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Why Not Get Rid of Doctrine?



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If one raises the issue of "doctrine" and its value to the church (or lack thereof), one is sure to evoke strong responses one way or another. Defenses of doctrine typically portray the churches of North America as given over to rampant ignorance and even anti-intellectualism. Those who don't care for doctrine typically pronounce the word in a way that loads it down with loathing. The idea seems to be that doctrine involves a fixation on correct propositions ("correct" according to a doubtful process of over-analysis) at the expense of actual Christian living, joy, and worship.

I think it might help all concerned to try to articulate a critique of doctrine as that word is commonly used.

AN EXAMPLE OF THE PROBLEM: THE CHRISTIAN "FAITH"

To begin with an analogy, let us compound one controversial statement with yet another. The problem with doctrine is much like the problem of "faith" when the latter denotes a body of belief. Even though affirming a body of belief is essential to Christian identity and godliness, talking about the Christian "faith" in our current circumstances may do more harm than good.

Imagine an astronomer lecturing on the moons of Jupiter and naming his lecture, "A statement of faith regarding the orbits of Jupiter's moons." That is *not* how we talk about things that are real—about things that actually exist. To be sure, the astronomer would be exercising faith. He would be trusting that his instruments have given him accurate data, that his coursework and background reading about the solar system and the principles of gravitation are accurate, and that his memory is more or less functional as he analyzes the data. His lecture does indeed articulate the things that he believes. Still, he is reporting on facts. The fact that he happens to trust what he is saying is true, or that he expects his audience to trust him as an expert, is never made the *object* of his study. No, he is not expounding his beliefs, even if his lecture could technically be described in that fashion. Rather, he is reporting public facts.

Christians report on reality. They make claims about history. Others don't want to believe what Christians say, but they are too polite, many times, to call them dupes and/or liars. They want to be nice. They don't want to be disagreeable. So they come up with a way of "honoring" Christian reports without actually believing what they report—without believing that about which they report. They refer to the "faith" of religious people as if it were a body of philosophy or practical self-help methods safely sectioned off from the real world. This allows them to offer Christians a place in society as long as the Christian report about the world remains rather muted and marginalized. (And Christians are encouraged to go along with this lest otherwise they find *themselves* marginalized to some degree or other—not least by other Christians who are comfortable with the status quo.)

My point here is simple. We must not forget that the Christian faith is actually a report on the world we live in and important events that have happened therein. Nothing less. Yet the word's use in wider society is often aimed at denying that very point. Even though we are speaking of what we believe is true, "faith" and "fact" are opposed in the minds of many.

DOCTRINE OR TEACHING?

The difference between faith and doctrine is that doctrine has a perfectly good substitute word that avoids its problems. We would be well served to drop the word and use its synonym, "teaching." Though technically synonymous, the two words commonly have different associations in the minds of English speakers. Doctrine would be less problematic if there was no such word as "doctrinaire"—just as "Christian dogmatics" and "dogma" are tainted in today's language because of the feelings invoked by the word "dogmatic" as it is used in common speech.

But the problem with doctrine is not just an accidental association with negative words. The term *doctrine* classifies the church as a certain kind of community. Lots of groups have doctrines. There is communist doctrine; there is the Monroe Doctrine; there is libertarian doctrine. It is not uncommon even to see words like *orthodox* used in these contexts. We can debate whether Leninist doctrine departs from Marxist orthodoxy.

Doctrine has become associated with *ideologies*, and ideological groups use the word *doctrine* to refer to their statement of *principles*. These are propositions referring to everlasting truths that apply in every place and at every time. Obviously, the church has need to use this sort of thing. The distinction between creation and the Creator, for example, is a general truth for all times and places (at least since God created the world).

STORY FIRST, PHILOSOPHY SECOND

But we must not forget that the Bible spends relatively little time on such principles. It usually simply assumes them. A story about George Washington crossing the Delaware will presuppose the existence of humans and, specifically, the existence of George Washington. One can imagine the story being used by space aliens in a galaxy far away to prove such points with little or no concern for the American struggle for independence. Nevertheless, the story is not designed to set forth those ideas. The story is not *about* the existence of the human

race or even the existence of George Washington. The story is about what he did. And the story is often told to those who are to view themselves as the beneficiaries of his heroism.

Let's consider Paul's letters, since they often are mined for timeless truths because they are so didactic.

As people far removed from Paul's situation, we have plenty of need to pay attention to the presuppositions behind what he says in order to apply them to our own situation. Our theology—our application of Paul's writings in the context of the whole Bible—need not and probably should not look exactly like Paul's own writings. Nevertheless, Paul should challenge us not to allow our report on the gospel story to be merely background to a set of "doctrines" we teach. The story is everything. When we tell the story of George Washington, we are explaining how the nation we live in came into being. When we tell the story of Jesus, we are explaining the beginning of a new creation that is no less real than the United States.

Paul's doctrine is simply his teaching about Jesus—how God has rescued us through Jesus' obedient submission to death and his victorious resurrection and rule at God's right hand as the new creation. Romans begins with a two-stage life of Christ as the content of Paul's Gospel (1:3, 4) and goes on to spell out the implications of the pattern of death and resurrection. Paul insists that the story of a king crucified and resurrected means the Corinthians' culture of spiritual oneness is wrong (1 Corinthians 2:2). The crucifixion of Christ in the flesh means that the world once divided by the flesh that separated Jew and Gentile no longer matters (Galatians 2:20; cf. Romans 8:3; Hebrews 10:19–20; Ephesians 2:14). Like Hebrew parents explaining to their children how God has saved them from Egypt, Paul explains to us how God in his grace has brought us into a new age.

