

Doctrines or Doctrine?

For many years I have been aware that “doctrines” (the plural form) never appears in the Bible except in a bad sense. This phenomenon never troubled me much until I came into fellowship with a sizeable number of people who made much use of the term “Doctrines of Grace”. This has reference to the so-called Five Points of Calvinism, which is really the five-point repudiation of the Arminian Remonstrance in the Synod of Dort. Many people who hold the truth of an absolutely sovereign God, but whose ecclesiastical affiliation does not descend from the Protestant Reformation, dislike the term “Calvinism”. They, nevertheless, wish to distinguish themselves from the man-centered apostasy that reigns and characterizes the teaching and ministry of most churches today. To them, these five points seem to be a good flag to sail under, and, not being ecclesiastical Calvinists, they seize upon the term “Doctrines of Grace”.

I can remember feeling a niggling irritation or discomfort when people in search of a church, or attempting to evaluate a church or ministry, would invariably say, “We are looking for a church which holds the “Doctrines of Grace”, or, “do they teach the Doctrines of Grace”? This seemed to be the first, main, and many times, the only criterion.

Part of my irritation could be my immediate objection to this test being the sole qualification as to the worthiness of a ministry. I have learned that these five points are fiercely held and contended for sometimes where Christ does not reign in hearts, Christian grace and love are not exhibited, and spiritual power is non-existent. Also, it is not only possible, but certainly true, that the essence of truth articulated in these five points may be employed and taught in a ministry that has never associated what the Bible teaches with the Synod of Dort. After all, was not the gospel true, pure, clear and powerful before 1618?

But I think I may have been preconditioned with a distaste for the word “doctrine” when a small boy. My parents became involved in a new denomination that had its early buddings in the 1920s and 1930s. These people were principally from Baptist and Methodist backgrounds and still held a high view of the triune God. A segment of that movement splintered off and became a separate denomination. However, they revived the heresy of Sabellius, which taught that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were in reality only one person and simply appeared in different modes at different times. The two groups tried for a number of years to hold common fellowship, since most of their other beliefs were the same. But it never could be, because, as I often heard my father disgustedly say, “They always have to bring up *that doctrine.*” In my young mind, doctrine became an evil thing that made Christian fellowship difficult, if not impossible. My concept of doctrine itself, at this point, is significant. To me, it meant a particular narrow spectrum of belief, a *thing* believed that stood alone in itself, not necessarily flowing out of the whole of Christianity. It was not the truth in its whole unbroken entirety, but a particular view about a particular thing. I think that view of doctrine, though a faulty one, is the prevalent view today.

My discomfort with the term “Doctrines of Grace” was also augmented by associating it with those Scripture passages that always use “doctrines” in a bad sense. The phrase itself seemed faulted on its face from the outset. I think the time has come to examine if that be true, and if true, why.

Delineations

The words “doctrine/doctrines” occur 49 times in the New Testament. With only one exception, they are translated from a word form essentially meaning “teaching”. Twenty-nine times the Greek *didache* is used, indicating the act of teaching. Nineteen times, *didaskalia* (the thing taught) is employed. The one exception is in Hebrews 6:1, where *logos* (word) is used.

The word appears in the plural only five times. Three times it is used as “doctrines of men”, once as “doctrines of demons”, and once as “various and strange doctrines”. It is also used in the bad sense in the singular six times. “Winds of doctrine” in Ephesians 4:14, “doctrine of the Pharisees and Saducees” in Matthew 16:12, and “doctrine of Baalim, of the Nicolaitans and of Jezebel” in Revelation 2:14-15, 24.

Every place the word is used in the good sense, it appears in the singular. We are exhorted, for example, toward *God’s* doctrine in Titus 2:10 and 1 Timothy 6:1, *the* doctrine in 1 Timothy 4:16, *Paul’s* doctrine in 2 Timothy 3:10, and the *apostles’* doctrine in Acts 2:42 and 5:28. A dozen times the word is used of *Christ’s* doctrine.

