

INSTRUCT THE BRETHREN IN THESE THINGS

The Whys and Hows of Studying Bible Doctrine

by G. Richard Fisher

The Apostle Paul tutored his young protégé Timothy with a detailed plan for building and overseeing a church. His blueprint included: "If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed. ... Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine" (1 Timothy 4:6, 16).

It is frightening to read the further inspired words of the Apostle of Christ as he speaks to the downward spiral of good doctrine and the rise of false doctrine beginning in his day and escalating in ours: "Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons" (1 Timothy 4:1). Concerning Paul's warning, Charles Ryrie notes that, "Paul returns to his attack on heresy. False teaching is inspired by *demons* and promulgated by means of *the hypocrisy of liars*."¹

Consider, too, the reality in regard to spirits who are not only deceitful, but who promote demonic doctrine:

"These evil spirits are ever active in seeking to turn men away from the faith once for all delivered to the saints. They are in rebellion against God, and yet are permitted for some strange,

mysterious reason, to influence and even possess men and women who are not subject to the instruction of the Holy Spirit."²

THE ECLIPSE OF DOCTRINE

One would have to be both blind and deaf to miss the theological obscurity of our day. Moreover, you do not have to look very far or very hard to see it. Vampires, zombies, Mayan calendars, hybrid creatures called Nephilim, boy wizards, identifying the antichrist, and all kinds of personal revelations (among other things) are very much current as a mental diet for many believers — all the while the sane solid tenants of the Bible are out and passé. As people become more feeling-oriented they become more fantasy-driven. People love to study about extraterrestrials, but not about the God who created the universe and outer space.

It is very interesting to monitor Christian magazines, periodicals, and television these days. One will see the fads rolling in and out of the Church scene like waves on a beach. Movie reviews are more popular than Bible study. Merchandisers and advertisers hope one fad will catch on and have a shelf life for a few years so they can ride that wave and clean up

financially. Christians are marketed to death in our celebrity culture.

Twenty years ago, it was every male believer's responsibility to become a Promise Keeper. Large-scale, multi-city rallies, plus tons of books and studies were hawked before the Promise Keeper organization ran out of steam and became another relic and another monument to the faddish bent of modern evangelicalism. Slightly more than a decade ago it became almost the duty of every church to have its members praying the prayer of Jabez. That lasted awhile and now, more recently, one could find piles of *The Prayer of Jabez* books on the shelves of local dollar stores. A couple years following the Jabez craze, it became fashionable — and even mandatory — to be "purpose driven." Churches were heavily marketed and the new fad established. The author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren, tried to reboot the frenzy by marketing a tenth-anniversary edition of *The Purpose Driven Life* during the 2012 Christmas season. But it was lightning that just could not strike twice.

An even more recent innovation is the mania to become missional. Of course, every church should recognize that it has a mission according to Matthew 28:18-20, but it is apparently

not that simple. The word “missional” is becoming ubiquitous and everybody seems to be crowding aboard the missional band wagon. Not many seem to know exactly what the word means, so it becomes whatever a person or a church body wants it to be. To be “missional” (a must use word especially in missionary circles) is like a prepaid debit card. You can load as much or as little onto it as you wish. It is the “in word” and the hot button word if you wish to be seen as “in” and really cutting edge.

Some contend “missional” means outreach as opposed to just trying to attract people; outreach rather than in-reach. But few really know where it came from. Like Creation itself, it appeared from nothing and caught on. No one wants to be against missions and so if a church doesn’t have it in its purpose statement and use it as a buzzword, it is thought to be out of step. Missional has become a well-worn word within the emergent church movement. If one asks what the word means, probably the best response is it means whatever you want it to mean.

Possibly the best theory as to the origin of the word “missional” was that it was developed by Darrell Guder. Guder used it in the title of his book, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, published by Eerdmans Publishing in 1998. Guder is the professor of Missional and Ecumenical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. The word was not an immediate success, but then along the way it struck and stuck, at least for the time being and until a new buzzword replaces it.

Those who were once called “unchurched” or “seekers” are now labeled as “nones,” and it is in vogue to refer to unbelievers with such a designation. Believers are to pepper their conversations regarding the unsaved as “nones.” (However, it may be wise to make sure that their audience is not confused, thinking that they are speaking about nuns.) Romans 3:11 combines the words “none” and “seek” in this way: “There is none who seeks after God.” Perhaps someday, terms such as “lost,” the “un-

righteous,” “unbelievers,” or even more politically incorrect, the “heathen” will regain favor.

The prevailing fad among extremist Pentecostals and Charismatics such as Todd Bentley³ is the sale of various forms of transferable anointings. Supposedly, one can learn (for a price) how to transfer a healing anointing, a prophetic anointing, or even a release-from-debt anointing. Their books or DVDs may even come with transferable anointing oil. It is a scam as they promise their followers that all this is paving the way back to an Adamic paradise that will set the stage for the Second Coming of Christ. Any doctrine of the Kingdom and/or the Lord establishing His Kingdom is lost in the hype.

So it is not just the world alone that is faddish. The problem is ramped up because many Christians seem to have full blown AIDS; that is, **Acquired Immunity to Doctrinal Studies**. In many formerly sound churches and especially in the emergent church movement, doctrine is no longer stylish or trendy. So it has to go — or at least given minimal distinction. It seems doctrine cannot measure up to a good fad.

