

# Is Doctrine a Dirty Word?

Peter Ditzel

Doctrine divides, love unites. You may have heard such bromides as this and the variations on its second half, such as ...Christ unites, ...service unites, ...spirituality unites, ...the Spirit unites, ...practice unites, and so forth. All are down on doctrine as divisive, and divisiveness is seen as bad. Notice this from an emergent church, process theologian writer: "In a world of multiple spiritual possibilities, today's seekers focus on experience rather than doctrine, and rightly so. In their experience, doctrine divides and deadens while experience unites and transforms" ("A Tapestry of Belief and Experience" <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/emergentvillage/2012/02/a-tapestry-of-belief-and-experience/>).

Those who question the importance of doctrine range from the crafty to the innocent. There are those who have an agenda and are consciously working to bring it about. And there are those who offhandedly and innocently wonder if it might not be better to lay doctrine aside so as not to cause rifts among family and friends. But did Jesus see doctrine as a problem? Did He see doctrine as something that can be laid aside? Did He come to do away with doctrine?

## Doctrine is Teaching

"Doctrine/doctrines" appears fifty times in the King James Version New Testament. With the exception of one place (Hebrews 6:1 where it is translated from *logos*), it comes from either of two Greek words, *didachē* and *didaskalia*. *Didaskalia* is derived from *didaskalos*, which means "teacher." *Didachē* comes from the verb *didaskō*, "to teach." Thus, strictly, *didaskalia* refers to the teaching of a teacher, and *didachē* focuses on the content of the teaching. But the distinction is extremely subtle, not always followed, and the meaning is adequately determined by the content. So, for practical purposes, I will treat both words as meaning the same thing—a teaching. When we see "doctrine" we can substitute "teaching."

The first place "doctrine" appears in the New Testament is in Matthew 7:28: "And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine." This is a good place to start our study of this word in the New Testament. We see that the people were astonished at Jesus' doctrine. Why? It was obviously something they had not heard before. We should also notice something else:

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"when Jesus had ended these sayings [*logous*—"words" plural], the people were astonished at his doctrine [singular]." Jesus' doctrine or teaching consists of words, and all Jesus taught comprises one, unified whole that encompasses His teaching. And, in fact, the doctrine or teaching of Christ (and of God), is always referred to in the singular. It is one indivisible body of teaching consisting of many words. I hope you see that this is an important concept.

### **The Importance Jesus Places on Words**

As if countering those who try to put the Spirit in opposition to doctrine and words, Jesus wrote, "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63). There is no separating the Spirit from Jesus' words. If you reject His words, you reject the Spirit. In John 8:47, Jesus pulls no punches regarding those who do not heed His words: "He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God." On the other hand, Jesus says, "If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him" (John 14:23), and, "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (John 15:7).

We are not living in an age when God has given us the right to reject the words of Jesus' doctrine and make things up for ourselves. There is no such age. Jesus said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away" (Luke 21:33). Jesus acknowledges that His doctrine is God's: "My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me" (John 7:16).

I would not want to be among those who are ashamed to stand up for biblical doctrine: "For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he shall come in his own glory, and in his Father's, and of the holy angels" (Luke 9:26). Notice this also: "He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day" (John 12:48). Notice in that verse that he who rejects Jesus' words (plural) will be judged by the word (singular) that Jesus has spoken. Again we see the concept that Jesus' words make up one body or corpus of teaching called His word, His doctrine. To reject any of the words is to reject the entire body, to reject Jesus, and to bring on condemnation. To receive Jesus' teaching is the sign of a true follower: "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed" (John 8:31). It is also an indication that one has

been regenerated with eternal life and has been everlastingly saved: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life" (John 5:24).

Jesus' followers spread the body of Jesus' teachings wherever they went, so that, for example, years after Jesus' death and resurrection, we read in Acts 19:10, "that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks." We can safely say that this is the same body of teaching called the apostles' doctrine in which they continued steadfastly (see Acts 2:42). In fact, 1 Timothy 6:3-5 warns, "If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself." And Romans 6:17 says, "But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you."

