

CHAPTER 1.

STUDYING DOCTRINE

Theology. Doctrine. Dogma. To most people these words sound heavy. They make people think of scholars who talk about the Christian faith in an unnecessarily complicated way, using big words and complex concepts. To be sure, pastors should study theology, and seminary students love to dive into the intricacies of doctrine. But does the man who fixes cars from nine to five need to do the same? Or what shall we say about the mom who is working all hours of the day and evening just to stay on top of all the hustle and bustle in her busy family? Do average Joes and Janes need to study doctrine?

Before we answer that particular question, we need to explore another matter. Does studying doctrine tend to drain the joy out of Christian souls? At the seminary where I work, my main task is to teach the courses in doctrine, or dogmatics, as it is sometimes called. I still remember the day that I tried to explain this to a librarian in one of our local public libraries. With one eyebrow raised high above her reading glasses, she asked, “So, you are a professor of dogmatics?” “Yes,” I replied, “that’s correct.” To which she responded, “So you’re actually telling me that you teach people to be stubborn and narrow-minded?”

That humorous conversation with the librarian was a humbling experience, I must admit. At the same time, it taught me something. Many people, both outside and inside the church, associate negative things with words like *doctrine* or *dogmatics*. Or, even if these words do not have

overly negative connotations for them, they certainly do not radiate overwhelmingly positive vibes. If Christians want to renew their zeal, they usually want to sing a solid, upbeat hymn or have a good heart-to-heart with a fellow believer about the challenge of living as God's children in a decidedly secular society. Most of the time, though, doctrine and joy are not found together in the same sentence.

All of this leads us to ask yet a third question. What is the content of our joy? Or, to put it in different words, *why* should we be joyful? Most Christians would point to Christ as the source of their joy, and rightly so. The apostle Paul urges us to “rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil 4:4), and in that context he is referring specifically to the “Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil 3:20). But there is so much to learn about Christ and his eternal Father and the Holy Spirit. The same apostle once prayed that members of the church might grasp, together with all their fellow Christians, how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ (Eph 3:18). When we study doctrine, that is really what we are learning. In an organized way, we are busy exploring the width and the length, as well as the height and the depth, of the love of Christ, which is revealed to us in the holy gospel.

So, now we are set to answer our initial questions. First, do average Joes and Janes need to study doctrine? Yes, because then they will know the love of Christ in deeper detail. Second, does studying doctrine rob Christians of their joy? Quite the opposite. To know the love of Christ better is to grow in joy. Third, what is the content of our joy? It is the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. When we study doctrine, that is precisely what we are learning. *Growing in the Gospel*: this is not only the title of this book but also the blessed benefit of studying doctrine.

WHAT EXACTLY IS DOCTRINE?

In order to define doctrine more precisely, we need to look at two things. First, we need to look more broadly at how studying doctrine relates to other ways of studying the Bible. Second, it is helpful to zero in on that one word *doctrine* and see what it means.

When Christians study the Bible in an organized way, they usually focus on one book of the Bible for a length of time. They may, for example, study the prophecy of Malachi or the gospel of Matthew. Also in personal devotions, people tend to read certain sections of Scripture, at one time working through the books of Moses while at another time going through the letters of Paul. As we study parts of the Bible we are usually looking for certain themes as well. We may ask questions such as: what does Leviticus teach us about sacrifice, or what does Ephesians teach us about the church? But what if we want to know what the entire Bible teaches on a certain topic? For example, what does the whole Bible teach about how people are converted to faith? Or what does the Bible teach about the return of Jesus Christ? When we start asking questions like that, we are studying doctrine. This approach to studying the truth of Scripture is also called *systematic theology* or *dogmatics*.

Of course, asking what the entire Bible teaches on various topics runs the risk of leading to some very long answers. After all, the Bible is a big book. There is a lot to say about each topic the Lord addresses in his Word. However, during the history of the church God has blessed us with some helpful summaries of doctrinal truth. These summaries are generally called *creeds* if they happen to be quite short, or *confessions* if they are a little longer. The ecumenical creeds are the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and Athanasian Creed. They originate from the early centuries of the Christian church but are still recognized and used throughout the world today. A number of valuable confessions as well as teaching summaries called *catechisms* were produced during the Reformation in the sixteenth century. In this book we will refer to the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Canons of Dort (1618–19). Together these three confessions are known as the Three Forms of Unity.