Clearly, the term is used properly to designate a whole, complete and unified body of teaching – the sum total of all that God would have us to know, the complete teaching of Christ, and consequently, that of His disciples and His church. That is the only doctrine which is commended in the Bible. It is what we are exhorted to seek after, cleave to, contend for, and preach.

It is significant that when Christ preached, He simply opened His mouth and taught. He did not begin by saying, “Now I am going to take up the doctrine of this or that.” He just plowed right into the issues of life and death, sin and righteousness, God and men, time and eternity. The astounding impression His preaching made was not from the fine art of homiletical oratory, but the stunning force of the truth He set forth and the authoritative power with which He spoke. His discourses are not broken down into neat little categories that stand apart by themselves in independent units. Apostolic teaching and letters bear the same homogeneous characteristics. Certainly different subjects are taken up, but they flow naturally from one to the other, or in some cases, where response is being made to certain inquiries, they begin by stating the question and then proceed with the answer. Appeal is made to the Scriptures, to the attributes and ways of God, but never to a particular section of truth, or a dogma from a creed identified as a separate doctrine. *A* doctrine is never in view. It is always *the* doctrine. Such is the form of sound doctrine first delivered to the saints.

In contrast, men now find it expedient to separate the whole body of truth into various independent parts and call each part a doctrine. The difference is analogous to that of an apple and an orange. In the Bible, "doctrine" is an apple, one single, undivided whole. Today we have an orange made up of "doctrines", segments which may be peeled off and stand alone. And we erroneously call each segment an orange, and any assembled number of them, oranges!

### Explanations

How and why has this come about? We will first consider some of the more honorable causes of this development, and then the more odious ones, together with liabilities incurred by both.

Early in the church's history, as false teachers arose, it was deemed expedient by prominent churchmen to have some objective standards by which heretics could be identified and discredited. The Saviour's yardstick, "by their fruits you shall know them", did not seem to be adequate, for the church was early on corrupted with sin and diluted with graceless professors. Grace had already been turned into lawlessness and licentious living. "Saved Sinners" gained a beachhead, and it seemed that the fruit of saints and that of sinners had not sufficient contrast. Also, it was, and it is yet true, that a false teacher may lead an exemplary lifestyle, and even true Christians may be in error on some points. Although Christ could have easily said, "by their doctrines you shall know them", He did not. We are, rather, urged to the arduous, but infinitely rewarding work of searching the Scriptures to determine the validity of teaching and thereby exercising our spiritual senses to "discern good and evil" (Hebrews 5:14). Conscientious bishops, unwilling to believe in the individual's competence to make these distinctions, felt it their responsibility to do it for them.

If we are to discredit what a man is teaching, we must affirm a right teaching by which it may be judged. False teachers never teach a whole body of lies. They teach much truth, whereby they may gain respectability and acceptance, then weave the lies into the system. Thus, when we go about to establish the portion of truth whereby the lie may be exposed, we are obliged to separate that portion, buttress and support it so that it becomes a defensible tenet. Having done that, we call it a "doctrine". Church councils and synods have given us a flood of such doctrines. Doctrines of the church, its constituency, its government, its order, its propagation. Doctrines of God, of the Trinity, of sacraments, of baptism, of communion. Doctrines of salvation, of the atonement, of justification, of sanctification. Doctrines of last things, of judgment, of the resurrection, of eternal punishment. The lists and subdivisions of these various doctrines are endless.

Another reason for formulating various doctrines is to facilitate human understanding. We are uncomfortable with mystery, and seek to analyze the teaching of Christ and the Apostles and break it down into manageable portions. This device is especially prominent in Christian writings. These chunks of truth are first pulled out of their Spirit-inspired settings in the Scriptures and molded into a proposition that can be stated separately. Various other Scriptures, information and logic are then brought to bear upon the proposition, so that it becomes adequately established and defended so as to become a dogma which we can henceforth call a doctrine. We then take the aggregate of all these derived and isolated doctrines and put them back together again as a logical system. The product is systematic theology.

