

Does Doctrine Really Matter?

Doctrine has become a controversial subject these days. In fact, comparatively few Christians wish to discuss or debate doctrine. It may not be “politically correct.” Or perhaps it is because so many are unsure of themselves—unsure of just how to *prove* the doctrines they believe. Many, unfortunately, are complacent—unwilling to look into what the Bible really says. Why is that?

The prophet Isaiah dealt with a rebellious people who had the same attitude as many today. In effect, they are saying to their preachers, “See not,” and to the prophets, “Do not prophesy to us right things, [but] speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions” (Isaiah 30:10). In other words, “Don’t take the Bible *literally*. Tell us things that agree with our feelings, agendas, prejudices, and desires; things that assure us of prosperity and success; things that will not disturb us with the apprehension of punishment.” Simply put, “We don’t want to hear corrective doctrine.”

What is Doctrine?

Doctrine simply means “teaching”—that which is taught by a religion or political party.

The word comes from the Latin *doctrina*, meaning a codification of beliefs or a body of teachings, especially when used in a religious sense. We derive our word “doctor” from this word. The Greek word *didache* is translated “doctrine” 45 times, and “doctrines” five times, in the KJV.

It is unfortunate that doctrine has been made out to be the “bad guy” in many Christian circles today. A sure way to cloud true doctrine is to bury it between two false doctrines. Some view the word “doctrine” as almost a curse word. “Doctrine divides,” they parrot. “Don’t get into a doctrinal discussion, or you’ll get into an argument.” It would be difficult, indeed, to get people to sit down at a table with open Bibles and discuss various teachings of the Bible. People, by nature, do not want to change—they want to believe what they *want* to believe. One of the most frustrating challenges Christians face is trying to preach the Gospel message to a person who has a closed mind due to spiritual blindness. When an individual or church organization deliberately ignores something God says they should *obey*, SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS automatically sets in. Christ said, “Leave them alone. They are BLIND leaders of *the* blind. And if *the* blind lead *the* blind, both shall fall into the pit” (Matthew 15:14).

All too often we meet people with an attitude that stoutly maintains, “Don’t confuse me with the facts, my mind is made up!” In other words, “It does not matter whether or not what you say is true, I am going to believe and do what *I* want.” Or, “What would my friends or family think if I suddenly changed my beliefs?” When feelings and emotions come into conflict with logic and facts, emotions win about 90 percent of the time. It appears we are hardwired that way. Many appear to have minds like concrete—all mixed up and permanently set. You can point to many scriptures; you can provide examples from the New Testament; you can quote the very words of Jesus—yet such a person will remain unmoved. Such an attitude would be almost humorous if it were not so sad. We need to understand that this is the way of the world: “And the great dragon was cast out, the ancient serpent who is called the Devil and Satan, who is [actively] *deceiving* the whole world; he was cast down to the earth, and his angels were cast down with him” (Revelation 12:9).

Ultimately, biblical truth must be *revealed* by God to a humble, seeking mind. Strangely, many people do not know, or even *want* to know, what their own church teaches! Theirs is more

of a “Christian fellowship” group. Instead of being taught sound doctrine, they would rather have their church, priest, pastor, or teacher provide them with music, meals, and entertaining stories. They would rather be told how Jesus loves them, that all they have to do is say the “sinner’s prayer” and be assured they are saved now and forever—as long as they pay, pray, and stay. “Teach us *s-m-o-o-t-h* things,” they say. “Preach *love*. Preach Christ and Him crucified—but *don’t* talk *doctrine* to me.” Again, the Bible speaks of rebellious people who will not hear the law of the Lord, “Who say to the seers, ‘See not,’ and to the prophets, ‘Do not prophesy to us right things, speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions. Go out of the way, turn aside out of the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us’ ” (Isaiah 30:10–11).

And yes, it is true: Bible doctrine *does* divide. Correct doctrine divides truth from error! Many were astounded at Christ’s doctrine: “And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine” (Mark 1:22; John 7:16). Indeed, Christ said, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). This is because following true biblical doctrine *will set you apart* from commonly believed teachings about God and the Bible. It might even set you apart from the false teachings of your own congregation!

Doctrine is Important

Doctrine is indispensable to Christianity. True Christianity cannot exist without it. The New Testament repeatedly emphasizes the value and importance of sound doctrine, sound instruction. “If anyone teaches any different doctrine, and does not adhere to sound words, *even those* of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the doctrine *that is* according to godliness, He is proud and knows nothing. Rather, he has a morbid attraction to questions and disputes over words, from which come envy, arguments, blasphemy, wicked suspicions, vain reasonings of men who have been corrupted in *their* minds and *are* destitute of the truth—*men* who believe that gain is godliness. From such withdraw *yourself*” (I Timothy 6:3–5).

