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THE DOCTRINE DEBATE: WHY DOCTRINE MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

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Doctrine is under attack.

Your initial response might be, "Of course it is, heretics have been challenging the foundations of the church since its inception!" and that is true, but today's attack not only targets particular doctrines held integral to true Christian faith (e.g. the Trinity, the incarnation, the existence of a literal hell, the inerrancy of Scriptures), it also undermines the idea of doctrine itself, labeling it antiquated, irrelevant, and downright divisive. What's more, this assault on the heart of creedal Christianity is occurring not only from outside the church, but from inside as well.

In God's Word, it is true knowledge of Jesus Christ that brings transformation: "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).¹ Eternal salvation depends not just upon believing in Christ, but also in believing accurately in Him: "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life..." (John 6:40). We recognize false prophets because they deny a key doctrine about Jesus, namely, that He came in the flesh (1 John 4:2). And Paul's encouragement to Titus is to appoint elders who will "hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9). Biblically and historically speaking it is difficult to underestimate the importance of right doctrine.

Why Doctrine Matters. As a youth worker, I realize the necessity of helping young people to understand God and the Scriptures accurately. The reason is simple: *our view of God affects how we relate to God and others.* Wrong doctrine or the misrepresentation of right doctrine has consequences.

For instance, lacking a biblical perspective on heaven sets many young people up for discouragement and sin. In the minds of many youth heaven is like a dull, uninspiring church service. Most of them think there are certain pleasures they can experience only here on earth. Since God will forgive them, why not indulge now? Randy Alcorn says that some of Satan's favorite lies are about heaven, for Satan knows that if we truly understood the reality of heaven, it would radically transform our present lives.² We would have far more resolve and boldness if we understood and embraced the biblical doctrine of heaven.

The American missionary force has decreased substantially over the past fifty years. Albert Mohler believes the reason is that inclusivism and pluralism have seeped their way into the church: "At base, the issue is a failure of theological nerve—a devastating loss of biblical and doctrinal conviction..."³ If salvation can be found apart from Christ, then why have a sense of urgency concerning the lost?

Given the importance of doctrine, it is distressing how biblically illiterate many Christians have become. In the "National Study of Youth and Religion" sociologist Christian Smith revealed that of conservative Protestant youth twenty-three percent are not sure of the existence of miracles, thirty-three percent maybe or definitely believe in reincarnation, and 41 percent disagree with the statement that people should practice only one faith. Smith concludes: "For a tradition that has so strongly emphasized infallibility or inerrancy of the Bible, the exclusive claims of conservative Christianity, and the need for a personal commitment of one's life to God, some of these numbers are astounding."⁴ According to Smith, the church is at fault: "Our distinct impression is that very many religious congregations and communities of faith in the United States are failing rather badly in religiously engaging and educating their youth."⁵

Right Creeds, Right Deeds. Right doctrine should never be about just being right. Rather, the point of right doctrine is *always* about establishing and growing right relationships. Perfect doctrine without love is worthless. 1 Corinthians 13:2 says, “If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” Even the demons recognize good theology when they see it (James 2:19). Orthodoxy (right belief) is meant to lead to orthopraxy (right practice). As my pastor puts it, “Right creeds lead to right deeds.”

Paul regularly makes the necessary connection between doctrine and practice. For example, in his letter to the Ephesians he uses chapters one, two, and three to explain what God has accomplished through Jesus Christ. Then he spends the final three chapters four, five, and six, to demonstrate how we should live in light of that truth. A similar pattern is found in both Colossians and Romans. There is one key difference in Romans: Paul spends eleven chapters on doctrine and five on application. The emphasis should be clear.

Though I do not agree with his philosophy of pragmatism, William James has practical insight important for the teaching of doctrine. He says for any idea we should always ask, “What difference does it make?” If it makes no existential difference to the way we live whether it is true or false, then according to James, we should not bother with it. When teaching doctrine we should be regularly asking, “So what?” How does belief in the Trinity affect my relationship to God and to others? How does belief in the sovereignty of God influence my view of the future? How does the incarnation affect my self-image? Much of the problem today is not with doctrine *per se*, but with our failure to connect doctrine to real life.

The Doctrine Difference. Numerous national studies conducted by pollsters such as The Gallup Organization, the Barna Group, and the Josh McDowell Ministry have revealed that the lives of Christians are largely indistinguishable from non-Christians. When it comes to divorce, materialism, and cohabitation, Christians differ only slightly from non-Christians (if at all). Fortunately, this is not the entire story.

