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Why Doctrine Matters

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Doctrine has even fallen on hard times even among those who call themselves evangelicals. Some evangelical historians now argue that the defining principles of evangelical identity are not specifically theological—at least beyond the most general affirmations. If true, that judgment would be a disgrace to any people of God. As it is, however, evangelicals have a proud doctrinal heritage and have historically given careful attention to confessions of faith and doctrinal issues.

Doctrine is, quite literally, the teaching of the church—what the church understands to be the substance of its faith. It is no substitute for personal experience. Evangelical Christians have given clear witness to the necessity of personal faith in Jesus Christ, but that personal faith is based in some specific understanding of who Jesus Christ is and what He accomplished on the cross. After all, we do not call persons to profess faith in faith, but faith in Christ.

There is no Christianity “in general.” Faith in some experience devoid of theological or biblical content—no matter how powerful—is not New Testament Christianity. Those called to Christianity in general may believe nothing in particular. But faith resides in particulars.

Some churches seem to think that doctrine is a concern for those of a certain intellectual bent, but unnecessary for most Christians. Interest in doctrine amounts to something like an intellectual hobby. Others steer clear of doctrine for fear of argument or division in the church. Both factors indicate a lack of respect for the Christian believer and an abdication of the teaching function of the church.

Those who sow disdain and disinterest in biblical doctrine will reap a harvest of rootless and fruitless Christians. Doctrine is not a challenge to experiential religion; it testifies to the content of that experience. The church is charged to call persons to Christ and to root them in a mature knowledge of Christian faith.

Sociologists and historians observing the American church scene indicate that one of the first signs of denominational decline is a lessening of doctrinal attention. Many mainline Protestant denominations have followed this course, with a weakening concern for biblical doctrine followed by decline in membership and evangelistic outreach.

Yet, evangelicals should not recapture a healthy concern for biblical doctrine merely as a means of avoiding organizational or congregational decline. We must do so because nothing less is worthy of a New Testament people. The essential issue for the church is faithfulness.

Churches lacking an intentional and effective program of doctrinal instruction risk becoming the company of the confused. Charles Spurgeon told the painful story of the Irishman who attended a sectarian religious society meeting. Telling of the meeting, the man recounted: “Oh, it was lovely: none of us knew anything and we all taught each other.”

American evangelicals must curb the decline of doctrinal concern in our midst and recapture the teaching responsibility of the church. Doctrine without piety is dead, but piety without doctrine is immature at best, and inauthentic at worst. Faithful Christians are always concerned with the development of true Christian piety and discipleship in believers. Yet, as John A. Broadus commented over a century ago, doctrinal truth is “the lifeblood of piety.”

Those who call for a “doctrineless Christianity” misunderstand—or misrepresent—both doctrine and Christianity. Pragmatism and program concerns dominate the lives of many Christians and their congregations. The low state of doctrinal understanding among so many evangelicals is evidence of a profound failure of both nerve and conviction. Both must be recovered if there is to be anything even remotely evangelical about the evangelicalism of the future.

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