Technically speaking, the study of creeds in a concentrated manner is also called *symbolics*. This term goes back to the early church, when people sometimes referred to creeds as symbols of the faith. Yet whatever term we use, whether creed, confession, catechism, or symbol, they are all simply summaries of what God teaches us in the Bible. They do not

have the same level of authority as God's inspired Word. They also do not add anything to God's Word. We respect them, however, because they have proved to be faithful summaries of Scripture. As mentioned earlier, the apostle Paul says that we should learn about the extent of Christ's love for us together "with all the saints" (Eph 3:18), also those saints who lived in previous centuries. Confessions help us in doing so. Therefore we gladly and gratefully make use of them when we study doctrine.

Yet someone will surely ask, "Does all of this doctrine help us any in our daily life?" People tend to be practical. They want to know how to improve their prayer life. They want advice on how to keep their marriage strong. This desire to apply faith in the nitty-gritty of life is entirely scriptural (Jas 2:17). At the same time, though, sound doctrine and daily life are not two separate compartments, at least not in the apostle Paul's mind. No sooner does he give us a symphony of deep doctrinal truths in the first half of Ephesians 1 than he immediately launches into a paragraph on prayer in the second half of the same chapter. Similarly, his teaching on Christian marriage is all wrapped up together with his doctrine of the church, to the point that he even sums up his instructions to husbands and wives by saying, "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph 5:32). Sound doctrine therefore finds its proper goal in holy living, and holy living is necessarily built on the solid foundation of sound doctrine. You cannot have one without the other.

Next we need to zero in for a moment on that one word *doctrine*. It comes from a Latin word that simply means *teaching*. Teaching is what our Saviour Jesus Christ focused on after he was anointed by the Holy Spirit. He walked throughout Galilee and Judea teaching in the synagogues and temple courts (Matt 4:23; 26:55). To be sure, he also did miraculous healings that attracted crowds from near and far (Matt 4:25). But when those crowds gathered, by the hundreds and even thousands, our Saviour seized those opportunities to teach (Matt 5:1–2). Also, just before he returned to his Father in heaven, Jesus Christ charged his disciples to concentrate on doctrine when he said, "Go therefore and make

disciples [that is, students] of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching* [there is the word again] them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19–20). Since our ascended Lord concentrated so much of his time on teaching doctrine while he was here on this earth, we, as his pupils, will gladly learn everything he has to teach us.

While we are on the topic of defining words more carefully, it is good to be more precise about another term that we have already encountered: *dogma*. You remember the librarian who was perplexed as to why a professor of dogmatics would teach people to be narrow-minded. This may come as a surprise to some, but in the Bible the word *dogma* has more to do with being broad-minded than narrow-minded. Shortly after our Lord ascended into heaven, the church wrestled with questions such as, “Do those who believe in Christ have to follow the Old Testament laws concerning clean and unclean food?” Eventually the apostles and the elders gathered in Jerusalem. Together they discussed this issue carefully and took some official decisions. All of this is recorded in Acts 15.

The leaders in the church took the time to come together because they did not want such sensitive questions to be answered merely on the basis of one man’s personal opinion. They sought after a much broader consensus. Not only that, but when they had reached a consensus, they wrote up a letter explaining matters and sent a delegation to communicate the decisions to the churches (Acts 15:22–35). In the original Greek language these communal decisions are called *dogmas*. In Acts 16:4 we read: “As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the *decisions* that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem.” So, in the Bible the word *dogma* refers to explanations of God’s truth, revealed in Scripture and agreed upon in the church—not just narrow personal opinions. Moreover, the Holy Spirit informs us that these dogmas certainly did not dampen the joy of the Christians but, instead, strengthened them in their faith (Acts 16:5).

There is always a temptation for different individuals or groups of people to run off in different directions: one teaching one thing and the other teaching a different thing. But since we serve *one* Lord, who has given us *one* Bible, we must resist the temptation to allow all kinds of different contradictory teachings in the church. Patiently, yet persistently, the church needs to aim for more and more unity and consistency in doctrine.

WHERE DOES DOCTRINE COME FROM?

If we are going to grow in our understanding of sound doctrine, we need to ask, “Where do we go to find it?” In short, the answer is that we must go to God’s Word, the Bible. In 2 Timothy 3:16 the apostle Paul writes, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” It is worthwhile noting that of all the things for which Scripture is useful, teaching is the first one on the list.

Now most Christians will agree that we must turn to Scripture as the source of our teaching. But will Scripture be the sole source of our doctrine, or will there be other sources in addition to Scripture? That is a very important question.

The Roman Catholic Church promotes two sources: the written Scripture *plus* the oral tradition. One of its major ecclesiastical assemblies, the Council of Trent (1545–63), even declared officially that Rome accepts both Scripture and tradition with “an equal affection of piety and reverence.”¹ In 1965, at another large ecclesiastical gathering called Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church reaffirmed this teaching.

