

Church and doctrine: Why what we believe matters? Why is doctrine important?

Read: Proverbs 2:1-6

Pray

You won't have failed to notice that in what I've said so far in outlining what a new church would be like, what values would be important to us, what may make us **distinctive** from the other seventy churches in Romford, there's been an awful lot about the importance of doctrine, what we believe.

The word doctrine is from the Latin word *doctrina* meaning "*that which is taught*".

I said that one of the goals of a new church would be to a community of people who are taught so that we're **theologically equipped** to live as Christ's people within our surrounding culture. Theology is simply the "*science of divine things*" (Richard Hooker), the study of God.

Why should we want to be distinctively a church where we think that what we believe is important?

Initial discussion: Why does doctrine, "*what we believe*" matter?"

We live in a day when by and large doctrine is despised and devalued. Our wider culture unashamedly promotes the idea that we can believe whatever we want and it shouldn't make an iota of difference to how we live. What's important is what we "*do*" rather than what we "*think*". That it's really all about what our hearts feel, rather than what our heads understand.

The most important thing is that we're sincere. So we encourage our youngsters to "*find their own way, to be true to themselves, to follow their heart.*"

But the Bible provides a very different evaluation of doctrine, one where what we believe is of vital importance. Kevin Vanhoozer an American Theologian has rightly said, doctrine matters because

doctrine helps the church to know what to say, think, and do in the face of new challenges

In our rapidly changing culture, when almost everything seems up for grabs, how do we know what's are the right thoughts and actions. We need to be a church where doctrine matters, because it helps us know how to live. And I want to address two areas of danger when it comes to doctrine:

- The danger of neglecting doctrine
- The danger of false doctrine

The Danger of neglecting doctrine

So we live in a culture where we're told people should be free to think what they like. That all of the old doctrines, the old beliefs should be thrown out of the window. A society where to say I am right and others are wrong is seen as arrogant – after all everyone has their own truth, their own moral standards.

"Don't tell me what to believe; I'll decide what's true for me." Doctrine is despised.

You may know last week was the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Abortion Act. Hold a debate today where a Christian will have a reasoned biblical argument against abortion, making a compassionate and careful case based on facts as to why abortion is wrong.

And in response a pro-choice advocate stands up and shares their personal story, there are no facts, no reason, no logic, but it's an emotional, heart-rending account, and the crowd are swept along with because it feels right and people aren't used to thinking critically.

Don't bother us with what you think is right and wrong, that doesn't apply to me anyway, it's all about how I feel. As church, that's the cultural context we're facing today, but are we equipped for the challenge? Discussing the interaction between the church and the wider culture, Christian author Rod Dreher has said, *"churches with just a five or ten point doctrinal statement, will be swept away in the coming cultural storm in Western society,"* because they simply didn't have a sufficiently theological testimony to give an answer to the kind of challenges that are coming.

And I'm sure that's true because it's not just out there in our culture; the **evangelical church** is rife with this spirit. The young people's bible study where the bible passage is read, everybody says what it means for them, but no conclusions are drawn, no *"this is what God teaches us in this passage."* We don't want to tie ourselves down in THAT way. We don't need a sermon that spends time exposing us to God's word and thinking through how what it says applies to our lives today. All I need to know is *"Jesus loves me,"* and I'm fine.

As far back as the 1940's author Dorothy Sayers, 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 (WCF 1.6) drawn from the careful reading of Scripture."

No one is wrong apart from those like fundamentalist Christians, who claim to be able to exclusively say what's right. So David Garner a Seminary professor in the US recently stated:

"Ironically, in the world of "humble" uncertainty, new certainties boldly rule. The reigning certainty is global uncertainty. Its cousin inclusivism requires that the exclusivity of the gospel be exclusively excluded."¹

In a culture that despises doctrine and loathes the idea that there's one objective truth that applies to all of us, actually there are all kinds of *"new doctrines"* that people are being made to submit to. We're seeing that more and more aren't we?

A Christian baker isn't permitted to refuse to make a cake that promotes homosexuality. It's not enough for homosexual behavior to be permitted; everyone has to be taught to think that it's good. So the new gender doctrines on must be promoted in all of our schools.