The apostles defended the faithful proclamation of the Gospel. They couched Christian faith in doctrinal terms, then called for its preservation. The apostle Paul pronounced a *curse* upon any who would preach any other Gospel than what was delivered to the saints. “But if we, or even an angel from heaven, should preach a gospel to you *that is* contrary to what we have preached, *let him be accursed!* As we have said before, I also now say again. If anyone is preaching a gospel contrary to what you have received, *let him be accursed!*” (Galatians 1:8–9).

Prove All Things—Hold Fast to That Which is Good

Studying *true* doctrine is nothing less than a study of the law, mind, and character of God. Indeed, we are to “put on” the very mind—teaching, doctrine—of Christ (Philippians 2:5; I Corinthians 2:16). That is, we are to learn to *think* and *act* as Jesus thinks and acts.

Your Bible reveals that there are *DOCTRINES OF CHRIST*—“Let this mind be in you, which *was* also in Christ Jesus” (Hebrews 6:1)—as well as *DOCTRINES OF DEVILS*: “Now the Spirit tells *us* explicitly that in *the* latter times some shall apostatize from the faith, *and* shall follow deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons; speaking lies in hypocrisy, their consciences having been cauterized [as] *with a hot iron*” (I Timothy 4:1–2).

In other words, there are *true* doctrines and *false* doctrines. We should always prove what we *think* we know (I Thessalonians 5:21). If something is not true according to God’s Word, do

not hold fast to it. Discard it immediately. For example, some of those false doctrines include “forbidding to marry” and “commanding to abstain from meats” (I Timothy 4:3).

Doctrinal Warfare!

Here are a few doctrinal beliefs and traditions that unfortunately divide Christians today: the rapture and the timing of the rapture; young-earth vs. old-earth creationism; charismatic vs. non-charismatic; pre-millennialism vs. amillennialism; the sacred names issue; speaking in tongues; women preachers; eating in a restaurant on the Sabbath; Sabbath vs. Sunday; the world’s holidays vs. God’s holy days; “soul-sleep” vs. an immortal soul; when is one born again; did Mary have other children; who, what is the devil; will Satan be destroyed; is Jesus merely a created being; is Jesus God; is God a trinity or a divine family; is homosexuality a sin or are we free to choose; whether God knows all things in advance; and many more. Believe it or not, these are all doctrines held by various *professing* Christian groups. Everyone wants to express their opinions—but are they really in harmony with God’s Word?

The Bible *alone* is God’s written revelation to man—not feelings, not tradition, not doctrinal creeds of *men*. And *no* doctrine is based on a *single* biblical passage. Yet many will “cherry-pick” out-of-context passages that appear to verify their preconceived beliefs. This is called “wresting” the scriptures (II Peter 3:16). Rather, we must gather *all* relevant passages on any given subject and put them together to fully understand what the Bible has to say about that subject. God asks through the prophet Isaiah, “*Whom* shall He teach knowledge? And *whom* shall He make to understand doctrine? Those who are weaned from the milk and drawn from the breast [spiritual babes]. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, there a little; for with stammering lips and a foreign tongue He will speak to this people” (Isaiah 28:9–13).

Isaiah 8:20 adds, “To the Law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this Word, it is because there is no light in them.” II John 10 confirms, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring *this doctrine*, do *not* receive him into your house, and do not say to him, ‘Welcome!’ ”

Teachers who attempt to “siphon off” some of God’s people must first “open their minds”—by altering their perceptions of doctrine. Their teachings often come under the guise of “new understanding,” “new truth,” “conviviality,” “church tradition,” or “ecumenism.” Political correctness has conditioned most people to defend their supposed “open-mindedness” by claiming that we should not *judge* others, but should have a spirit of *love* and “be more Christ-like,” etc. The basic idea is that we should seek fellowship among various groups and COMPROMISE—i.e., by *ignoring* differences in doctrine and practice, by putting everything we believe “on the table.” Beware! Do not become so “broad-minded” and ecumenical that you become shallow, or so “open-minded” that your brains fall out!