Within emergent circles it is considered cutting edge to question everything that is biblical and then subtly suggest the polar opposite of what Christians have always believed. In fact, doctrine is considered totally out of date and a genuine hindrance to dialoguing with cults and other religions. Christians, we are told, must play nice and all get along. We are instructed that we can separate Jesus’ ethical teachings from the doctrines that accompany that teaching. However, that concept is patently absurd.

Some argue that we just need the Golden Rule⁴ minus doctrine. Nevertheless, what God has joined together we cannot put asunder without much spiritual damage and loss. Christians should not even try to separate who Jesus is and His ethics from what He taught in terms of doctrinal issues. Jesus said that the words that He taught were “life” (John 6:63). Millard

Erickson reminds us that, “The ethical teaching is insufficient without the reality which is spoken of by the doctrine lying behind the Golden Rule. If we ignore or alter the doctrine, the ethical teaching loses its validity.”⁵ Consider how important the doctrine of Scripture is because all other doctrines flow from it. Correct doctrine about Christ dictates whether we have the true Christ or another Jesus.

THE EROSION OF DOCTRINE

Regretfully, the cry today is that doctrine is something that went out of date a long time ago, so we need to just get over it. Propositional truth is too confining and therefore obsolete. Our biblical beliefs, we are told, are all culture-bound and belong to past ages of an ancient and archaic world. The current mood was expressed by E.W. Kenyon:

“Dogmas and Doctrines have lost their significance. They are the worn-out shells of yesterdays. They have held us in bondage for years.”⁶

Kenyon made that observation about a century ago, so one could maintain that he was ahead of his time in the outright rejection of doctrine. Kenyon’s jettisoning of doctrine led him far afield into extreme speculation about the use of the name of Jesus. Douglas Jacobsen wrote:

“When the believer spoke or acted in the name, it was the equivalent of Christ doing the same thing. Kenyon thought that potentially all the powers of Christ — all the powers of the godhead — were at humanity’s disposal.”⁷

Kenyon’s is a cautionary tale that few are heeding. His teachings and others like his have produced a flurry of wealthy, pompous charlatans preying on the Church.

We are presently instructed that doctrine divides. Few have expressed this perspective in a more foul and graphic way than Paul Crouch, president of the Trinity Broadcasting Network. Crouch told the faithful viewers of his network:

“And I want to say to all you Scribes, Pharisees, heresy hunters; all of you that are going around picking little bits of doctrinal error out of everybody’s eyes and dividing the body of Christ and arguing over splinters and doctrinal hairs and dissipating and wasting all of our time when the world’s going to hell. I say get out of God’s way, quit blocking God’s bridges or God’s going to shoot you if I don’t. I mean this is in my spirit, folks. I’m tired of Scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites blocking God’s bridges when the harvest is perishing out there and God’s calling the body to come together. *Let Him sort out all this doctrinal doo-doo.* I don’t care about it. I don’t care any more.”⁸

What Crouch and others like him miss is the fact that doctrine is supposed to divide and it is a sure path to dividing truth from error and good from evil. When Jesus said, “Beware of false prophets” in Matthew 7:15, He was the authoritarian divider. In Matthew 10:33-39, Jesus further instructs us about division that can occur when one rightly holds to truth. So it is a fact of life and of logic that truth draws a red line and separates itself from error.

Others certainly see and understand the erosion. For example Pastor Mark Johnson observes:

“Today the flock often lives on a diet of junk food, rather than on well-planned, nourishing banquets that include the meat of the Word. Why this sorry state? Here are some of the many reasons: (1) Many people have come to devalue God’s Word as less than inerrant, less than authoritative, and less than relevant. (2) Experimentation with how to ‘do church’ stresses exciting methodologies but places less emphasis on preaching or leaves little time for Bible teaching. (3) Expository preaching has fallen on hard times. It is considered out of date for a postmodern culture that shuns propositionalism (presenting and defending theological

truths through propositions that can be proven true) and absolutism (the view that certain things are right or wrong).”⁹

THE EVASION OF DOCTRINE

In a politically correct climate where getting along is the ultimate virtue and goal, doctrine just gets in the way. People who are strongly and unashamedly rooted in biblical doctrine are laughed at, scorned, and ridiculed. They are labeled “divisive” and “unloving.” They are called “uncivil.” With sneers they are told they are living in the Dark Ages. They are the problem with the world and if they would cease and desist with the hate speech and try to get along, the world would be at peace and in harmony. Sin is not the problem — rather it is those evil, unloving Christians claiming to have ultimate truth who are really the problem. Rather than upset people and create division as they do, they just need to affirm what unites and not focus on what divides. They create false guilt in people and that needs to be stopped. Harmonic convergence could occur right now if we could only silence the mouths of the doctrinal spoilers.

On the other hand, Muslims, cultists, and fringe movements — even those who promote sinful lifestyles — are able to hold tenaciously to their doctrines and beliefs and that is not only approved but applauded. It is, after all, defined as free speech. However, in a society where Christians are now considered an evil class and their doctrines portrayed as hate speech, true believers seem to be living in a parallel universe. Regardless, Christians need to keep speaking and defending. Jude 3’s command to “contend earnestly for the faith” has not been rescinded.