It cannot be denied that to human reason and fleshy understanding, systematic theology is far more lucid and manageable than the Bible. *But the implications of that very statement are fearful.*

### Implications

Some questions: Is systematic theology better than Biblical theology? Is man's arrangement of truth superior to God's? Is this human understanding that we gain from systematics superior to spiritual enlightenment on the Bible itself? Have we lost anything by tearing truth out of its spiritual setting and putting it into an intellectual one? Have we reduced infinitely transcendent truth to finite and fallible human reason?

Lest someone think I am out of line with these questions, let me repeat some chilling statements I have just read from a recent publication (Christ Schlect, *Credenda/Agenda*, Moscow Idaho, Vol. 4, No. 5), advocating men's creeds against the creed of "**only the Bible**". "**First, there are many doctrines which are as important as Scripture**". Shades of Rome! "**Because it is limited and imprecise in what it addresses, the minimalistic creed discussed above** (Believe only what the Bible teaches) **is almost worthless.**" What God gave us to believe is almost worthless? "**It provides no basis for doctrinal unity in the church.**" Human creeds gave us more unity than God gave the early church? "**If the church's doctrine is no more specific than this,**" (the Bible) **then it will proclaim a message that is confusing and imprecise.**" The Holy Spirit confusing and imprecise? "**The audience won't be impressed.**" It seems to me that the audience at Pentecost was quite impressed. And the Bible has made a more profound impression on the world than all the writings and reasonings and preachings of all men combined.

I will leave it to my readers to ponder these questions. I think they are eminently worthy of consideration.

### Observations

The science and art of homiletics is considerably augmented by the separation of various doctrines, especially in the preparation of sermons. Most preachers are not comfortable with extemporary preaching. Nor are they willing to invest the time and labor necessary to write out their sermons in full. Outlines with notes seem to offer the best median between these two methods. They relieve one of the painstaking labor of composing a complete manuscript, yet deliver from the horror of losing the chain of thought, becoming confused, nonplussed and speechless during delivery.

Outline preparation demands that subject matter be broken down into separate statements and propositions that may be arranged under headings and sub-headings. The preacher then has a roadmap for his discourse to which he may refer from time to time as he guides his hearers' train of thought to the sermon's objective and conclusion. Although these headings and sub-headings are not necessarily, or even usually, statements of particular doctrines, the same mentality behind doctrinal divisions drive this method.

This is almost universally consented to be good preaching. But it is yet to be demonstrated that good homiletics is necessary to the power of God. We certainly are not suggesting that disorderly and incoherent preaching is to be desired, or even tolerated.

Truth must be lucid, and presented in an orderly, cohesive fashion. But if 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 means anything at all, it means that a master of logic and persuasive powers deliberately shunned these devices, that Christian faith might rest in nothing less than powerful, Holy Spirit persuasion.

Another reason for the development and employment of separate doctrines is the idea that a deeper impression may be made upon the hearer's mind if the subject matter is more narrowly defined. We may more effectively instruct a person, for example, on the doctrine of progressive sanctification if his mind isn't detracted and diluted with thoughts on justification by faith. While this may be true, it is also true that the former flows naturally out of the latter. The two are rarely stated separately in Scripture, and never separated in experience. Such topical isolation may be effective in creating a deeper impression about a particular dogma, to the detriment of that truth's place in the wholeness of divine revelation.

Separate doctrines allow the man who does not have much to say, to say much about much that does not matter much in practical Christian living. Take, for example, the fine distinctions between the doctrines of justification, conversion, forgiveness, reconciliation, and adoption. The initial application of Christ's redemption of the sinner is split into narrowly defined benefits, compared and contrasted and exhaustively explored. Five separate volumes may be written on these five doctrines. One must be charitable with such works, but we are tempted to suspect the man of being more enamored with his analytical expertise than with the wonder and glory of Christ saving sinners.

