Why Doctrine Matters

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Some time ago, several people in our church emphasized the importance of a prospective pastor's theology. Others heatedly called such concerns nothing more than the "idolatry of theology." I passionately protested that correct doctrine is fundamental, even crucial, in this matter. R. Scott Clark, professor of historical theology at Westminster Seminary California published a short article in the July 2012 issue of Ligonier's Table Talk magazine that I think is spot-on! I commend it to you.

"Drawing the Line – Why Doctrine Matters"

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"Imagine Mike. He's an unusual mechanic. Where other mechanics find natural laws (such as gravity) unavoidable and even useful, he suspects them to be arbitrary, invoked in order to stifle his creativity. We can imagine how the story ends. Cars brought for repair are returned in worse shape than before. Mike goes out of business. Whatever Mike might think, the laws of physics are built into the nature of creation.

So it is with the doctrine in the Christian faith and life. Throughout Christian history, folks have proposed to do without Christian doctrine, the good and necessary inferences drawn from the implicit or explicit teaching of Scripture. Like Mike, some Christians have suspected that doctrine is just an invention, a way to control people. Such a position is just as false as Mike the mechanic's. Doctrine is inescapable because it is revealed in Scripture and necessary to Christian faith and life.

Doctrine is Biblical

Our English word *doctrine* is derived from a Latin word, *doctrina*, which means, "that which is taught." In Christian usage, it refers to Christian teaching about Scripture, God, man, Christ, salvation, church, and the end of all things. It is fitting that the English word *doctrine* was first used in the 1382 Wycliffe Bible Translation (from old Latin to English), because in the old Latin Bible, the word *doctrine* occurs more than one hundred times. The King James Version (1611)

used the word about half as often, and contemporary translations use it more sparingly. Nevertheless, the ideas is present throughout Scripture.

One of the root ideas in the word *doctrine* is instruction. Moses received instruction from the Lord on the mountain (Ex 24:12), which occurred after the Israelits had sworn a blood oath (v.7) to do all that the Lord had spoken. That instruction included truths about who God is, what he had done for His people, and what He expected of them. That pattern is repeated throughout the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, Titus, a young pastor on the island of Crete, was exhorted to 'hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught' so as to be able "to give instruction in sound doctrine (Titus 1:9). There are several such passages in the New Testament, some of which we will survey below. Clearly, the teaching and preservation of divinely revealed doctrine is basic to the office of the minister and the function of Christ's church.

Doctrine is Evangelical.

The universal church and her greatest teachers have always taught and confessed certain basic doctrines. The early church focused on the Bible's doctrine of God and Christ. After considerable Bible study and debate, the church concluded that God's Word teaches that God is one in essence and three in person, and that Jesus, God the Son incarnate, is one person with two natures (divine and human).

The medieval church preserved these basic doctrines but became quite confused about the doctrine of salvation. T his confusion contributed to widespread moral corruption in the church. The Reformation was largely a struggle to recover the certain biblical doctrine of justification (acceptance of sinners by God) by unmerited divine favor alone, through faith (resting in or trusting) alone, on the basis of Christ's righteousness imputed alone. The Protestant churches wanted to ground the Christian life in the recovery of these great truths. The Roman communion (church) wanted to ground Christian life in a doctrine of justification that said God accepts those who are holy and righteous in themselves by grace and cooperation with grace. Under Protestant lights, the Roman doctrine denies Paul's teaching that "if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works' (Rom. 11:6). The Roman doctrine is bad news for sinner because we can never cooperate sufficiently to become truly righteous before God.

Beginning about one hundred and fifty years after the Reformation, the Protestants faced another great doctrinal crisis. A great philosophical upheaval began to turn the Western intellectual world on its head. Instead of beginning with God and His Word, intellectuals increasingly began their thinking with human experience and reason apart from God's self-revelation. That movement, known as the Enlightenment, laid siege to the reliability of Scripture as God's Word and to the Christian faith and life.