The drift from fixed truth and doctrine did not happen overnight. It has been a long time coming. Bible teacher and author William Evans wrote:

“There is probably no greater need in the Christian church today than that its membership should be made acquainted with

the fundamental facts and doctrines of the Christian faith.”¹⁰

Those words by Evans were written over 100 years ago. The doctrinal drift has, as Jude tells us, come by way of certain men who “have crept in unnoticed” (v. 4). The Apostle Peter concurred, writing “there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies” (2 Peter 2:1).

A major factor in this proliferation of destructive heresies could be said to have begun in earnest a few centuries ago in two movements. One is called European Scientific Biblical Criticism. This new perspective transformed the Gospel tradition to such a great extent that the end result is a skepticism about the historicity of what is recorded in the Gospels, ranging from a relative to an absolute uncertainty.¹¹

The Gospels, we were told, were not what Jesus taught; neither do they convey real truth about His life on earth, but rather are fantasy and wishful thinking of the early Christian Church. The early Christians fallaciously constructed a religion purely out of a desire to have Jesus as some kind of miracle-working hero. Wanting it so badly, they conceived and declared Him as they wished He had been. Those who espouse this view maintain that the Gospel accounts are simply what the early believers made up and that we can have no confidence in the text.¹²

Nothing is to be believed in the Old and New Testaments, but we are to believe the critics and their contradictory views. It seems strange in today’s topsy-turvy world that we are told to believe the doubters and deniers of Scripture, but not the apostolic writers of the first century. We are further instructed to regard with suspicion the four Gospels of the New Testament, and to believe, without question, the heretical Gnostic gospels (written long after the eyewitness accounts of the New Testament). Likewise, the remainder of the New Testament canon fares no better in the hands of these hyper-liberal biblical critics. It is remarkable to observe that

this destructive movement flourished in Germany, the birthplace of the Reformation.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND DOCTRINE

The impetus of higher criticism is indebted to an earlier major movement known as the Enlightenment. It was a time when human reason was crowned king. This movement takes us all the way back to the mid-1700s:

“The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement that stressed reason as the way to truth, a world based on perfectly ordered natural laws and a self-confident and optimistic belief in human ability to make progress. The epoch is also frequently called the Age of Reason because reason was understood to be the path to providing the true understanding of man, society, the world and God. Truth, it was believed, had been obscured by revelation and dogma, but at least people could be enlightened through reason, science and education. The intellectual and religious implications of the Enlightenment were profound, constituting a *massive shift in Western thought*.”¹³

Thus man became the ultimate judge of Scripture, rather than the other way around.

The long and the short of it was that Scripture was no longer accepted because it went contrary to the reason of some in academia. The deity of Jesus was rejected because it seemed to some to be contrary to reason. The Incarnation seemed unthinkable. And so, theological domino after theological domino began to fall. Somehow the ethics of Jesus were fine, but His death as atonement and bodily resurrection from the grave made no sense. Miracles could not be logically understood, so they had to be eliminated as well. With core doctrine being either marginalized or outright rejected, higher criticism, Unitarianism, and Universalism arose and flourished, as they seemed to make more sense to some. Arrogant men with their fallen,

tainted reason were now the sole arbiter of truth.

Unaided, fallen human reason has created many weird religious ideas. This is why there are so many believers who embrace and buy the publications of those who claim to have traveled to heaven — and hell. In today’s Christian circles, it appears people can take a trip to a celestial paradise more easily than a cruise to a Caribbean paradise. A trip to heaven is free and then its description can be sold to others in book form. These books with fantastic claims saturate both the Christian and secular marketplace and all tend to be unbiblical, contradictory, universalistic, and in many cases pantheistic and occultic.¹⁴

Many of these heavenly accounts are just silly. It is obvious that some believers are not really giving their attention to doctrine as an antidote to error. The driving force in esoteric religious movements seems to be our feelings and our experiences. Yet Proverbs 28:26 addresses our flawed, fallen emotions and experiences affirming that, “He who trusts in his own heart is a fool.”

Our interior life must be informed and guided by the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit or we can easily fall into gross error following our own promptings and self-generated illusions. When an individual’s reason and reasoning contradict another person’s reason, who or what breaks the tie? Not to be outdone, there are those who suggest the mind-boggling idea that even though these experiences are creating contradictory theologies, it is still acceptable as long as Jesus is preached. The question that screams for an answer is: “Which Jesus of which experience?”

THE EMBRACE OF DOCTRINE

Without a doctrinal base we have no real foundation or Christian identity. We have no parameters. What is doctrine anyway? How do we define it? The Apostle Paul says we are to give attention to doctrine (1 Timothy 4:13), so it must be important. All told, in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus the word “doctrine” is used no less than 16 times. It is contrasted in some of

those verses with false doctrine. It comes from the Greek root *didache* meaning “teaching.” Realize that it is not just anyone’s teaching or teaching in general, but *the teachings of the Apostles*. Acts 2:42 speaks clearly to this: “they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine.” So doctrine is teaching and instruction from the Bible. The Apostles’ words have been inspired and then inscripturated and handed down to us in a permanent and unchanging form in an authoritative book. As one theological dictionary expresses it, “Doctrine is the teaching of Scripture on theological themes.”¹⁵ It is not just some ecclesiastical teaching, that is, Church tradition or dogma, but Bible-based propositions of truth.

