

Doctrine Is Practical

Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 11:33-36; Romans 12:1-2; 1 Timothy 3:16-17; 1 Timothy 4:1-6; Titus 1:9; Titus 2:10
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I have in my library a book by the spiritual father of a quasi-Christian cult. It argues that structured doctrine and systematized theology are contrary to the spirit of Jesus' ministry.

The idea that Christ is anti-doctrine is a foundational belief of that cult. But no idea is further from the truth. The word doctrine simply means "teaching." And it's ludicrous to say that Christ is anti-teaching. The central imperative of His Great Commission is the command to teach (Matthew 28:18-20).

Unfortunately, cultists aren't alone in their bias against doctrine. Some evangelicals have almost the same perspective. Because they view doctrine as heady and theoretical, they dismiss it as unimportant, divisive, threatening, or simply impractical.

People often ask why I emphasize doctrine so much. Now and then someone tells me frankly that my preaching needs to be less doctrinal and more practical.

Of course, practical application is vital. I don't want to minimize its importance. But if there is a deficiency in preaching today, it is that there's too much relational, pseudopsychological, and thinly life-related content, and not enough emphasis on sound doctrine.

The distinction between doctrinal and practical truth is artificial; doctrine is practical! In fact, nothing is more practical than sound doctrine.

The pastor who turns away from preaching sound doctrine abdicates the primary responsibility of an elder: "holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (Titus 1:9). We teach truth, we teach error, or we teach nothing at all.

Building on the Truth

Practical insights, gimmicks, and illustrations mean little if they're not attached to divine principle. There's no basis for godly behavior apart from the truth of God's Word. Before the preacher asks anyone to perform a certain duty, he must first deal with doctrine. He must develop his message around theological themes and draw out the principles of the texts. Then the truth can be applied.

Romans provides the clearest example. Paul doesn't give any exhortation until he has given eleven chapters of theology.

He scales incredible heights of truth, culminating in Romans 11:33-36, where he says, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen."

Then in chapter 12, he turns immediately to the practical consequences of the doctrine of the first 11 chapters. No passage in Scripture captures the Christian's responsibility in the face of truth more clearly than Romans 12:1-2.

Resting on eleven chapters of profound doctrine, Paul calls each believer to a supreme act of spiritual worship — giving oneself as a living sacrifice. Doctrine gives rise to dedication to Christ, the greatest practical act. And the remainder of the book of Romans goes on to explain the many practical outworkings of one's dedication to Christ.

He follows the same pattern in Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and 1 Thessalonians. The doctrinal message comes first. Upon that foundation he builds the practical application, making the logical connection with the word *therefore* (Romans 1:1; Galatians 5:1; Ephesians 4:1; Philippians 2:1) or *then* (Colossians 3:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:1).

Living by the Truth

We have imposed an artificial meaning on the word doctrine. We've made it something abstract and threatening, unrelated to daily living. That has brought about the disastrous idea that preaching and teaching are unrelated to living.

The scriptural concept of doctrine includes the entire message of the gospel — its teaching about God, salvation, sin, and righteousness. Those concepts are so tightly bound to daily living that the first-century mind did not see them as something separate from practical truth.

The New Testament church was founded on a solid base of doctrine. First Timothy 3:16 contains what many expositors believe is an early church hymn: "God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory" (KJV). There, in capsule form, is the basis of all Christian teaching. Without that, no practical application matters.

Departing from the Truth

The next few verses of 1 Timothy describe what happens when men depart from the basis of biblical truth: "Some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth" (1 Timothy 4:1-3).

Lying, hypocrisy, a dulled conscience, and false religious practices all have roots in wrong doctrine.

No ministry activity is more important than rightly understanding and clearly proclaiming sound doctrine. In 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, Paul commissions two young men to the ministry. His central theme is the importance of adhering to sound doctrine.

Paul charged Timothy: "In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following" (1 Timothy 4:6). "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching," Paul adds, "persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you" (1 Timothy 4:16).

Titus 2:10 says we "adorn [or honor] the doctrine of God" by how we live. When it comes to affirming sound doctrine, what we do carries far more significance than what we say. That's why it's disastrous when a pastor, seminary professor, or any kind of Christian leader fails morally. The message he proclaims is that his doctrine becomes merely an intellectual exercise.

Hearing the Truth

True doctrine transforms behavior as it is woven into the fabric of everyday life. But it must be understood if it is to have its impact. The real challenge of the ministry is to dispense the truth clearly and accurately. Practical application comes easily by comparison.

No believer can apply truth he doesn't know. Those who don't know the Bible's principles for marriage, divorce, family, childrearing, discipline, money, debt, work, service to Christ, responsibilities to the poor, care of widows, response to governments, eternal rewards, and other teachings will not be able to apply them.

Those who don't know what the Bible teaches about salvation cannot be saved. Those who don't know what the Bible teaches about holiness are incapable of dealing with sin. Thus they are unable to live fully to God's glory and their own blessedness.

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