### **Does Doctrine Cause Division?**

Notice this:

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love. This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from

the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But ye have not so learned Christ; If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus:

Ephesians 4:11-21

This passage tells us that if we are ignorant, we can be tossed about by the doctrines of men, but the knowledge of Christ, rather than dividing us, unites us. Those who reject this knowledge are as the Gentiles, walking in the vanity of their minds.

This concept is found stated more simply in other passages. In Romans 16:17 Paul writes, "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them." And 2 John 1:9-10 says, "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed." Whenever I see Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses coming to the house, I think of this Scripture. But there are many others who also teach contrary to the doctrine of Christ.

The answer to the question of whether doctrine divides is that doctrine unites brethren but divides between true believers and everyone else. Jesus even said that doctrine divides family members: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:34-37). Yes, doctrine divides even family members, and this division is an inevitable outcome of remaining faithful to Jesus Christ. We can and should do what we can to live peaceably with all men (Romans 12:18). But if we are faithful to the teachings of Jesus Christ, there will be some rift—a non-meeting of minds—with family members who are either unbelievers or who believe differently than we do.

## **"I Have No Doctrine" Is a Doctrine**

I want to quickly point out that the teaching, "I have no doctrine" is self-contradictory. As we have seen, doctrine is teaching. Thus, when someone teaches that he has no doctrine, he is speaking nonsense. Also, all of the second halves of the bromides at the beginning of this article are doctrines. For example, "love unites" is a doctrine. It is impossible to get away from doctrine.

Suppose someone says, "For the sake of unity, let's set aside the divisive doctrines of sovereign grace and free will." Has this person gotten rid of doctrine? No. This person has created a new doctrine. The new doctrine says that sovereign grace and free will are unimportant. Further, unless this person can prove from the Bible that sovereign grace and free will are unimportant to God, then this new doctrine is exposed as a doctrine of men. And, as we have seen in this article, the Bible condemns doctrines of men.

One way or another, we always have doctrine. The question is whether the doctrine is the doctrine of men or the doctrine of God. If it is the doctrine of God, it unites us to fellow believers. If it is the doctrine of men, then the doctrine divides us from the followers of Christ.

At the beginning, I mentioned that there are people who innocently question the importance of doctrine. I hope this article has helped them. I also mentioned those who have an agenda. Their agenda can be seen in a parable.

Little Bob, Sophia, Greg, and Chloe are brilliant at mathematics. They like numbers and drill each other on them and play games with them. Their love for and understanding of numbers and the rules of mathematics unites them. Along comes Todd. Todd doesn't understand or like mathematics. He sees the other four children happily speaking to each other and working in what is essentially a language he doesn't understand. And he becomes envious. So, he comes up with a scheme. "The rules of mathematics divide us," he says. "Let's get rid of them. Instead, let's draw numbers and color them and hang them on the walls right side up and upside down. But let's forget about the divisive rules of mathematics." What has Todd done? Because he did not understand the rules of mathematics, he called them divisive and tried to get rid of them.

In the same way, those who are trying to get rid of doctrine are those who do not understand doctrine. They are blinded to the truth of the

Bible. Therefore, they denigrate the corpus of the teaching of Jesus Christ, the doctrine of the Bible. They say it is unnecessary and divides. What it divides, of course, are those who understand it—because they are the elect children of God—from those who don't. Getting rid of doctrine allows these people to play around with "Christianity" while not having a clue about what Jesus really taught. It hides their ignorance, helps them feel good about themselves, and misleads others. But we must not fall for their pleas to drop doctrine or their claims that doctrine is bad because it divides.

Is doctrine a dirty word? No. It is, in fact, many words, good words, the words of eternal life (John 6:68). It is the body of teaching consisting of the words of Jesus Christ and His followers as found in the inspired Word of God.

*I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.*

*2 Timothy 4:1-4*