In the Pauline Epistles, “the apostles’ doctrine” is often referred to as *the faith*. It is that body of truth handed down by the Apostles. It is sometimes called tradition (2 Thessalonians 3:6), meaning what is handed down by the Apostles and eyewitnesses. The Apostle Peter is clear: “that you be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior” (2 Peter 3:2). In 2 John 9, the Apostle says there is an apostolic doctrine of Christ that is to be embraced and held onto. This tells us that there are false and twisted teachings about Jesus that do not line up with the Apostles’ teachings in the Scripture. Those Bible doctrines, taken in totality, form a pattern of orthodox beliefs that have been believed and taught in the Church for 2,000 years. These doctrines are contained in many of the historic creeds. The study of biblical doctrines has a long and venerated history and should be embraced.

The early Church Fathers were clear. Ignatius (c. A.D. 105) urged that we “Study, therefore, to be established in the doctrines of the Lord and the apostles.”¹⁶ Tertullian (c. A.D. 197) wrote, “We hold communion with the apostolic churches because our doctrine is in no respect different than theirs. This is our witness of truth.”¹⁷ He then further argued:

“If that [doctrine] has existed from the beginning which has the apostles for its authors, then it will certainly be quite evident that the doctrine which comes down from the apostles is that which has been kept as a sacred deposit in the churches of the apostles.”¹⁸

“Hold fast to what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21) is not just for Bible college professors and pastors. British author Ian Macpherson reminds us:

“Jude says the faith is for the saints. Some seem to think it is for scholars only. It is true that without the scholars, humanly speaking, we should not have had the faith. They have formulated, translated and transmitted to us the documents in which the faith has found historic expression. But the faith was not discovered or devised by the scholars. It was Divinely delivered to the saints.”¹⁹

It would do every true believer well to be aware of Church history and doctrinal continuity down through time. A book such as *The History of Christian Doctrines* by Louis Berkhof is worth the effort.

More than a half century ago, Andrew W. Blackwood, an enormously powerful voice in America for orthodoxy and doctrine, wrote numerous books on homiletics (the art of preaching). In all, he wrote more than twenty books. One of his titles was *Doctrinal Preaching for Today*. One would be hard pressed to find a title like that in this day and age.²⁰ Imagine teaching pastors how to effectively preach doctrine from the pulpit! What an innovative thought! What if that became a fad?

EDUCATION IN DOCTRINE

The chief concern of this article is to recognize a practice far too often ignored (as done above) and then to provide some broad suggestions on *how* to actually *study* doctrine. This latter objective will be suggestive and not exhaustive because of the limited space this journal affords. Readers are

expected to fill in the blanks as we process the much neglected subject of how to study doctrine. We could look far and wide and research many doctrinal books, both old and new, and come up empty as to information on the actual how-to.

One such exception is Herbert Lockyer’s book, *All the Doctrines of the Bible*.²¹ A simple chapter title within that volume, “How to Study Christian Doctrine,” expresses a unique idea. It indicates that Lockyer realized the need of instructing believers on just *how* to study doctrine. Every believer is indebted to other believers in one way or another. We all stand on the shoulders of those who went before, and so this author is indebted to Lockyer for his thoughts and suggestions. They are the impetus for the concepts which follow and are developed upon with much gratitude for his insights. Paraphrasing, summarizing, and building upon what Lockyer has written, we will explore the ABCs (and more) of how to study doctrine (by using an outline with the letters A through F).

A — Assemble. First we must assemble all the pertinent verses having to do with the particular doctrine we wish to study. Why is this important? Author Kay Arthur advises:

“A topical study is a comprehensive and exhaustive study of what God’s Word has to say regarding a specific topic. It is much like a word study, only far more comprehensive. The advantage of a topical study is that it gives the total picture of what the Word of God has to say on a particular subject.”²²

We can use a concordance to gather verses which contain the doctrinal word we are looking for like salvation, or righteousness, or sin. Some help might be gleaned from a topical Bible as well. Chain reference Bibles can also be of help as they link a topic through the entire Bible with cross references provided in the margins. Some of the chain reference Bibles even color code certain words or doctrines. There is, as well, the option of researching the doctrinal word in a good Bible dictionary or encyclopedia.

A word study from W.E. Vine or other linguists will give us very helpful root meanings. Of course, the ideal would be an acquaintance with Hebrew or Greek, but we can use English helps to hurdle the obstacle of not knowing the original languages.

Additionally helpful would be reliable and dependable authors who have written books on doctrine. We can create a small doctrinal library. Assembling is very important as a first step. In assembling we need to be sure to gather all the pertinent Scriptures. We would lose something important, for instance, if we attempted to study the doctrine of sin, but never consulted Genesis 1-3, especially the fall of Adam and Eve (in chapter 3). The same goes for Romans 1-3 when studying sin and its effects on humankind. Assembling as much of the doctrinal picture as we can will insure a deep and proper understanding. This takes work and there are no shortcuts.