A mindset engaged in mining "doctrine" from Paul will be prone to miss the fundamental fact that Paul is telling and applying a *story*. The reader will look instead for a generalized philosophy of life. Yes, all of Paul's teachings are, strictly speaking, doctrines. But the fact remains that the word

doctrine tends to predetermine for us what sort of message Paul can write to us.

It has become the favored mode of teaching in the church to produce books that lay out "the truth" in comprehensive form. These books are useful and even essential for certain kinds of tasks. But one cannot escape the fact that virtually all the letters of Paul are nothing like this. Romans and Galatians are not written as general, summary statements of Christian doctrine but are letters directed to specific churches in specific circumstances with specific needs. Pauline theology is, as we have it, almost invariably pastoral theology. If Paul were to teach in our seminaries in the way he has come to us in the Bible, he would be a professor of practical theology. And our systematic theology texts resemble Webster's Dictionary far more than they do the Pauline letters.

If there were a button to push that would eliminate *doctrine* from our vocabulary, why would one hesitate to push it?

LEARNING CHRIST

One of the great virtues of a word like *teaching* (one which is lacking in its more troublesome synonym) is that it can overlap with a word like *training*. Doctrine is something one only memorizes from a page. But that is not what the apostle Paul tells us to learn. In Ephesians 4:17ff. he puts us under oath to "no longer walk as the nations do, in the futility of their minds." After waxing poetic about the Gentile's "darkened" comprehension and their alienation "from the life of God" caused by "ignorance," which is in turn caused by "hardness of heart," Paul finally speaks positively about what Christians *should* be like:

But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:20–24 ESV).

Paul tells us we should not go down the road of the nations because we have “learned Christ.” The person of King Jesus, the Christ, is spoken of in terms of a *different way of life*. This is not at all uncommon for the apostle Paul. In fact, many times, when Paul speaks of what Christians should or shouldn’t *learn*, his emphasis is clearly more on *practices* and *attitudes* than on doctrines. We read in Philippians 4:9–11, for example, that what the Philippians had “learned and received and heard and seen” in Paul were things to be *practiced*. Indeed, Paul goes on to speak of learning to be content, a “doctrine” I don’t believe was, nor can be, gained from a book. Christians are to “learn to show godliness” in a context that plainly means they are to begin *practicing* godliness (1 Timothy 5:4). And again, “And let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful” (Titus 3:14).

WORDS DO MORE THAN DENOTE, AND THE CHURCH IS MORE THAN WORDS

When God brought Israel out of the wilderness, he did not simply *command* that they keep the Sabbath, but he *trained* them with manna. Six days out of the week they were to go outside and gather food. If they tried to store any, it would be inedible the next day. On the sixth day, however, the rules were different. They were able to gather more and save it for the next day, because on that seventh day no manna appeared on the ground to be gathered (Exodus 16).

Though the Bible is a book of words, and not a food distribution system, it still has the tendency to *train* as part of its *teaching*. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians begins not by telling the readers to be thankful but with a prayer of thanksgiving (Ephesians 1:3ff.). Simply by virtue of listening to the reading of the epistle hearers are caught up in the practice of prayer and worship in response to, and trust in, God’s amazing grace. The Bible is, in fact, full of songs which are not simply reducible to “doctrines.” Yes, we can occasionally be helped by a commentary on the Psalms, but we are usually better off if we will simply *pray* them, rather than insist on getting ideas *out* of them.

Add to this the fact that a church is more than simply a lecture hall, and what we are to learn there involves more than simply the memorization of formulas and facts.

But as for you, speak what accords with healthy teaching. Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled. Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled. Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us. Slaves are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the teaching of God our Savior (Titus 2:1–10 ESV, with minor alterations).

Books by older women may be helpful, but the older women themselves are essential. Titus’ speech must be sound, but it can qualify as sound only if Titus’s behavior comports with it.

What Paul wants cannot come out of a book. It comes from a structured community that is shaped by the gospel in the Spirit. The Bible’s words are essential to that community but it cannot replace that community. Emphasis on doctrine encourages the illusion that the book is all we need.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THEOLOGY?

People typically assume that by opposing doctrine one is opposing theology. But nothing would do more to interest people in theology than to unshackle it from the associations it has with doctrine. In the first place, since there is some need for what doctrine does in dealing with abstract truths, readers

need to remember that “teaching” covers all that needs to be done. The only difference is that we are no longer implying that the abstract and the formulaic are the only important aspects of Christian thought and life. Theology remains valuable. (I get to keep subscribing to the system of doctrine in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, for example, just in case any of you were worried about my Presbyterian job security!)

But what is theology for Paul the apostle? After exhorting us to walk not like the nations (Ephesians 4:17), Paul proposes a different sort of walk: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (5:1–2). For Paul, theology is not (only?) fodder for philosophical analysis but a transfiguring vision revealed in the cruciform gospel. We become what we worship, and Paul expects the true God revealed in the gospel to reshape us. “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:31–11:1). “We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself” (Romans 15:1–3a). God has revealed himself in Christ in such a way that we who learn Christ—and thus learn God—learn a new definition of what we should be.

This sort of theology leaves room for philosophical questions and abstract summations where necessary, but does not throw the emphasis on that aspect of the Church’s task. Doctrine tends to distract us from all that the Bible offers, and all that the church is called to do.

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