Actually doctrine is inevitable. You can't not believe anything. You can have good teaching based on facts and truth, or you can have poor teaching, based on lies and whims. We can hold deep-rooted doctrine with a firm foundation and that logically hold together, or we can hold to shallow doctrine that will be swept away with passing fads. But a culture will always hold to doctrine. It's never actually a case of *"shall we have doctrine?"* but rather, *"which or whose doctrine shall we have?"*

In the Bible we find that from the beginning it's God's instruction, God's teaching we need to hear.

In Exodus 24, where God's newly redeemed people have been delivered from slavery in Egypt and stand before Him at Mount Sinai to renew the covenant, we read

*The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their **instruction**."²*

Doctrine is instruction God gives to the people He has redeemed, to teach them what they should believe and how they should behave. We need to be taught by God. The Psalmist prays to the LORD:

¹ David B. Garner, Credo Magazine, September 2016

² Exodus 24:12

*Teach me good judgment and knowledge, for I believe in your commandments.*³

Or again

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!*⁴

Into the New Testament and again the importance for God's people to be taught is clear. Jesus himself teaches and preaches the Kingdom of God to His disciples as the one sent from God. To Nicodemus he says,

*Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony*⁵

In Paul's letters, especially in those written to men with responsibility for pastoral oversight in the church, 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus, he can say,

*If you put these things (the gospel truths he's been speaking of) before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good (sound) doctrine that you have followed.*⁶

Later in his second letter to Timothy, Paul with all the authority of an apostle of Christ gives Timothy a charge

*I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ²preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. ³For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.*⁷

And it's not just to Timothy to whom Paul's keen to stress teaching is vital; when writing to Titus concerning what qualifications elders within Christ's church must have he says,

*He must hold firm to **the trustworthy word as taught**, so that he may be able to give **instruction in sound doctrine** and also to rebuke those who contradict it.*⁸

And again he exhorts Titus,

*But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.*⁹

What is taught in the church is to be the word of truth, Scripture and not myths or babbling.

*Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. ¹⁵Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. ¹⁶But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness,*¹⁰

So we would ascribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith when it says

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.¹¹

³ Psalm 119:66

⁴ Psalm 111:10

⁵ John 3:11

⁶ 1 Timothy 4:6

⁷ 2 Timothy 4:1-4

⁸ Titus 1:9

⁹ Titus 2:1

¹⁰ 2 Timothy 2:14-16

¹¹ Westminster Confession of Faith 1:6

So we don't want to be a church that neglects doctrine. In the midst of a culture that doubts and despises doctrine, we want to be a church that values doctrine, where what we believe, matters. A church where we want to be taught and instructed in God's Word and apply it and the necessary consequences of those principles laid down in God's Word to every part of our everyday lives.

Because the risen Jesus is the Lord with authority over all (Matthew 28:18), so there are no areas of life or belief where His instruction is not required. S Paul, in defending his ministry to the church at Corinth and his defense of the faith against false teachers says

*We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and **take every thought captive to obey Christ,***¹²

What God has instructed affects all of life. We need to be a church convinced that what we believe is important. But then it's not just that we're to value being taught, we need to ensure our doctrine is sound, that what we believe it true. Secondly there is

The danger of false doctrine – doctrinal error

One of the reasons there's wide-spread neglect of doctrine within the church of the Lord Jesus today, is because doctrine seems to divide. Isn't that why there are so many different denominations and church groups, because we can't agree on things? Surely if doctrine divides and Jesus wants us to be united then we're best going light on doctrine – not being too fussy on what we hold to be sound doctrine.

Always ready to say, "we'll just agree to disagree." That's by and large the view of much of the western church today?

Does doctrine divide? Yes it can do. Is that of necessity a bad thing? Well not according to Jesus, in Luke 12

*Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. ⁵²For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. ⁵³They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."*¹³

Jesus' main concern isn't keeping everyone in the same room, He comes as truth and truth divides.

In both Old and New Testaments the need to guard against false doctrine is portrayed as of the utmost importance. This is so **firstly** because false doctrine ultimately bears false witness against God.