Scripture asks, “Can two walk together unless they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3). The answer is *no*, not without *compromise*—not without fudging on some foundational or variant doctrine. People agreeing in ecumenism are agreeing to the lowest common denominator on what they agree with religiously. Under the guise of “love,” they set what God’s Word says aside. Ignoring doctrinal differences, many churches—even many of the churches of God—scrap all differences, especially when seeking more *M&Ms* (*members* and *money*). They do this using membership drives, public service events, and youth activities—and often feature contemporary music consisting mainly of amplifiers, guitars, drums, and screamers.

For example, would any Christian organization sponsoring a prison ministry dare to teach the truth regarding God's Sabbath and holy days? Or would they *compromise* by encouraging the uninitiated to observe such traditions as Sunday-keeping, Christmas, and Easter? They would probably be thrown out of jail if they taught the truth from the Bible!

Charles H. Spurgeon (1834–1892), a prominent Baptist minister for most of the second half of the nineteenth century, hit the nail on the head when he observed, “The devil has seldom done a cleverer thing than hinting to the church that part of their mission is to provide ENTERTAINMENT for the people, with a view to winning them. Providing AMUSEMENT for the people is *nowhere* spoken of in the Scriptures as a function of the church. The need is for biblical DOCTRINE, so understood and felt that sets men afire.” How true!

Deadly Dangers of False Doctrine

Let's test our memories: Has anyone followed the case of **Andrea Yates**—the woman who drowned her five children in a bathtub because it was “God's will”? The foundational issue she was grappling with was a false understanding—false doctrine—of who and what God is. She stated that her desire was to kill her children so they would be kept from falling into Satan's hands when they grew up, and to punish herself for being a bad mother. On July 26, 2006, a Texas jury in her retrial found that Yates was not guilty by reason of insanity. What else would trigger this irrational behavior if not false doctrine—a false understanding of God's Word?

Or take the case of **James Warren Jones**, leader of the Peoples Temple Christian Church, Disciples of Christ. On the evening of November 18, 1978, in Guyana, Jones ordered his congregation to drink a concoction of cyanide-laced grape-flavored Kool-Aid. In all, 914 died: 638 adults and 276 children. Their bodies were in a state of extensive decay when the authorities arrived. Following the mass murder-suicide, Jones was found dead on the floor of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. The Guyanese coroner said that hundreds of bodies showed evidence of needle marks, indicating foul play. Still other victims were shot. A few fled into the jungle and survived. This was the largest murder-suicide in American civilian life until the events of September 11, 2001. What was the basic cause? False belief! FALSE DOCTRINE! Following a hierarchical church leader instead of God's Word!

And consider the case of **Marshall H. Applewhite, Jr.**—the leader of the Heaven's Gate religious cult in Texas. He was known for his musical and dramatic talents. He sang opera and was a good public speaker, impressing people with his strong baritone voice and good diction. He was a self-proclaimed prophet, drawing rhetoric from science fiction and Scripture. He led his group to commit mass suicide in 1997 in hopes of being lifted into a spaceship. His close partner, Bonnie Lu Nettles, decided they were “The Two” mentioned in the Book of Revelation. They felt that they had an important mission for the Heaven's Gate group. Applewhite led 38 of his followers to eat the “poisoned purple pudding of death.” He preached that suicide would allow them to leave their bodily “containers” and enter an alien spacecraft hidden behind the Hale-Bopp comet. Again, the culprit is misinformation—*false doctrine!*

And don't forget the case of **mother Eve**: She listened to the subtle voice of the serpent and was persuaded to take of the forbidden fruit. Why? Because she listened to the devil's lie. He promised her additional benefits. She gave way to *false doctrine!*

Yet Christ *warned* repeatedly about false teachers, false prophets, and false doctrine. Matthew 24:5: “For many shall come in My name, saying, ‘I am Christ,’ and shall deceive

many.” In verse 11, He said, “And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many.” Still later, He said, “For there shall arise false Christs and false prophets, and they shall present great signs and wonders, in order to deceive, if possible, even the elect. Behold, I have foretold *it* to you” (Matthew 24:24–25).

But how do such false Christs and false prophets generally deceive? By *false doctrine!* Jesus earlier warned, “But beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing, for within *they* are ravening wolves. You shall know them by their fruits...” (Matthew 7:15–16).