Then there are also those who build their theology on the twin pillars of divine revelation *plus* human philosophy. You can understand how this might happen. Philosophy sometimes deals with questions about God. Who is God? How can we know about him? Can we prove that God really exists? Philosophy also deals with ethical questions. How do we determine what is morally right and wrong? Is there such a thing as the

1. Council of Trent, Session IV, April 8, 1546, “Decree concerning the canonical Scriptures.”

highest good? Since Scripture and philosophy both address some similar questions, it is easy to see how people might combine them as they seek for answers. We must remember, however, that philosophy comes from below, from human reason, while Scripture comes from above, from God. In this way they are fundamentally different (1 Cor 1:20–25; 2:1–16). (We will come back to this in more detail in chapter 4.)

But even if we are not particularly interested in the decrees of Rome or the deliberations of philosophers, most of us are still tempted to use a more subtle two-source approach in theology. For lack of a better term, this approach might be called Scripture *plus* my desires. The apostle Paul warns against this in 2 Timothy 4:1–5 when he speaks about itching ears (v. 3). Different people have different desires. Sick people want to be healed. Poor people want to be richer. Sad people want to be happy. Lonely people want to be popular. The desires may be different, but one thing is the same: desire is an internal force to be reckoned with. It is like an itching ear that we simply *must* scratch. Without a doubt there are more than enough teachers, even those who use the name of Christ, who are very skilled at scratching people’s itching ears. They know just what to say and how to say it. If people are itching to be rich, these teachers will tell them how they can get rich. If someone is itching to be healed, these teachers will have a cure.

Be careful, warns the apostle Paul. Why are people running to these teachers? Is it simply because they are skilful at scratching an itch? What about the doctrine, that is, the teaching, of these teachers? Is it sound? This is what the apostle Paul draws to our attention. There are teachers who will turn people’s ears away from the truth and fill them with empty myths and false hopes instead (2 Tim 4:4). However, the church that is faithful must focus on “sound teaching” (2 Tim 4:3).

Summing up, there are people who add human tradition to God’s holy Word. Others attach human reason. Still others include their own desires as a source of their theology. However, when we study doctrine, it must not be Scripture *plus* anything else. Why? Simply put, because neither tradition, nor philosophy, nor our own desires ever redeemed anyone

from a single sin, let alone from slavery to sin. The LORD, he *alone*, is our Redeemer (Isa 44:6). Therefore he *alone* is the one who reveals the way of salvation, and Scripture *alone* is God-breathed, that is, inspired (2 Tim 3:16). Therefore the one source of sound doctrine is the God-breathed Scripture—*all* of it!

WHY BOTHER WITH DOCTRINE?

Even if we use the correct source for our theology, there is still the matter of motivation. Is sound doctrine something that stirs up our enthusiasm?

The apostle Paul was clearly passionate about teaching the gospel correctly. When the church at Galatia was beginning to embrace unsound doctrine, he was deeply concerned and exclaimed, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one” (Gal 1:6–7). Later he added, “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” (3:1). Those are hardly indifferent or merely academic words.

Yet why is the Apostle Paul so passionate about having *correct* teaching in the churches? In the first place, as he writes in 1 Timothy 6:3, sound doctrine includes “the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In other words, sound doctrine is not ours to do with as we please. It belongs to, and it focuses upon, Jesus Christ, who is our majestic and merciful Saviour. As his servants we are responsible for taking good care of that precious doctrine. If we are not passionate about protecting the pure teachings of our Master, then we are wicked and lazy servants (Matt 25:26).

There is another aspect of sound doctrine that should prevent us from ever becoming lethargic about it. The apostle Paul reminds Timothy that “sound doctrine” is something that conforms to “the gospel of the glory of the blessed God” (1 Tim 1:10–11). This glorious gospel is the “power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). This gospel announces that in Christ we are freed from slavery to sin and Satan! And therefore the apostle writes: “Do not submit again to a yoke of slavery”

(Gal 5:1); do not let yourselves be trapped by “words of eloquent wisdom” that empty the cross of Christ of its power (1 Cor 1:17).

In short, we should be passionate about learning sound doctrine because without it we will quickly be re-enslaved under the power of sin and the deceit of Satan. With every fibre of our being we want to avoid that misery.

HOW SHOULD WE STUDY DOCTRINE?