George Barna makes a distinction between “born-again Christians without a biblical worldview” and “born-again Christians with a biblical worldview.” Those without a biblical worldview have made a personal commitment to Jesus that is important to their lives and believe they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus as Savior.

The criterion for Christians with a biblical worldview, on the other hand, is much more stringent. In addition to the aforementioned beliefs, they also hold that the Bible is the moral standard of absolute truth that is completely accurate in all its teachings and that God is the all-knowing, all-powerful Creator who still rules the universe. Barna has found that only nine percent of born-again adults and two percent of born-again youth have a biblical worldview.⁶

For those who question the importance of doctrine, it may come as a surprise that Christians with a biblical worldview live radically different than the world. Forty-nine percent volunteered more than an hour to an organization serving the poor, whereas only twenty-nine percent of born-again Christians *without* a biblical worldview and twenty-two percent of non-born-again Christians have done so. They are nine times more likely than all others to avoid “adult only” material on the Internet. They are twice as likely not to watch a movie specifically because it contained objectionable material and four times as likely to boycott objectionable products and companies.⁷

In *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, Ron Sider relates the importance of these findings to correct doctrine: “Barna’s findings on the different behavior of Christians with a biblical worldview underline the importance of theology. Biblical orthodoxy does matter. One important way to end the scandal of contemporary Christian behavior is to work and pray fervently for the growth of orthodox theological belief in our churches.”⁸

Isn’t Doctrine Divisive? In previous articles for the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, Norman Geisler distinguished between essential and nonessential doctrines of the Christian faith.⁹ In terms of making salvation possible, essential doctrines include: (1) human depravity, (2) Christ’s virgin birth, (3) Christ’s

sinlessness, (4) Christ's deity, (5) Christ's humanity, (6) God's unity, (7) God's triunity, (8) the necessity of God's grace, (9) the necessity of faith, (10) Christ's atoning death, (11) Christ's bodily resurrection, (12) Christ's bodily ascension, (13) Christ's present high priestly service, (14) Christ's second coming, final judgment (heaven and hell), and reign. Geisler makes three critical observations relevant to our discussion. First, the essential doctrines are the foundation for our unity. Second, the essential doctrines distinguish true Christianity from cultic spin-offs. Third, the only truths Christians should divide over are essential doctrines. The third point is most important for our purposes: the essential doctrines are nonnegotiable for followers of Christ and are matters over which we *should* divide.

There is a trend in the church today to elevate unity above truth. Many are willing to set aside essential doctrines for the sake of harmony. While unity is a prime virtue for the body of Christ, it should not come at the expense of truth. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus did emphasize the importance of peacemaking, but he was not afraid to criticize false teaching—calling his followers to “watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves” (Matt. 7:15). Jesus saw the value in dividing over essential doctrine because it saves people from the consequences of false teaching.

It is ironic that some churches today have divided over the matter of whether churches should divide over doctrine! With further irony, the claim that Christians should *not* divide over doctrine is itself a doctrine. There is no way for a community to avoid having doctrinal beliefs. Community requires a shared set of ideas taken as authoritative. Even those who claim that doctrine should not be emphasized have their own authority claims that rule their particular communities.

True unity comes not when we sacrifice sound doctrine, but when we focus on the core truths of the gospel. Thus, the real question is not *if* we teach doctrine but *what* doctrines do we teach, *how* do we teach them, and do we live them out in relationships. For the sake of our youth and the vitality of the church, we must not cave into the pressure to stop teaching doctrine. The proper response to the attack on doctrine is not retreat, but to march forward with even greater resolve, unity, and love.

— Sean McDowell

NOTES

1. All Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version* (NIV).
2. Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2004), 10–12.
3. Albert Mohler, “Missions at Risk—A Failure of Nerve” (www.crosswalk.com/1353434/, accessed on August 25, 2007).
4. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, 2005), 43–44.
5. Smith and Denton, 262.
6. George Barna, *Think Like Jesus* (Brentwood, TN: Integrity Publishers, 2003), 23.
7. *Ibid*, 28–29.
8. Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 129–130.
9. Norman L. Geisler, “The Essential Doctrines of the Christian Faith: A Historical Approach,” *Christian Research Journal*, 28, 5 (2005), <http://www.equip.org/JAE100-1>; and Norman L. Geisler, “The Essential Doctrines of the Christian Faith: A Logical Approach,” *Christian Research Journal*, 28, 6 (2005), <http://www.equip.org/JAE100-2>.