# APPENDIX: A Template to Studying Doctrine

## ESTABLISHING YOUR GOALS

In This Study I Must...

Aim for spiritual transformation

Strive for a higher view of God

Account for all the truth on this subject

## STUDYING THE MATERIAL – 10 QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

1. What Is The Big Picture This Doctrine/Passage Fits Into?
2. Is This A Major Theme In An Entire Book of the Bible? If So, How Does That Book Contribute To The Whole Topic?
3. What Are The Major Passages About This Doctrine? How Should They Be Interpreted?
4. What Are All The Relevant Verses About This Topic? What Do They Mean? How Do They Fit Together?
5. What Are The Implications Of These Verses?
6. What Are The Presuppositions These Verses Are Built Upon?
7. Are There Any Practical Illustrations That Would Make This Topic Clearer?
8. Are There Similar/Parallel Texts Which Would Complement The Text I'm Considering?
9. Are There Similar Topics That Need To Be Compared/Contrasted With This One?
10. What Are The Exact Definitions of Main Words Related to This Scripture/Dctrine?

## FORMULATING THE DOCTRINE

### Step 1: Prepare Your Heart

Examine Yourself And Your Approach

Pray About The Study

### Step 2: Collect The Material

What Are The Relevant Words?

What Are The Key Passages?

What Are The Relevant Verses?

What Are The Factors Of This Subject? (Who, What, Where, When, Why, How?)

### Step 3: Organize The Material

### Step 4: Describe And Define The Doctrine

Level 1: Define Your Terms Carefully

Level 2: Establish Blatant Facts

Level 3: Interpret The Main Passages You Found

Level 4: Connect The Facts, Terms, And Passages Into A Concept

Level 5: Present The Doctrine With The Concepts Coherently Connected

### Step 5: Reflect On Your Findings

Why Does This Doctrine Exist? How Can I Appreciate It?

How Does This Doctrine Apply To My Life?

How Can I Use This In Worshipping God?