B — Balance. We must by all means keep doctrines in balance. One can gather all the verses on the love of God and neglect those which speak to His holiness and justice, thereby ending up with a false God who is nothing more than a kindly old grandfather. This lack of balance regarding God’s attributes will skew our understanding of other doctrines like eternal punishment — a path taken by popular emergent church pastor and author Rob Bell.²³

We cannot neglect *any* of God’s attributes, so we may even launch into a study of His names in the Old Testament. These give us great insight into God’s character.

Another example of balance would be in understanding the doctrine of salvation. Salvation divorced from a robust doctrine of sin will end up with no need of repentance or an inadequate understanding of why Jesus had to die on the cross. Atonement then loses all meaning when sin is denied or diminished. Grace, as well, is a concomitant to salvation, and proper biblical understanding of grace will keep one from lapsing into works salvation.

We could also note that if one focused solely upon the deity of Christ, he would easily lose sight of His humanity. On the other hand, if he focused only on His humanity, he would lose any awareness of His deity. Either way, he would have a false Christ, another Jesus.

Lack of balance is the grist of cults. Balance of doctrine is urgent. In the early 1900s, Pentecostal leader Andrew David Urshan so totally misunderstood the doctrine of the Trinity that he adopted Oneness theology and taught that Jesus was the only person in the Godhead and that He played the part of Father and Holy Spirit at different times. In this view, Jesus becomes the Divine Actor or Great Pretender. Of course, this would have had Jesus praying to Himself in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross forsaking Himself. There can also be Patristic Oneness where the Father is considered to be the only person in the Godhead. This is clearly the belief of Unitarianism.

Urshan combined his Oneness doctrine with the teaching that baptism and the speaking in tongues were required for salvation. One heresy often creates another. Later on, Urshan left his wife for ministry, showing his total loss of balance and a misunderstanding of the doctrine of sanctification, as well as marriage.²⁴

C — Combine. One must never separate doctrine from duty; that is, dissociate right believing from right living and precept from practice. First and foremost, doctrine must inform us, enlighten us, change us, motivate us, and direct us. For example, consider a study of grace. Grace teaches us to deny ungodliness and to live soberly and righteously (Titus 2:12). Doctrine should separate us from worldly living and lusts. Doctrine needs to be dynamic and life changing. Lockyer is spot on when he asks, "What is the use of a correct creed without a correct character?"²⁵

Apologist and author Steven Tsoukalas instructs:

"Though defending the faith is important, I consider it secondary compared to knowing the

things of God, putting that knowledge in the heart, and rendering to God glory by expressing that knowledge in worship and lifestyle. This, I am convinced, is the goal of theology. We read in Scripture that the early Christians 'were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer' (Acts 2:42). They were *doing* theology. Again, doing theology involves studying about God and expressing in our lives what we learn."²⁶

For doctrine to really be dynamic it must be applied to life and living. A correct understanding of the doctrine of forgiveness should lead to a freedom from the past and a release of guilt and remorse. We must combine doctrine with practical outcomes in our lives. The old way of saying it was *practice what you preach*. We must be servants to the Word ourselves while depending on the Holy Spirit and embracing personal change. We can prepare food to feed others while starving ourselves. That makes no sense. We must combine our intellectual research with our own devotional life otherwise we are hypocrites. Everett Harrison confirms that segregating doctrine and practice is unjustifiable:

"In current discussions, doctrine is sometimes used in contrast to spiritual life. However, an anti-thetical use here is unfortunate, for these two elements are complimentary. When Paul speaks of 'sound [healthy] doctrine' (I Tim. 1:10; Titus 2:1) he seems to affirm that true doctrine is life-giving."²⁷

D — Develop. Be aware that Old Testament truth is developed, filled out, and brought to completion in the New Testament. A flower is not yet completed until it brings forth a bud. In one regard the Old Testament is the foundation and the New Testament is the completed building. In the Old Testament we see Jesus in prophecy, in types, and in many ways foretold, but not in fullness until His Incarnation. Grace and truth came by Jesus in its fullest manifestation. When the

Word was made flesh, it gave us a more complete understanding.

In the New Testament we see Jesus in a human body and have a more well-rounded picture. This progression and development of Old Testament to New Testament is often called progressive revelation; where truth is given in stages as it builds on prior truth. The Old Testament was in a sense childhood and the New Testament maturity. In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit was partially revealed as one who could come to a person and leave (Psalm 51:11). In the New Testament the Holy Spirit indwells believers and never leaves (John 14:16-17).

If one constructs a doctrine of the Holy Spirit only from the Old Testament they would be hesitant and uncertain and wondering if the Comforter was there to comfort them in the midst of trial and tribulation. It would be a truncated and incorrect doctrine of the Holy Spirit that creates deep uncertainty. It would influence one toward man-made and counterfeit remedies.

A sad example of this is how so many today are lacking a well developed doctrine of angels and demons. The lack thereof allows them to be wide open to paranoia, deliverance ministries, and bogus exorcisms.

