

LESSON ESSENTIALS

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

LESSON 1: WHY DO WE NEED TO KNOW DOCTRINE?

When Paul instructs his readers to hold fast to their confession and to the teachings they have received (Hebrews 4:14 and 2 Thessalonians 2:15), it is clear that he is assuming that Christians will have a confession to hold on to and that they will have paid attention to the foundational teachings. This is what we are talking about when we use the word 'doctrine'.

There is a saying that people will often use when they are happy to remain uninformed about a given topic. They might say, "Ignorance is bliss." Unfortunately, too many Christians hold to this attitude when it comes to the doctrines of faith. Is this a stance that Christians can rightly hold?

Of course our relationship with Christ is paramount to the health of our faith, but our relationship is most assuredly formed by what we believe to be true about Him (and about ourselves). This understanding or belief about God and what He says is – this doctrine – is foundational to all of the Christian life.

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There is a disturbing trend among some in the Christian faith. There is a movement that says Christians ought to not be concerned with doctrine or 'religion' but rather only about 'relationship'. Well-intentioned people say this meaning that they want their faith to be only about their relationship with God and that they do not want to be tied up in facts of religion, only in following Jesus with their life.

The problem is that everyone holds to some kind of doctrine, regardless of how they classify their faith (or lack thereof). It is impossible to not believe in something. Of course our relationship with Christ is paramount to the health of our faith, but our relationship is most assuredly formed by what we believe to be true about Him (and about ourselves). This understanding or belief about God and what He says is – this doctrine – is foundational to all of the Christian life. As such, it is imperative that believers make sure that they are holding to true Christian faith by believing true Christian doctrines.

This can be controversial because there are some tenets of the Christian faith that are polarizing. Opinions on end-times, baptism, and music styles, for example, can divide a church. Doctrines like these, which are not specifically or clearly stated in the Bible, are known as peripheral doctrines. This does not mean that they are unimportant: it simply means that whole-hearted Christians can believe differently on these matters and still be part of a true Christian church.

Essential doctrines, however, are ones upon which the true Christian church are founded. These are the doctrines that identify Christianity as separate and distinct from other religions. Doctrines such as the Trinity, the Inerrancy of God's Word, the Exclusivity of Christ, and so on are absolute truths that all those who claim to believe in Christ must hold to.

Now, some may say that they still do not want to get tangled up in doctrine, but want to only focus on the loving relationship that they have with God through Jesus Christ. However, in saying just that much this person is relying on several doctrines! This statement assumes that there is a particular God with whom we should want to be in relationship with, that there was a problem of some sort that hindered that relationship, and that there is a way that Jesus Christ can solve that problem. The next step for this person would be to consider how they will continue on in that relationship, where they will find the information they need to know how to please the Lord, and how they will know what He requires of them. All of these details are part of this person's doctrinal belief system. If this person chooses to ignore the doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible,

for example, then they will need to struggle to come up with their own way to please Him leading them to either living wrongly or feeling the stress of insecurity in their relationship with God.

Let's compare studying doctrine, and holding fast to true doctrine, to carefully laying a foundation of a building. If one stone in the foundation is crooked the whole building is in jeopardy. So it is with our faith. The doctrinal foundations need to be true and solid and firmly known so that the building of our faith can be true and solid (see Matthew 7:24-27). Clearly, yes, we build on the foundation of Jesus Christ, but what about Him? He said we build well by hearing His words and doing what He says. That sounds like adhering to doctrine, does it not? Too many people get lax in their beliefs, allowing their doctrinal leanings to be shaped by culture and not by the Word of God. When this happens, and Christian doctrines get altered or ignored, the church ceases to be a true Christian church.

It is critical that we take time to study true doctrine, and to remain humble but steadfast as we live according to it. Essential doctrines must be agreed upon in a true Christian church. Peripheral doctrines need to be held humbly and taught with grace. As the body of Christ, we are free to disagree on some points; however, we are not free to look down upon someone for believing differently on those peripheral points. The fact that some doctrines are controversial or confusing is no excuse for not studying them. In order to make God known to the nations, you must truly know God. So, study hard and develop an educated opinion on the doctrines of the Christian faith.

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IN REVIEW

- Everyone believes something. As Christians it is imperative that we believe what the Bible says. Studying doctrine is not the same as 'dry religion'. It is coming to truly know the God with whom we have a relationship.
- Essential doctrines must be held to firmly in order to remain a true Christian church. Peripheral doctrines can be disagreed on amongst believers but ought not to cause strife and division. Christians must remain humble and gracious in their discussions about doctrine.
- It is impossible for us to make God known to the nations if we do not truly know Him ourselves. Studying doctrine is how we come to truly know Christ and how to truly function as His church.
- The fact that the study of doctrine can be complicated or controversial does not excuse us from studying it. We must hold fast to the true confession of our faith so that we do not be negatively influenced by culture.

HAVE YOUR SAY

- Do you know the difference between essential and peripheral doctrines? Are there some essential doctrines that you struggle to agree with? Are there some peripheral doctrines that you are holding to too tightly? Pray and ask for wisdom to be able to humbly submit to the Word of God and to deal graciously with His people.

- Are you using 'relationship with God' as an excuse for not doing the hard work of studying doctrine? Ask the Lord to help you view doctrinal study as a way to get to know Him more and to fuel your love for Him more.

- What resources and people are available to you to help you learn correct doctrine? What can you do to help you be firmly established in what you know to be true?

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