In the Garden of Eden the good instruction God had given to his children not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil on punishment of death, is portrayed by Satan as falsehood

the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die."¹⁴

Satan's false instruction pictures God as a liar and plunges humanity into spiritual and physical death. As those made to love God with all our faculties including our *mind*, to think wrong thoughts about our good Creator God is sinful and worthy of death.

But **secondly**, error in doctrine not only bears false witness about God, it inevitably leads to ungodly behavior. Each of us live out our beliefs in our words and actions. What we believe is never mere theory. So A. W. Tozer says,

What we think about, when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

¹² 2 Corinthians 10:5.

¹³ Luke 12:51-53

¹⁴ Genesis 3:4

That's totally true, what I think about God, whether there is a God or not, what that God is like, will affect my every thought, word and action.

It's why Paul doesn't simply instruct Timothy and Titus to teach doctrine but rather to teach **sound** or **good** doctrine, warns against those who teach and practice "whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine."

There is sound teaching or doctrine and there is false teaching. In warning Timothy against the false teachers who are hanging around the church at Ephesus, and who are misusing the OT law, Paul says

*Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, ⁹ understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰ the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, **and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine**, ¹¹ in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted. ¹⁵*

Or to Titus

*Teach and urge these things. ³ If anyone teaches a **different doctrine** and does not agree with the **sound** words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the **teaching that accords with godliness**, ⁴ he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. ¹⁶*

God's children are to be taught sound teaching, the sound words of our Lord Jesus and the teaching that accords with godliness.

That means that it's not enough simply to have **sincerely** held beliefs.

Again that's a characteristic of our culture isn't it? I'm passionate about something so it must be fine. God will accept me. We can be sincerely wrong and be puffed up, conceited, knowing nothing. The devils are sincere and they are condemned.

For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. ¹⁷

So in the Medieval Roman Catholic Church, erroneous beliefs about the pervasiveness of sin, the finished work of Jesus on the cross led to erroneous behavior - indulgences being offered and the hope of purgatory after death for the wicked.

And 500 years ago Luther, Tyndall, Calvin and others protested against the false teaching and wicked practice that accompanied it, seeking to reform the Catholic Church. Those Protestant Reformers believed whole-heartedly that doctrine mattered. Indeed they were willing to go to the stake for what they believed.

And that is so different to where our culture, to where our church culture is today, isn't it? Because we don't think doctrine is that important, because we think right and wrong are just subjective and we can't really be that certain about anything – to think otherwise would be just arrogant.

We want to be a church that holds true doctrine dearly and are ready to teach and defend the faith once delivered to the saints. Yes a church who want to work in partnership with others who may not agree with us on every secondary issue, but who are committed to the same gospel convictions as we are – we don't want to be divisive. But are ready to stand against false teaching when needed.

¹⁵ 1 Timothy 1:8-11

¹⁶ Titus 6:2-4

¹⁷ Philippians 3:18-19

Now I do want to be clear that believing good doctrine is not the thing that saves us. God saves us, by His grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. We shouldn't think that unless we've fully understood the intricacies of the doctrine of the Trinity, or have completely grasped the minutia penal substitution then we're not saved. That's not what I'm saying.

God saves us without any of our works or any of our intellect and any understanding of the truth of the gospel we have doesn't come from being academically capable but rather by God's Spirit opening the eyes of our heart to the beauty of Christ. But being taught well should not be considered optional. I like the quote from Vanhoozer, who says,

Good doctrine is salutary - healthy and helpful, in the same way that sunshine, clean air and rain are healthy and helpful for people

Our doctrine, what we believe, is important for us to live well by living in the light of truth. You can scrape by for a while without sun and rain and clean air, but that's not what's good for you – it's not healthy is it. And as we are grounded in truth, we can acknowledge humbly both past failures and expect future failures.

Links

<http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/drawing-the-line-why-doctrine-matters/>

<http://www.crosswalk.com/church/pastors-or-leadership/why-doctrine-matters-1233758.html>

<https://www.gty.org/library/articles/A142/does-doctrine-really-matter>

<https://www.crossway.org/articles/why-theology-matters/>

<http://www.virtueonline.org/doctrine-matters-chapter-1-why-doctrine>

<http://www.credomag.com/doctrine-matters/>