### **Aberrations**

Now we come to the less wholesome aspects of "doctrines". We have already observed the desirability, if not the necessity, of distinguishing ourselves from that segment of Christendom that has fallen into apostasy. Much, if not most, of that which calls itself "Christian" is not worthy of the name. I do not think, however, as some do, that we should abandon the name "Christian" for a more doctrinally defined name such as "Calvinist". The Name of Christ will not be rescued by the name of Calvin. Supplant the Name of our Saviour and King, the Author and Finisher of our faith, our living God, with that of a dead Reformer? Perish the thought! We must rather contend for true and pure Christianity. We must doggedly hold the true faith, exhibit and demonstrate it, continually refusing the Christ-deniers right to His Name. It is far, far, far better to try to determine if a person is a Christian than to determine if he is a Calvinist, or Reformed, or Conservative, or Covenantal, or Fundamental, or any other title defined by subscription to certain doctrines. Fellowship with a Christian of another doctrinal stripe may require more work and greater grace, but it will be impossible with a non-Christian with whom we may be, nevertheless, in theological agreement.

In whose eyes do we wish to distinguish ourselves? If it is in God's eyes, then let us remind ourselves that God, having already read our hearts, is not impressed with our creed. If we wish to gain credibility and receive a hearing from sinners, we should consider that the power and efficiency of our witness is not so much in our distinctive *doctrines* as it is in our *doctrine* and our *life*. Sinners may not be able to distinguish the fine points of theology, but they can sense the contrast between Christ and the world, flesh and Spirit, grace and works, gracious condescension and forbearance, and militant, intolerant combativeness.

Far too often, I fear, we use doctrines to pridefully distinguish ourselves among ourselves; that is, Christians among Christians. We use them to garner approval from those of our particular sect. We also use them to separate ourselves from those who do not hold our particular views. We necessarily believe our views to be superior to those of differing Christians, else we would not hold them. And when we are pointing out the difference between ourselves and others, we do not call attention to inferiorities, but to our perceived superiorities. We are thankful that we are not as other men.

This is especially apparent when a doctrinally separated group tends to rant and harp on its distinctive doctrines to the neglect of the whole counsel of God. Wesleyan and holiness sects make much of their doctrines of Perfectionism, of Free Will, and of Falling from Grace. Churches of Christ hammer away on their doctrines of Baptismal Regeneration and other works for salvation. Seventh Day Adventists are known for their doctrines of Saturday Sabbath-keeping, their peculiar views of the *kenosis*, and their aberrant doctrine of hell. Reformed/Reconstructionists are so committed to their agenda of imposing Old Covenant law upon society in order to bring in an earthly Millennium, you rarely hear them preach any gospel at all. Fundamentalists wear to a frazzle the doctrines of Biblical inerrancy, Virgin Birth, Deity of Christ and Premillennialism. Fervent Dispensationalists beat the drums of Second Coming, Rapture, Tribulation, Anti-Christ, Mark of the Beast and other such profitless speculation. Keswick and other Deeper Life enthusiasts must interpret every Scripture as some expression of their doctrines of Second Blessing, Carnal and Spiritual Christians. Pentecostals, of course, can see nothing in the Word of God except supernatural phenomena, with special emphasis on speaking in tongues and bodily healing.

Some may object that I am being overly generous to consider some of the above groups to be Christian, but I doubt that many would be rash enough to deny that Christians may be found in any and all of them. Some of the doctrines mentioned above are less worthy than others, and some are downright false. But when even the purest and most vital portions of truth are harped on and emphasized to the neglect of others, the health of the church suffers.

### **Deprivations**

First the children are deprived of bread, the whole counsel of God. They are left ignorant of truth that might rescue them from bondage to the world, the flesh and the devil. They are also left vulnerable to well-informed false teachers, the plentiful charlatans infesting Zion who know how to take advantage of the gaps and holes in the theology of the less informed. Vast areas of sin, pride, unbelief, worldliness and demonic fleshiness lie undisturbed because only a narrow spectrum of doctrines (which we are proud to hold!) are ever broached. Our infantile carnality is thus obvious to everyone except us. And we wonder why we make no impact on the world!

