

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 26

The importance of doctrine

“I don’t want to study doctrine,” one person said. “I’m tired of doctrine. I want sermons to be short and inspiring — I don’t want them to be doctrinal.”

I can understand the feeling. Doctrinal arguments can certainly be wearisome, and doctrine can turn people off. Yet I must point out that we still need doctrine — not in the sense of arguments, but in terms of understanding our faith. A “doctrine” is a “teaching,” and the important teachings of the church are those relating to *truth about God*.

Sermons should be inspiring, but the kind of inspiration we need comes not from the speaker’s skill, but from truth about God. For example, we can be inspired and have confidence about the future because of what God has done in Jesus Christ. We can be optimistic even in a troubled world because we have been taught about Jesus Christ. Our teachings and beliefs about Jesus are doctrines, truth about God, and the foundation of all that we do.

Enduring Christian faith is not built merely on good feelings, on brief moments of sensing God’s presence in the beauty of the creation, or on a short inspirational story once a week. Good feelings and moments of inspiration are indeed wonderful blessings — but those feelings alone cannot lead us into the changed life of unity and reconciliation with God that comes through knowing and believing in Jesus Christ. We need enduring faith, and *that* is built on knowing and understanding truth about God.

That is why doctrinal instruction is important, and why Christians need more than a 10-minute

sermon once a week. We are dealing with eternal truths and ultimate realities, as well as the less important, but seemingly more urgent matters, of day-to-day life. Sometimes a profound point can be made in 10 minutes, but continually growing in understanding of who God is and what he has done needs a certain regular and on-going commitment of time.

What Jesus has done for us, as well as how that affects us and the way we live, must be explained again and again, continually, week after week, from many different angles, examining again and again the many different biblical lessons, prophecies, instructions and stories that God has given us to teach us about it. If most sermons are only 10 minutes long, we can easily see that it might take 20 years to cover all the subjects that are worth covering. But Christians need more than that.

It is easy to be simplistic in 10 minutes, to present only one side of the story. But Christian life is complex. People do not automatically grasp how the cross of Christ should affect the way we treat our neighbors, and they do not automatically believe everything they hear. Most aspects of Christianity take more than 10 minutes to explain. The sermon has to be for new people as well as for long-time members.

Need for classes

Ideally, churches would offer both discipleship classes and sermons. The classes would be more doctrinal and explanatory, with opportunity for questions and discussion. They would be geared toward specific groups, such as new Christians, teenagers, pre-teens and others. Then, the sermons

could be shorter, with more of a motivational orientation, based on a short passage of Scripture. Motivation cannot come out of thin air or from a certain speaking style — it should come from truth about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. The sermon must include some solid instruction, not just clever sayings and nice ideas.

Inspiration and exhortation cannot be separated from truth and discipleship. Bible study and doctrinal study is a form of worship, and may be done in a worship service. The sermon should be used for both instruction and encouragement. Doctrinal subjects can be covered through a series of biblical expository sermons.

A biblically grounded doctrinal sermon or Bible study takes greater mental energy, both in preparation and in listening, than a 10-minute “thought for the week.” But Christians want to understand their faith, and Christian leaders and teachers should help them do so. Christians realize that faith in Christ goes much deeper than just good feelings and inspirational sayings, and they enjoy and appreciate being fed in all the good things the Word of God has to offer.

Of course, I am not advocating long sermons. There is no virtue in talking longer than people can pay attention. Some speakers can hold attention better than others, but even the best can’t get 100 percent. However, speakers should do their best to explain the Word of God, explain something of its significance, to show how it relates to faith in Christ, how it relates to practical matters of life and death, and how it is based on what God has said and done. That will take some time, and it will take some work from the audience as well as from the speaker.

How long should a sermon be? A good length is probably between 30 and 45 minutes, with flexibility for special situations. Some speakers are less gifted and may be more effective if they give shorter sermons, giving some of the sermon time to other members for testimonials, inspiring stories or scriptural insights on a topic related to the sermon theme.

In part, it depends on how much spiritual nourishment people are getting during the week. Are they opening themselves to God’s instruction in

prayer, Bible study and small group fellowship? Sometimes it seems as if the people who do the most Bible study are also the most interested and excited about listening to sermons. They have a hunger for God. Christ is, after all, the most important thing in our lives and in our future.

I am convinced that doctrine is important — even though not all doctrines are equally important. For some people, it seems, earthquakes are just as important as the resurrection of Christ. Perhaps they seem more relevant to life today, but in actuality, Jesus’ resurrection is always more important to us, even if we are in the middle of an earthquake. The doctrine of the resurrection is always relevant — especially when death is a real possibility! It is vital that all sermon and Bible study instruction be rooted in Jesus Christ.

How to avoid heresy

Christians need a strong doctrinal foundation that will help them discern crucial teachings from less-important ideas. Some Christians are attracted by New Age teachings or the teachings of quasi-Christian cults because of a lack of doctrinal grounding. We need to teach doctrine, because only doctrine will give people a defense against heresies that are preached with enthusiasm and confidence.

The early church had a great need for doctrine. The New Testament is filled with doctrine — with information about Jesus Christ and the difference he makes in our lives. But not all biblical teachings are of equal importance. For example, the teaching that the apostles numbered 12 is not as important as the teaching that Jesus was raised from the dead.

Core beliefs

The early church developed a short list of doctrines they felt were essential for new believers to know and accept. Different regional churches had slightly different lists, and in time these lists became more standardized. They are now called creeds, from the Latin word for “I believe.” These creeds were simple statements of belief. [See our website for articles on the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed.]

Our church also has a Statement of Beliefs, developed through much discussion in our doctrinal

team. This provides a list of basic doctrines. It doesn't include everything, but even our Statement of Beliefs is longer than a list of what is *essential* to Christian faith. The doctrinal team has therefore developed a shorter list of ten essential beliefs, which we are calling a Doctrinal Summary. These are the core doctrines. These could form the basis for a series of sermons, and would provide a stable doctrinal foundation. Here is the Doctrinal Summary:

We believe:

- In one holy, loving, all-powerful, and gracious Creator God who exists in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- That the Bible is the inspired and infallible Word of God, fully authoritative for all matters of faith and practice.
- That Jesus Christ, born of the virgin Mary, fully God and fully human, is both Lord and Savior.
- That Jesus Christ suffered and died on the cross for human sin, that he was raised bodily on the third day, and that he ascended to heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father.
- That Jesus Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead and to reign over all

things.

- In the Holy Spirit, who brings sinners to repentance, who gives eternal life to believers, and who lives in them to conform them to the image of Jesus Christ.

- That Christians should gather in regular fellowship and live lives of faith that make evident the good news that humans enter the kingdom of God by putting their trust in Jesus Christ.

- In the spiritual unity of all believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.

- That salvation comes not by works, but only by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

- In the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

Friends, I hope that these doctrines never become boring and never seem irrelevant. Granted, we human speakers can sometimes make them sound boring and irrelevant, but the doctrines themselves are vital for us all. These are short and inspiring doctrines. I for one am thankful that God has given his truth that is worth teaching again and again, as we follow the Teacher, Jesus Christ.

Joseph Tkach