Notice Jude 4: “For *certain men have stealthily crept in*, those who long ago have been written about, condemning them to this judgment. They are ungodly men, who are perverting the grace of our God, turning it into licentiousness, and are personally denying the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.” These false teachers come *in disguise*. They do not *appear* to be false teachers—they do not appear to be ravening wolves. Matthew 7:22 shows that they don’t even necessarily deny Christ—they *call* Him “Lord, Lord.” They *appear* to be godly, sincere, moral people. But never forget, the devil is the father of lies (John 8:44). Paul wrote, “For such *are* false apostles—deceitful workers who are transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And *it is* no marvel, for Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore, *it is* no great thing if his servants also transform themselves as ministers of righteousness—whose end shall be according to their works” (II Corinthians 11:13–15).

Looking again at Matthew 7, Christ sternly warned, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but the one who is doing the will of My Father, Who is in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy through Your name? And did we not cast out demons through Your name? And did we not perform many works of power through Your name?’ And then I will confess to them, ‘**I never knew you.** Depart from Me, you who work lawlessness’” (verses 21–23).

The devil will go up to 99 percent on truth just to slip in his one percent error—because he knows that, like leaven, false doctrine will spread and grow until it consumes entire congregations. What is his methodology? By craft, speculation, presumption, supposition, and guesswork, his “teachers” plant “new” ideas into people’s minds—in other words, false doctrine!

II Peter 2:1-3 warns, “But there were also false prophets among the people, as indeed there will be false teachers among you, who will stealthily introduce destructive heresies, personally denying *the* Lord who bought them, and bringing swift destruction upon themselves. And many people will follow *as authoritative* their destructive ways; *and* because of them, the way of the truth will be blasphemed. Also, through insatiable greed they will with enticing messages exploit you for gain; for whom the judgment of old is in *full* force, and their destruction is *ever* watching.”

One of the surest ways to become a victim of false doctrine is to think it’s not dangerous and that you don’t need to be concerned about it. Before leaving Ephesus, Paul lamented: “For I know this: that after my departure grievous wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will rise up speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves. Watch, therefore, remembering that *for* three years I ceased not to admonish each one night and day with tears” (Acts 20:29–31). Paul warned that after his departure some would rise up and cause schisms in the church or congregation in order to get a following to support them. After all, Satan’s strategy is “divide and conquer”—hence all the splits and schisms in the churches today. Paul warned Timothy, “For there shall come a time when they will not tolerate sound doctrine; but according to their own lusts they shall accumulate to themselves a *great number of* teachers, having ears itching to *hear what satisfies*

their cravings; and they shall turn away their own ears from the truth; and they shall be turned aside unto myths” (II Timothy 4:3–4).

Satan—Source of Deception and False Doctrine

Satan the devil has several names and titles. He is called the god of this age (II Corinthians 4:4), the prince of the power of the air, and the spirit that is now working within the children of disobedience (Ephesians 2:2). Revelation 12:9 tells us, “And the great dragon was cast out, the ancient serpent who is called the Devil and Satan, who is deceiving the whole world; he was cast down to the earth, and his angels were cast down with him.” To deceive means to cause someone to believe something that is not true; to trick, mislead, falsify, dupe, defraud, or victimize.

Look again at II Corinthians 11:13–15: “For such are false apostles—*deceitful workers who are transforming themselves into apostles of Christ*. And it is no marvel, for Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore, it is no great thing if his servants also transform themselves as ministers of righteousness—whose end shall be according to their works.” Sincere students of God’s Word change their beliefs match Scripture, but arrogant and dishonest people change and wrest the words of the Bible to match their beliefs.

Reading on to Ezekiel 22:25–26, “There is a conspiracy of her prophets in her midst, like a roaring lion tearing the prey. They have devoured souls; they have taken the treasure and precious things; they made many widows in her midst. Her priests have *done violence to My law and have profaned My holy things*. They have put no difference between the holy and the profane, and have not taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have hidden their eyes from My Sabbaths, and I am profaned among them.”

Appreciation for Truth Requires Opposition to Error

People tend to seek consistency in their beliefs and perceptions. So what happens when one of our beliefs conflicts with another previously held belief? The result is “cognitive dissonance”—the feeling of discomfort that results from holding two conflicting beliefs at the same time. When there is a discrepancy between conflicting beliefs, *something must change* in order to eliminate or reduce the dissonance. For example, if one is a Sunday-keeper and discovers that the Bible says the *seventh* day—Saturday—is the Sabbath, cognitive dissonance kicks in. When two things are opposites, they cannot be reconciled. If we embrace true doctrine, we must be *against* its opposite—*false* doctrine. The stronger we favor a truth, the stronger we should oppose its opposite.

Here are some examples: If I favor a democratic republic, I must *oppose* dictatorship. If I favor life, I must *oppose* death. If I favor light, I must *oppose* darkness. The more I value the one, the more I must *object* to the other. Error is the *opposite* of truth. If I appreciate truth, then I must *oppose* error.