E — Exactness. There is no need to coin words and phrases for doctrines in an effort to be innovative, enchanting, or more acceptable. Many modern-day authors try to be real trendy just to sell books. That practice often waters down or distorts truth. Peter Jeffery reminds us:

"Some Christians think of doctrine as being big words; words they can hardly spell, let alone understand. They think of words like propitiation and justification as being well beyond the understanding of ordinary Christians. It is true that these are big words. The truths they express are gigantic in their importance and massive in their place at the heart of the Christian faith. But it ought not to be beyond the ability of most believers to un-

derstand them, especially when we remember that Paul used these words in writing to the church in Rome and most of the Christians there had nothing like the educational advantages we have. The Apostle expected the Romans to understand propitiation and justification and he would have been amazed at our protests that these big words are too much for us."²⁸

Thus, we must allow the Bible to speak for itself — even when doctrinal words seem technical. Moreover, calling God by anything other than what He is called in Scripture is not helpful at all. God had reasons for speaking of Himself in the way He did.

Similar to this are those who try to tone down the doctrine of sin by labeling it a "mistake" or an "error" or "human frailty." But doing so clearly obscures truth. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 2:13, makes a distinction between man's words and words used by the Holy Spirit. Terms like "righteousness," "salvation," "the new birth," "heaven," and "hell" may seem to some to be terribly out of date, but creating new words rather than explaining Bible words can create false doctrine and tainted truth.

We need to speak with precision and exactness and be true to the biblical text. There are times that a failure to be precise and exact in the use of Bible words may tilt us slightly toward error that is not yet full blown heresy, but amounts to nothing more than junk food doctrine. It may not be outright poison, but it is unhealthy and contributes nothing toward Christian growth. Some teachings are silly and unproductive. Sometimes it is just to be sensational and to draw attention. There are some teachers who claim a good doctrinal core and have an orthodox statement of belief to prove it, but are still dispensing a lot of spiritual junk food. Bill Gothard is a prime example. Of all of the numerous lists that he has dreamed up over the years, some might be helpful while others are imaginative and foolish, doing more harm than good.²⁹

F — Fairness. We must be silent where the Word is silent. As English Reformer and martyr Nicholas Ridley expressively stated:

"In these matters I am so fearful, that I dare not speak further, yea, almost none otherwise than the text does, as it were, lead me by the hand."³⁰

The Apostle Paul instructed the believers at Corinth: "that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written" (1 Corinthians 4:6). We must be honest and fair with the text. People often get caught up in feelings and imagination which may well lead to impose on the text something it does not say. Date-setting the return of Christ is one such bit of nonsense. Everyone who tries it fails; just ask Harold Camping, Edgar Whisenant, William Miller, and others. Date-setting has a long and infamous history of failure. Date suggesting is also dangerous. There are important and prominent doctrines which are clear and our doctrine and teachings should be found clearly in the Bible. Our musings are something else entirely.

An occurrence that should immediately send a red flag up our flagpole is when a teacher or author pretends that he or she has found something in Scripture that has never been seen before or taught before. It is sometimes passed off as "revelation." These "newly discovered" mysteries and revelations always turn out to be a manipulative hoax. One Bible verse often twisted and used for support is Daniel 12:4, "shut up the words, and seal the book until the time of the end." Cult leaders like Camping have claimed that the meaning of the prophecy and the timeframe of events were sealed and unrevealed; that is, until our day and the emerging of Camping and his Family Radio network.

Cult leaders nearly all say that now they alone can open the meaning and unseal the heretofore unknown prophecy details and dates. What they really do not know or are knowingly distorting is that this verse in Daniel has nothing to do with the *meaning* of

Scripture, but rather the *fulfillment* of Scripture. The fulfillment waits until "the time of the end." It is obvious as we compare Daniel 12:4 with Revelation 22:10 that we see what is being addressed in Daniel is definitely fulfillment of prophecy. John, in Revelation 22:10, says: "Do not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand."

Unsealing prophecy means to fulfill prophecy and being shut up means being unfulfilled. Dr. Harry Ironside wrote:

"Throughout the New Testament, the end is always looked upon as having drawn nigh: therefore, through the book of Revelation, the seal is removed, as it were, from the book of Daniel, and the latter prophecy is found to be the key to the former."³¹

Fulfillment opens and unseals all prophecies. Camping made a fool of himself and has retreated into seclusion under a cloud of disgrace that he created for himself. He could not be told and would not accept correction. Pride indeed goes before the fall. We must not create doctrines from our subjective experiences or pretended insights. Camping chose to go into enlightenment thinking by supposing his reasoning alone could set dates that no one knows. His run-amok imagination created mysteries that were not there. We must be fair and honest and not make the Bible say something it really does not. We would not treat any other book this way. The minute someone touts their teaching as the unlocking of new mysteries, we need to wisely vacate the premises.

OTHER ERRORS IN DOCTRINE

There is little doubt that our society is out of control. Our culture lacks a foundation and parameters and as a result becomes increasingly immoral and violent. A stark depiction of our present world can be clearly seen in Romans 1 and it reads like the daily news headlines. Lack of doctrinal clarity, along with uncertainty about what Christians believe, is definitely not helping things. Major doctrinal

error can be easily illustrated when people ignore the A-to-F steps suggested above.