Secondly, these, our pet doctrines, allow the devil to set Christian brothers and sisters *against* one another instead of *for* one another. Is that not as incredible as it is horrendous? What a perennial scandal and curse upon Christians! We will ignore the common Holy Spirit within us, our identical fervent love and devotion to the Saviour, the fact that we have a common formidable foe

(the devil and his works), our common commission to evangelize and make *Christian* disciples of all men. We will even ignore that 99% of doctrinal agreement we have, just to fight over the 1% about which we disagree. We see Christians outside our particular camp, not so much as fellow soldiers for Christ, but enemies and competitors. We treat them as adversaries and false teachers against whom we must wage battle and do all we can to discredit and expose.

One often misused passage of Scripture may serve us well here. “*Now I beseech you brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them*” (Romans 16:17). This is used to disfellowship a person who is transgressing the prescribed orthodox creedal boundaries. It is as if the Bible had said, “Mark and avoid them who teach a doctrine different from the ones you have been taught.” But that is not what is being said here. It is the *divisions and offenses* that are contrary to what has been taught!! Christian doctrine invokes unity. We have learned that from such teachings as are found in Romans 12, 14 and 15, Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 3, 12 and 13. The doctrine and Spirit of Christ does not cause divisions among Christians. It is *men* who cause such divisions, often with a lopsided emphasis on a particular portion of the doctrine of Christ.

Even when we attempt to put aside fine creedal differences in order to fellowship with Christians who champion a doctrine which we do not hold, we often do not sense ourselves being received as a brother, but rather being sized up as a prospect.

This brings up a third liability of doctrinal imbalance. Our zeal for a certain flavor of Christianity colors our evangelism. We find ourselves desiring, not just converts to Christ, but converts who will see things exactly as we see them. We tend to be witnessing less to unregenerate sinners who are not theologically sophisticated enough to appreciate our doctrinal distinction. Better prospects are found among Christians who may be candidates for conversion to our creed. We become more inclined, for example, to busy ourselves in converting Arminians to Calvinism than in urging sinners to come to Christ. In such a scene the Doctrines of Grace have supplanted the doctrine of Christ. I am acquainted with a sect of Calvinists who are now asserting that no man can be truly saved unless he understands and holds to Particular Redemption. Yet most of those very men were converted under Arminian ministry.

A fourth and final hazard I will mention is that “doctrines” allow an unholy infatuation with the philosophical implications of a particular portion of truth. Isolated from the whole doctrine of God, such portions do not, indeed, cannot, convey the same truth. Truth is treated as theological and philosophical gymnastics rather than practical redemptive therapy. For example, it is one thing to believe in the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, and an entirely different matter to believe in God Who, among other things, is sovereign. The first is a theological abstract that can be, and often is, held without any subjective experimental communion with the living God. It is belief in a system, a thought, a tenet. The second, however, is vital faith, confidence in a Person. This Person is, first of all, real. Communion with Him is real. His sovereignty is a glorious aspect of His worthiness, but it hardly begins to define Him. Humanly formulated doctrine cannot do that. Only He, by His Spirit in redemptive power, can do that.

**It would be difficult to envision Christianity today without human creeds. Such a thing is not even a remote possibility. I am certainly not advocating a crusade to abolish creedal statements, denominational confessions or systematic theology. Given human nature, the state of the religious world, and abounding theological ignorance in particular, we would likely be worse off without them. More realistically, perhaps, the object of this paper is to put these creations of men in a better, more realistic, Biblical perspective.**

To those of us who are “people of the Book”, we must not forget that such doctrines and creeds are extraneous to the plenary inspired word of God. We are not Romanists who have a tradition of Church Fathers which stands on an equality with the Bible. Nor can we agree with the great Reformed theologian who asserted that “the sense of Scripture is Scripture also.” Certainly we must make sense of Scripture, but when we have done that, we have only derived what a human mind can understand of divine Omniscience, and that is not very much. It is certainly *not the same*.