The ecclesiastical version of this movement became known as liberalism. The liberals derided doctrine as impractical and dry speculation. 'Deeds not creeds' was their slogan. Of course, they only pretended to deny doctrine. They were teaching 'doctrines' of the universal fatherhood of

God, the universal brotherhood of man, and human goodness (denying the Fall). Under the cover of denying doctrine, the liberals had made their own religion.

Doctrine is unavoidable.

Non-doctrinal Christianity is impossible. The teaching of non-doctrinal Christianity is doctrine. It is bad doctrine, but it is doctrine nonetheless. Some argue that 'doctrine divides,' and therefore, that we should avoid it. True, doctrine sometimes divides, but that is what the Lord intended. In Luke 12:51-53, our Lord expressly taught that He came not to bring 'peace on the earth' but rather to bring 'division,' even among family members. We cannot hereby justify schismatic behavior in the church, which Scripture condemns repeatedly, but we cannot accept the notion that division is inherently evil.

The real questions is not *whether* Christians will have doctrine *but which* doctrine or *whose* doctrine? Our Lord and Savior Himself advocated a host of doctrines. The Gospels are replete with His doctrinal teaching. He taught about the nature of God (John 4:24), humanity (Matt 10:28), creation (Mark 10:6), sin (John 8:34), redemption (John 3), the church (Matt 16), and the end of all things (Matt 24). He taught doctrines about the history of salvation and how it should be understood (Luke 24). Anyone who advocates non-doctrinal Christianity must do so without Jesus.

Doctrine is practical.

The history of salvation and of the church is, in part, the history of the struggle between true and false doctrine and the moral consequences of error. Satan came teaching false doctrine about God, man, sin, and judgment. His doctrine led to death. Moreover, those who mocked Noah and those who called for Barabbas believed false doctrines, and they acted upon them.

In Scripture, there is no divorce between doctrine and practiced. In Proverbs 8:10, *instruction* is a synonym for knowledge, and both come in the context of getting wisdom, that is, an understanding of how to live in God's world according to the patterns He has established. Nothing is more practical than wisdom, and doctrine is built into wisdom. It is impossible to be wise, the biblical sense, without doctrine.

The Apostle Paul warned the Roman congregation (Rom 16:7) about those who divide the congregation, who seek their own gain, and who contradict Apostolic doctrine. The noun *doctrine* occurs in a similar context in Ephesians 4:12. Paul contrasts crafty, self-aggrandizing liars who are immature and who may cause believers to be tossed about 'by every wind of doctrine,' that is, every passing fad, like a small boat in a big storm. Here, bad doctrine and moral corruption are intertwined.

True doctrine is never mere theory. This connection is explicit in 1 Timothy 1:8, where Paul lists a series of gross sins and categorizes them as 'contrary to sound doctrine.' To deny biblical doctrine is immoral, and morality is based upon fundamental Christian teaching.

There is another consequence of denying Christian doctrine: chaos. Dorothy Sayers, in the 1940s, predicted this outcome in her book *Creed or Chaos?* Today, partly as a result of the misguided search for non-doctrinal Christianity, there is virtually no consensus as to what constitutes evangelical Christianity. The first step back from the abyss and toward order is to recover the biblical and Reformed conviction of the necessity of 'good and necessary' consequences (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6) drawn from the careful reading of Scripture.

Nevertheless, for all its virtues, good doctrine is not magic. It is possible for someone to profess right doctrine and yet remain an unbeliever. That is called hypocrisy. It is also possible for one to live well and yet confess bad doctrine. That is blessed inconsistency. Neither Scripture nor history commends either option. We should rather think that good doctrine is salutary – healthy and helpful in the same way that sunshine, clean air, and rain are salutary for living beings.

The biblical pattern confessed by the church is to live well by living in light of the truth, which is formulated in Christian doctrine. We do so, however, chastened by the knowledge of our past failures, that we have not always lived in accordance with what we teach, and by the certainty that we will fail again.

Our hypocrisy, however, is no ground for giving up on doctrine. Non-doctrinal Christianity is more than oxymoronic: it is a myth. Christians can no more escape doctrine than Mike the mechanic can escape the laws of physics."