For example, one of the heresies infiltrating the Church at large is what can be called Incarnational Salvation. (It is also sometimes called Incarnational Christology.) The bottom line of this teaching is that in the end everyone is saved whether they know it or not.³² This spurious view is smuggled into the Church in a very subtle way. It loudly affirms the Incarnation of Christ and Christ as the God-Man, which sounds good, but then comes the heretical deviation. In the late 1970s and early 1980s this heresy was being promoted by a Roman Catholic writer named John Pawlikowski, although it dates back much earlier and under different names.

Orthodox Christology was turned on its head with the promotion of Incarnational Salvation. A recapitulation of this teaching could be expressed as: Jesus became a man, thus forever uniting deity with humanity. In some sense then humanity was deified. Jesus' humanity elevates all humanity here and now.

The plain error, however, is that when we speak of a deified humanity in any sense, it can *only* be attributed to Jesus. He and He alone is the God-Man. No one fully understands the mingling of Jesus' two natures into one. We do know, however, that Jesus is Jesus and fallen man is fallen man. In no sense does the deified humanity of Jesus transfer to man. Even Jesus' death and resurrection does not automatically change anyone's fallen humanity, though it does create the possibility and potential of spiritual change for the lost. All of humanity is corrupt flesh which is taken to the grave and not changed until resurrection.

Scripture does not seem to matter to those who promote Incarnational Salvation. In spite of verses to the contrary, what is true of Jesus is somehow true of every human, they say. Every human possesses some measure of deity in his humanity. We are told that Jesus' uniqueness is not a

uniqueness that is totally other and unlike that of any other human being. Every person has some type of elevated humanity by virtue of Jesus elevating human flesh. We are only different from Jesus by degree rather than kind. This intimate connection to Jesus simply by virtue of our humanity renders us linked to Christ eternally and therefore saved.

The problem is that the Bible addresses us as sinners and clearly says that we are lost (Romans 1-3); our flesh is corrupt (1 Corinthians 15); and our fallen humanity does nothing for us except seal our judgment. Jesus alone was without a sin nature, therefore His humanity was far different from ours, both in kind and degree when it mingled with His deity. This in no way denies His true humanity.

The truth is we are really unlike Christ in every way. Salvation comes only from receiving Jesus and trusting in Him for salvation, which gives us the indwelling Holy Spirit. There is certainly nothing in our humanity that would merit heaven. We all have fallen short of God's glory and are separated from God by a chasm so vast and so deep that we need a supernatural deliverance from outside ourselves to render us saved. Pawlikowski has created a terrible heresy by distorting Jesus and what He came to do. Jesus became man to die as a man, not to deify mankind.

Roman Catholic priest Henri Nouwen may have derived his idea from Pawlikowski and others. All can be addressed as being in the Beloved, according to Nouwen. PFO has stated in the past that within evangelicalism Nouwen is the most quoted and least discerned Catholic priest.³³ He is idolized by both Catholics and Protestants alike. That is a disturbing fact because so few know what he really believes and teaches. Nouwen carries the idea of a deified humanity so far that he can assert that homosexuality is a blessing to our nation. Apparently man can do no wrong. Part of that equation for Nouwen is his personal proclivities.

In addition, Nouwen could have easily developed this teaching from

Roman Catholic mystic Thomas Merton. Merton, decades earlier, stated of Jesus:

"He became man and united man's nature to Himself, ... For in becoming man, God became not only Jesus Christ but also *potentially every man and woman that ever existed*. In Christ, God became not only 'this' man, but also, in a broader and more mystical sense, yet no less truly, 'every man.' ... And indeed, if Christ became Man, it is because He wanted to be any man and every man. If we believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God, there should be no one on earth in whom we are not prepared to see, in mystery, the presence of Christ."³⁴

Merton's theology is corrupt and his anthropology horribly distorted.

The seeds for all this were being planted imperceptibly almost a century before with destructive criticism and the liberal emphasis on the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man teaching. God was declared as being everyone's Father and it took people such as Merton, Pawlikowski, and Nouwen to give it a Christian-like veneer. Jesus never taught universal fatherhood and that is clear from just one verse in which Jesus says that the Pharisees were of their father the devil (John 8:44).

We know that theologians and philosophers from the very early centuries of Church history discussed and debated what aspects of human nature Jesus embraced and took upon Himself. However, they did not fashion an automatically applied salvation for all, but potential salvation offered to all. They never confused anthropology and Christology. Emphasizing even one good doctrine to the exclusion of all others always leads to error. The bottom line for all cults is that they simply ignore, deny, or distort some area of doctrine. Be aware that does not have to start out as a huge broad jump, but rather as many tiny steps in a long departure. Christians should desire to have a long obedience in the right direction.

EXCELLING IN DOCTRINE

The Apostle Paul warned:

“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables” (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

The “time” of which Paul spoke came a long time ago. We then, who profess Christ, need to excel in doctrine and in doctrinal studies. There is no doubt that without good doctrine we create a void that error will fill. People who are starving will eat anything. They will rummage through dumpsters for scraps while being within proximity of a good restaurant.