### Limitations

Let us learn some limitations of doctrines and creeds. Have they delivered what we supposed they would?

1. They have not discredited false teachers in the eyes of the world, nor have they stopped the mouths of gainsayers. After 20 centuries, Christendom has more of them than ever, and they have a far better hearing in this world than the true preachers of the gospel. When allowed the option, the world will hear what it pleases – and who believes that it will prefer light to darkness? Virtually all the historical councils and synods, from which we receive our doctrinal statements as well as the creeds and confessions, occurred in a sacral society where the state was empowered to enforce what should and should not be preached. Such creeds and doctrines were set forth with that very prospect in view. This is true of Protestant Reformed traditions as well as Roman Catholic – think on *that* a bit!
2. Creeds have not secured unity in a denomination. All the old-line Protestant churches have wide spectrums of disharmony and disagreement among them, and they keep splitting and branching. “Doctrines” will not even deliver unity to a movement. Witness the ever-increasing in-fighting and separations among those of us who hold to the Doctrines of Grace. We fight over different views of Water Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, Law, Ecclesiology, Church Government, Evangelism and Missions, the Holy Spirit. Although we have a common agreement on Grace, we cannot put up a solid front against Works, and had rather fellowship with a Methodist or Pentecostal than a fellow Calvinist who disagrees with us on some minor doctrine.
3. Correct “doctrines” are impotent to prevent the apostasy of a denomination or church. One has only to glance at the horrible departure from Christianity among Lutherans, Presbyterians, Anglicans and Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Reformed, Baptists and Methodists. The amazing thing is, that they have done this while leaving the traditional Confession of Faith intact. Indeed, that “Noble Historic Confession” helps accredit and keep in existence a church, long after it has become only a mummified shell, empty of spiritual life, “the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird.”
4. Right “doctrines” cannot make a Christian. We may catechize our children with the best of them, but they will only parrot them by rote if they are not born again. They certainly cannot make a preacher. Alas! How many aspiring men without divine calling

and gifts have impoverished their families to surround themselves with the best writing of great preachers and theologians, only to discover that the gift of God cannot be purchased with money or learned in the classroom. Good theology is the sharp edge on the axe. But that is all. If the mettle, the temper is not in the blade, then the edge will not hold. If no divine power wields the handle, it will cut no wood.

### **Applications**

Returning now to our launching observations about doctrine versus doctrines, I offer these closing suggestions:

1. Perhaps we should not dignify particular portions of truth, especially those about which there is no disagreement among Christians, with the word “doctrine”. That word ought to be reserved, as it is in the Bible, to designate the whole of Christian teaching.
2. Reference to separate portions of the whole body of teaching generally held by all Christians may be indicated without the creedal “the doctrine of”. For example: “I am speaking about Justification of faith”, or “concerning eternal judgment”.
3. Teachings we hold which other Christians do not hold could be accurately called views or tenets.
4. In respect to the Doctrines of Grace in particular, I have one more objection to the term. It seems to impoverish the very concept of grace. There can be no doubt that the Five Points extol the grace of God in salvation, but to confine *grace*, by the definite article, to those five propositions is absurd. What of the graces of love, forbearance, selfless servitude, kindness, humility, meekness, generosity, integrity and courage, to name a few? I know of nothing that is pure, beautiful, lovely, true and wholesome that does not flow out of the boundless, infinite grace of God. And no word provokes thoughts of such things as does the word **GRACE!**

Perhaps, then, those five points could be better called the Five Tenets of Calvinistic Soteriology. That is really all they are. I sincerely hope, however, that those of you who choose to continue using the term “Doctrines of Grace” will continue to receive me as your brother.

- C. M.