

BASIC DOCTRINE – THE FUNDAMENTALS

An Introduction to the Basic Doctrinal Beliefs of the Christian Faith

(Abridged Edition)

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PART 1: WHY STUDY THEOLOGY?

When it comes to the study of theology believers can have various opinions and questions. We might think to ourselves “Why should I want to know something about theology? What use is it to me? I am not a theologian; I am just a regular Christian. I have my Bible to tell me what to believe and the Holy Spirit to lead me in truth. On top of all this, I have heard more than once that theology divides people, so why should I spend my time studying something that can tear believers apart instead of bringing them together? I better leave theology to the Pastor.”

Many believers have legitimate concerns and doubts about the usefulness of such a study, especially when they are so busy with other matters of every day life, and may be left wondering how it would benefit them personally. Shouldn't

they be spending their time on more practical subjects as how to increase their faith or learning to pray better in order to get their prayers answered. Well, to begin with, if you are a believer, no matter what your place is in the body of Christ, whether you know it or not, in some way or another, you are doing theology already.

The word “theology” itself comes from two Greek words, “theos” meaning God and “logos” meaning word or reason. Quite literally, theology means “God-talk” or “God-reasoning.” Thus, in a certain sense, every time you think or talk about God, or answer such questions as who is Christ?; what is salvation?, why do I have to believe the Bible?, you are engaging in theology. In short, theology is the study of God and the great truths of God from which we can derive an understanding of what is correct and appropriate for the Christian faith.

As theologian and author RC Sproul writes “Every Christian is a theologian. We are always engaged in the activity of learning about the things of God. We are not all theologians in the professional or academic sense, but theologians we are, for better or worse.” Thus all believers—every single Christian—has a theology. The important issue is, as Dr. Sproul points out: “do we have a sound theology? Do we embrace true or false doctrine?” If Dr Sproul is correct then it is worthwhile for any follower of Christ to take a little time to know something about great truths of the Bible because knowing something, even if it is a little something, about theology is important for a few of the following reasons.

First, consider the words of the Apostle Paul who was constantly concerned for the spiritual health of the people whom he had led to the Lord. He was especially watchful over the spiritual health of those he charged with overseeing the flock, people like Timothy and Titus. When Paul wants to contrast bad shepherding of the flock with good shepherding, he warns Titus to concentrate on doctrine: *But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine. (Titus 2:1)*¹

Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary defines doctrine as “A body of beliefs about God, man, Christ, the church...considered authoritative and thus worthy of acceptance by all members of the community of faith.” In other words, anytime you are taught, on any subject of the Christian faith, you are receiving doctrine of some kind. The earliest Christians are said to have: *continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. (Acts 2:42-43)*. But in order to have a sound doctrine one must first have a sound theology to base it on.

A proper understanding of theology provides the content for all of the doctrines we believe. Our faith must be grounded in what we know is the will and teaching of God. This is why Jesus insists that God be worshiped in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

¹ All biblical quotations are from the NKJV unless noted otherwise.

Sound doctrine sets the boundaries to our beliefs and practices and serves as a kind of warning signal that when we have crossed the perimeters and are in error; a sign that says “Danger-Do-Not-Enter”. This is why the apostle John uses doctrine to distinguish Christians from non-Christians: *Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. (2 John 9-10)*

When our warning signals are weak due to our failure to learn sound doctrine, we end up making mistakes and disobeying God’s will for us. If we keep going in this direction we may end up like those whom Paul warned Timothy of when he wrote *“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 Tim 4:3-5)*. It is unfortunate that many believers in the past and even today have been led astray over some so-called “higher teaching” that has ignored sound doctrine.

Of course, different denominations within the Christian body have different doctrinal beliefs and these beliefs are often the reason for denominational divisions. But the amazing thing is how much in common these denominations have when it comes to basic doctrine, the foundational truths of the Christian faith. Besides, while it is true that different bodies of believers may hold to divergent views on many things, such as the modes of baptism to the gifts of the

Holy Spirit, we are still exhorted by God to give diligent study to His word in order that we might grow in understanding of what His will is for us. This is why Paul urges the Corinthian Christians: *not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature. (1 Cor 14:20)*

In order to heal the divide that inevitably comes from different bodies of believers, some theologians have found it helpful to distinguish essential and unessential doctrines. What they mean by essential doctrines are the beliefs that are primary and necessary to the Christian faith. These are baseline, foundational doctrines that must be believed, confessed and adhered to in order to be a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven and a member of the family of Christ.

Given what Christians face today in a culture permeated with the influx of new age teaching, moral relativism, pluralism, revival of pagan beliefs, and anti-Christian, pseudo-scientific theories promoted as scientific fact, we need more than ever to familiarize ourselves with God's revealed truth. Since the writing of the book of Acts which records the birth of God's church, Satan has tried to inject erroneous ideas into the heart of the church and dilute the truth. Paul faced a world much like our own, with its pressures on Christians to compromise true teaching, which is why he warns Timothy to: *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Tim 2:15-16)*

We must constantly remind ourselves that the church of today is no more immune to the attacks of Satan than it was in Paul's day. We must labor to know what God has commanded.

Today's society is changing fast. The traditional Judeo-Christian view of life has been all but dismantled as a basis for western culture. At present the church of our Lord Jesus Christ may be facing some troubled times. We see new and extreme positions on human relationships and sexuality being thrust upon society at an alarming rate.

Throughout history, believers have been forced to defend their faith in a world hostile to God's will. The church, as the Bride of Christ, may at some time in the near future be in the same position as the early Christians under the government of Rome. We may all soon be faced with the question of who is Lord: Caesar or Christ? What will believers stand on when they are faced with a civil government that commands them to do what they know, as children of God, they ought not to do? We must pray for the best but be prepared to defend our faith if that time comes.

As Paul reminded the believers of his day who were also destined to face difficult times ahead: *For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us there is one God, the*

Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live. (1 Cor 8:5-6)

The stakes are very high when it comes to the study of God's will for us. The study of theology and doctrine—the teaching—found in the Bible must be done with prayer, reverence and humility. We should take heart because God promises us in His word that He will give us success in drawing near to him.

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. (James 4:8)

If we are to face the future with confidence and joy, we need to know who our God is, what His nature is, what His character is like, what His will is for us, and most of all, how much He loves His children.