As an example, people who have been rightly taught that faith (Greek: *pistos*) means trust in God and His Word will be stable, secure, and balanced in their faith. Those wrongly taught that faith is a force which they can use to speak their imaginations into existence will be very unstable and go from error to error. Faith is not about manipulation and a metaphysical force unleashed by speech that we can use to refashion reality and get what we want when we want it. That is a pathway to disappointment and confusion, as well as heresy. Faith is a living trust in God and Scripture as its objects of trust. It is dependent upon the will and providence of God. It is a long obedience to Scripture and biblical principles.

Christians need to know how to study doctrine and then study it. As we engage in that study and become more equipped, we then need to speak loud, clear, and with precision to the confusion and spiritual needs of others. The Apostle Peter’s words provide a fitting conclusion:

“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15).

Knowing how is half the battle.

Endnotes:

1. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1976, pg. 1819, note for 1 Timothy 4:1-5, italics in original.
2. Harry Ironside, *Timothy, Titus and Philemon*. Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1964, pg. 95.
3. For more information regarding Todd Bentley, see G. Richard Fisher, “The Pied Piper of Chaos - The Life and Times of Todd Bentley,” *The Quarterly Journal*, January-March 2009, pp. 1, 14-21.
4. Drawn from the Sermon on the Mount by Jesus, Matthew 7:12 is often referred to as the Golden Rule: “Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them.”
5. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1986, pg. 111.
6. Kenyon cited in Douglas Jacobsen, *Thinking in the Spirit*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003, pg. 352.
7. *Ibid.*, pg. 346.
8. Paul Crouch, *Praise the Lord show, “Praise-a-Thon,”* Trinity Broadcasting Network, April 2, 1991, emphasis added.
9. Mark Johnson, “Whatever Happened to Sunday Dinner? The Crucial Role of Biblical Preaching,” *Israel My Glory* magazine, Bellmawr, N.J.: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., September/October 2012, pg. 34.
10. William Evans, *The Great Doctrines of the Bible*. Chicago: The Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1912, pg. 7.
11. See further, Donald Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishers, 1984, pg. 73.
12. This skeptical view is sometime euphemistically labeled “higher criticism” to distinguish it from “lower criticism.” Lower criticism is generally not negatively critical of the Bible, but comprises an effort to understand the text and times of the Scriptures. Even good commentaries can be called “lower criticism,” so we must make that distinction. For an extensive critique of both Old and New Testament higher criticism, see Josh McDowell, *More Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. San Bernardino, Calif.: Campus Crusade for Christ International, 1975.
13. W.L. Pitts in Daniel G. Reid, Editor, *Dictionary of Christianity in America*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990, pg. 393, emphasis added.
14. See further, G. Richard Fisher, “Heaven Is For Real, But the Stories Are Not,” *The Quarterly Journal*, October-December 2011, pg. 2, 22.
15. Everett F. Harrison, Editor, *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1960, pg. 171.
16. David Bercot, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000, pg. 28.
17. *Ibid.*, pg. 29.
18. *Ibid.*, brackets in original.
19. Ian Macpherson, *The Faith Once Delivered*. Milton Keynes, England: Word Books, 1988, pg. 7.
20. For additional biographical material on Blackwood, see Jay E. Adams, *Studies in Preaching*, Volume Three, “The Homiletical Innovations of Andrew W. Blackwood.” Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976.
21. Herbert Lockyer, *All the Doctrines of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1967.
22. Kay Arthur, *How to Study Your Bible*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1994, pg. 129.
23. For more information regarding Rob Bell, see J. Greg Sheryl, “Bell’s Hell - The Universalist Gospel of Rob Bell,” *The Quarterly Journal*, October-December 2011, pp. 1, 12-21.
24. See further, *Thinking in the Spirit*, op. cit., pp. 251-252, 254-255.
25. *All the Doctrines of the Bible*, op. cit., pg. 3.
26. Steven Tsoukalas, *Christian Faith 101: The Basics and Beyond*. Valley Forge, Penna.: Judson Press, 2000, pg. xiv, italic in original.
27. *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, op. cit., pg. 171, brackets in original.
28. Peter Jeffery, *Bitesize Theology*. Auburn, Mass.: Evangelical Press USA, 2000, pg. 13.
29. For more information regarding Bill Gothard, see G. Richard Fisher, “The Basic Life Principles of Bill Gothard - Benevolent Ministry or Bondage Making?,” *The Quarterly Journal*, April-June 1998, pp. 4, 7-12. Also see, Don and Joy Veinot and Ron Henzel, *A Matter of Basic Principles - Bill Gothard and the Christian Life*. Lombard, Ill.: Midwest Christian Outreach, 2002.
30. Ridley cited in John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians*. Edinburgh, England: T. & T. Clark, 1883, pg. 28.
31. H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Prophet Daniel*. New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1960, pg. 233.
32. One could label Incarnational Salvation a “cousin” to Inclusivism, the teaching that while Christ is the only Savior, faith in Him is not necessary for salvation. Main proponents of Inclusivism include Clark Pinnock and John Sanders.
33. For more information regarding Henri Nouwen, see G. Richard Fisher, “Evangelicalism’s Favorite Priest - Is Henri Nouwen a Friend or Foe?,” *The Quarterly Journal*, April-June 2011, pp. 1, 15-21.
34. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1961, pp. 294-295, 296, emphasis added.