To suggest that false practices do not matter much is to necessarily imply that truth does not matter much. Yet the Bible says of itself, “Sanctify them in Your truth; Your word is truth” (John 17:17).

Every biblical passage that emphasizes the importance of *truth* simultaneously emphasizes the *danger* of error. The more we care about truth, the more firmly we will oppose error. “The fear of the Lord *is* to hate evil; I hate pride, and arrogance, and the evil way, and the

perverse mouth” (Proverbs 8:13). “Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore *I hate every false way*” (Psalms 119:104). See parallel passages at: Psalms 119:128, 163; 36:4; 97:10; 101:3; Amos 5:15; Micah 3:2; Zechariah 8:17; Matthew 6:24; and Romans 12:9.

How to Escape the Danger of False Teaching

When someone tells you that the Law is “done away with” and that doctrine is no big deal—that you just need to love the brethren—you are being led astray. It will be just a matter of time before such “teachers” will try to get you to accept other false teachings through creeping incrementalism. True doctrine can be likened to a row of dominoes: tip one, and it will tip another further down the line!

Our best defense is to put on the whole Christian armor: “Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the might of His strength. Put on the whole armor of God so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, because we are not wrestling against flesh and blood, but against principalities and against powers, against the world rulers of the darkness of this age, against the spiritual power of wickedness in high places. Therefore, take up the whole armor of God so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having worked out all things, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girded about with truth, and wearing the breastplate of righteousness, and having your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. Besides all these, take up the shield of the faith, with which you will have the power to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one; and put on the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God; praying at all times with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and in this very thing being watchful with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints” (Ephesians 6:10–18).

First Corinthians 10:12 reminds us, “Let him who *thinks* he stands, *take heed* lest he fall.” So here are some ideas on how we can “stand firm” in the truth:

(1) **LOVE THE TRUTH.** Those most likely to accept error are not sufficiently dedicated to the *truth*. “For the mystery of lawlessness is already working; only there is One who is restraining at the present time until it arises out of the midst. And then the lawless one will be revealed (whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth, and will destroy with the brightness of His coming); even the one whose coming is according to the inner working of Satan, with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in those who are perishing because they did not receive the love of the truth, so that they might be saved. And for this cause, God will send upon them a powerful deception that will cause them to believe the lie” (II Thessalonians 2:7–11).

(2) **STUDY GOD’S WORD DILIGENTLY.** “Prove all things” (I Thessalonians 5:21). If we proved a doctrine once, we can prove it again. The way to recognize error is to compare it to the truth (Acts 17:11; II Timothy 2:15; 3:16, 17). “Your Word is truth” (John 17:17).

(3) **HONESTLY EXAMINE EVERY DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE** before you accept it (II Corinthians 13:5). Further, if we can’t teach it to others from the Bible, we don’t know it well enough ourselves!

(4) **LET GOD’S WORD BE THE STANDARD** for all our spiritual decisions. Always give the Bible the benefit of the doubt (Galatians 1:6–9; II Timothy 3:16, 17; Matthew 15:9; II John 9; etc.). God’s Word says, “If you are teaching these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Jesus Christ, being nourished by the words of the faith and of the good doctrines that you have closely followed” (I Timothy 4:6). “For I give you good doctrine; do

not forsake my law” (Proverbs 4:2). “But as for you, speak the things that befit sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1).

(4) AVOID DABBLING IN “NEW” TEACHINGS. Amazingly, many people do not know what their church teaches doctrinally. So they are tempted to check out “alternate” teachings—rationalizing, “I just want to see what they are saying.” This is a satanic trap. There is an old saying that if you play with a snake long enough it *will* bite you. The same is true when playing around with the serpent’s (Satan’s) false doctrines. We are warned, “Therefore, *submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil*, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you...” (James 4:7–8).

What about you and me? How much do we care about truth? Do we care enough to study diligently, to remove error from our lives, and serve God faithfully? If you know the truth, have you *obeyed* it? Are you living a faithful life as a Christian? “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free” (John 8:32). Free from sin and death!

Remember, “There is a way which seems right to a man, but the end thereof is the way of death” (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25). We must always be testing our beliefs to see if they truly line up with what God has said in the Bible. So “beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing, for within *they* are ravening wolves” (Matthew 7:15).

Beware of the dangers of drifting! Beware of Christian compromise!

—Lloyd W. Cary