

Doctrine and Life

“Not doctrine, but the Lord”

When making public profession of faith, the first question you are to answer is: "Do you wholeheartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confession and taught here in this Christian church?"

In this first question the *doctrine* is referred to repeatedly. There are people who are offended by a question like this. They think that "doctrine" is not of great importance at all. The main thing, they say, is that you believe in Jesus Christ. "Not doctrine, but the Lord" is their slogan.

But, in saying this, an antithesis is created which is not really there. Now, people very often have a wrong idea about "doctrine". Often they have the idea that doctrine is nothing but a dry system of abstract truths and theoretical hairsplitting. Thus they make a caricature of what it says in the first question.

When it speaks there of "the doctrine of the Word of God", a theoretical system is not meant, but the teaching, the instruction of the gospel.

Let me give a few examples. In the first chapter of the Gospel according to Mark we are told that the Lord Jesus taught in the synagogue at Capernaum as one having authority, and not as the scribes. The teaching of Christ was not at all full of the clever hair-splitting and human opinions that the scribes put forth, but it was teaching with *authority* (Mark 1:27). It was the glad tidings that God's salvation had come, and that the prophecy of the acceptable year of the Lord was fulfilled. (Luke 4:21)

The Lord Jesus testifies of himself: "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me. If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority." (John 7:16,17) In other words, the Saviour says: in teaching we do not deal with things we have thought up, but with matters that are revealed by God.

It is said of the young Pentecostal congregation that they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching. (Acts 2:42)

That teaching is not abstract, but the very instruction which they themselves had received from the Saviour: redemption through him.

The apostles especially emphasize that one may not teach anything other than the teaching (doctrine) of the gospel, the teaching of Christ. Paul writes to the Galatians:

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. (Galatians 1:8,9)

And John writes in his second letter:

Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting. (2 John 9,10)

So anyone who teaches a different doctrine than the Gospel, the doctrine of Christ and of the apostles, puts himself under God's curse. Anyone who goes further than the revealed doctrine, who adds his own thoughts and opinions, may not be accepted as a teacher, but must be shown out the door.

And so "doctrine" and the "Lord" are not opposites at all. The doctrine mentioned in the first confession question is exactly the teaching of the Lord!

Presumptuous?

We are concerned, then, with the doctrine included in the Scriptures: in the entire Bible, the Old and New Testament. The confessions are also mentioned in the same question, that they are summaries of the doctrine of the Word of God.

The question has been asked: isn't that really rather presumptuous?

Should we mention the confessions and the Bible in one breath? Then people say: the Bible is God's Word, but the confessions are a human product! Surely one cannot put those two on the same level? Then a

quick judgment is made. This is confessionalism, overrating of the confessions. This is how the church binds people's consciences. Surely we must not bind ourselves to anything but God's own Word?

But we must not judge too hastily. We speak of confessionalism only when the confessions do not serve and carry out the Word of God, but have instead taken the place of the Word, or become its competitor. Then the Word of God is pushed aside and the confessions have been put in its place.

However, it is an entirely different matter when the main points of Scriptural doctrine have been summarized in the confessions. Then the confessions lead to the Scriptures and aim to emphasize the Scriptures.

The confessions only give a compact rendering of several important points of the doctrine revealed in the Word of God.

In the confessions the church indicates what she has read in the Word of God throughout the ages. And so the confessions give nothing more than a summarizing overview of the doctrine of the Scriptures.

In saying therefore, that the doctrine of the Word of God is summarized in the confessions, we are not being presumptuous or arrogant.

Outdated?

Well, one may hear, that's all fine and dandy, but these confessions only really tell us how people *used* to read and understand God's Word *in the past*.

People may accept the fact that their forefathers were willing to give their all for the sake of these confessions. They'll even allow that we should muster the same enthusiasm as those fathers. But next they question if they are bound to the same contents of faith as their forefathers. After all, we now live in a different age.

But this reasoning is wrong. In the confessions of the church, which reflect and summarize the doctrine of the Scriptures, we, as children of a different age, do not just have antiquated theology, or a school of thought which seems strange and alien to us. No, it is that faith substance which we must keep in all purity.

When Jude in his short letter urges us to contend for the faith that was entrusted to the saints (Jude 3), he means specifically the substance

of faith. The form may change. It is conceivable that the language of a confession may have to be adjusted to the common language of a different age. Certain expressions may become obsolete and be more clearly rendered by different ones. Therefore it is a good thing that in these days efforts have been made to translate the confessions into contemporary English.

However this does not change the *contents*. With this doctrine according to the Scriptures, the church fathers refused to bow to the gods of their age. The martyrs made their profession in the face of death saying: anyone who departs from this doctrine of salvation is a heretic. He separates himself from the communion of saints.

That is why, in making profession of faith, you join the church of all ages. You don't join an outdated faith, but you know yourself incorporated in God's entire church, in heaven above and on earth below.

You don't say: this is my personal opinion about faith. No, you say: I agree with the substance of the faith of the whole church, from both early and later times. I personally confess this but the substance of the faith is communal. Now I myself may be included in the great cloud of witnesses, and my personal testimony is one with the testimony of God's church through the ages.

Lifestyle more important than doctrine?

Many ask the question: is doctrine all that important? Isn't the way you live really all that is important? Some state it very strongly: doctrine is nothing, living it is everything. Profession in itself does not mean anything; it is the application in life that counts! In this way a distinct antithesis between doctrine and life is created.

Of course it is possible that there are people who are, according to James, hearers of the Word only, and not doers. But in that case, says James, we only delude ourselves. (James 1:22) No, you must do one as well as the other. You must listen to the Word of God, and live accordingly.

That is also the way it is with doctrine and life. Anyone who turns that into an antithesis acts as if the doctrine is something we created, something that is not really a part of life. But doctrine is clearly expounded in the living Word of God. As we *teach*, so we shall also

live. The one must be in agreement with the other. Then if there are people whose way of life is not in agreement with the doctrine they confess, we do not say: "The *doctrine* is wrong." No, then we must say: "Those *people* are wrong." They don't live according to the doctrine. They are not real doers of the Word.

The apostle Paul writes to Titus, his spiritual son, that life must be the adornment of the doctrine: slaves must be "submissive to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our savior attractive." (Titus 2:9,10, NIV1984) By living in submission the slaves adorn the *doctrine* as an illustration. This image is especially applicable in the case of slaves, simple subordinates who possess nothing, yet make their lives an adornment of doctrine!

And so life must be an illustration of that which we teach. It is now also clear that in no way is there an antithesis. One must be in accordance with the other, life and doctrine must overlap and be in agreement with each other.

Therefore it is not lifestyle that is *more important than* doctrine. Neither is lifestyle *over against* doctrine. But lifestyle is an adornment of doctrine – life that puts doctrine into practice.

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