To begin with, all teachers and students of doctrine should be filled with humility. After the LORD redeemed his people from Egypt and brought them into the Promised Land, they began to turn away from him when their hearts became proud (Deut 8:14). Furthermore, it is striking how often Scripture associates false teachers with conceit, pride, and boastful words (Gal 6:13; 1 Tim 6:3–4; 2 Pet 2:18; Jude 16; Rev 13:5). Since we are servants of our Lord Jesus Christ, we must conduct ourselves in exactly that way, as servants who have no basis for boasting in themselves.

Indeed, instead of boasting, servants should focus on serving. If we grow in the doctrine of the gospel ourselves, we can help dish up its nourishing truths to others. Now you may wonder why we are comparing doctrine to food. The answer is this. In his letters to Timothy and Titus, the apostle Paul speaks about sound doctrine or instruction no fewer than eight times (1 Tim 1:10; 6:3; 2 Tim 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:9; 1:13; 2:1, 8). The word *sound* has to do with being healthy. When we eat and digest the food of healthy doctrinal teaching, we ourselves will be spiritually healthy and strong. If, however, we eat spiritual food that is partially or completely rotten due to false teachings, we will become spiritually sick and weak.

Healthy food must also be properly prepared. The spiritual menu must be considered carefully. Over the long term, meals must be balanced so that the church, which is God’s household (1 Tim 3:15), will be well nourished. If there is too much emphasis on God the Spirit and not enough on God the Son, or the other way around, then the family of God will be

malnourished. If there is too much emphasis on how Christians should live and not enough on what Christ has done for us, or the other way around, God's household will not receive all the nutrients that it needs.

Finally, thinking about doctrine as nourishment helps us see how it is connected to daily living. After all, why do we eat? We eat to gain strength and energy to live and work. Likewise we digest healthy doctrine so that we can stand up, be active, and live holy lives (1 Tim 1:10; 6:3; Titus 1:8; 2:1, 8).

WHAT IS THE GOAL?

In any given task it is necessary to keep an eye firmly focused on the end goal. Those who do not know their final destination tend to get lost somewhere along the way.

This is also true in studying doctrine. Our goal is not to build a big and impressive intellectual palace to which the admiring crowds will flock. In fact, in the end it is not about a building that we construct; it is about a Bride whom Christ has chosen in his love (Eph 5:25–26, 29–30). Right now, the beauty of Christ's bride, the church, is not always so obvious. She still has many blemishes, that is, sins. She still has to mature, that is, to grow in understanding. But one day the church will appear as the Bride of Christ, beautifully dressed for her husband (Rev 21:2). Learning sound doctrine is all part of preparing Christ's Bride for her wedding day. We need to keep that goal in our minds and in our hearts.

Still, there is an even greater goal than that. Since Christ "has ransomed us, body and soul, from all our sins, not with silver or gold but with His precious blood" (LD 13), we call him our Lord, that is, our majestic and merciful Master. Therefore we, as his redeemed servants, strive to remain faithful to him in everything. In this way the Son who redeemed us, the Spirit who sanctifies us, and the Father who created us will receive all the honour and glory. Ultimately, *that* is what studying sound doctrine is all about.

Suggested Readings: 1 Corinthians 2; 2 Timothy 4:1–5

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. What does the word *doctrine* mean? What does the word *dogma* mean? Read Titus 2:1–10, which gives a description of “sound doctrine” applied in the lives of different age groups and genders. Why would we associate most of the things mentioned in that passage with ethics rather than with doctrine? When and how did the meaning of the word *doctrine* change to exclude, generally speaking, matters pertaining to a godly lifestyle? How can we recapture the full biblical sense of this term?
2. Some people build their theology on a two-fold foundation. Give some examples from this chapter showing how this happens. Can you think of one or two more, beyond those mentioned in this chapter?
3. Why was the apostle Paul so passionate about making sure churches did not deviate from sound doctrine?
4. What are the two main goals in studying doctrine?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. If a fellow Christian is not interested in studying doctrine carefully, how could you motivate such a person to become more enthusiastic about digging deeper into the truths of the gospel?
2. At other times the problem is not so much that Christians are uninterested in doctrine but rather that they feel intimidated by it since there are some complex issues at stake. For example, studying the doctrine of the Trinity can quickly go over people’s heads. What can we do to reduce the intimidation factor? How does a document like the Heidelberg Catechism help in this? (See LD 8 concerning Trinity.) What other aids can you think of?
3. In your own experience in the church, have you noticed examples of unbalanced doctrinal teaching? Which imbalances have you noticed? How could you work in a positive and Christian manner in order to improve the teaching being given and received?
4. Since doctrine is ultimately meant to lead us to doxology, or

praising God, how can this be brought into sharper focus both in your own personal life and within God's household as a whole?

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