

LESSON ONE: WHY STUDY DOCTRINE?

Bible Doctrines Class

VINCE LOMBARDI ILLUSTRATION

Coach Vince Lombardi is well-known for building a championship team out of the Green Bay Packers several decades ago. He is also well known for his commitment to coaching and teaching the fundamental truths, not only to rookies, but also to those who think they know it all, to veterans, to starters, to all-stars. He refused to complicate a game that, when boiled down to the basics, consisted of blocking, tackling, running, passing, catching—all to be done with abandon. As he often said, “You do all those things right, you win. It’s a matter of the basics, concentrate on the basics.”

Probably the most well-known and retold story of this coach is how he began training camp. I’ve been told the players all sat in a heap, tons of massive humanity hanging on the words of one man. In front of him were sitting some of the best athletes in the world. They had played football since they were children. They were some of the highest paid athletes of their day and some of them are now in the Football Hall of Fame. Holding the football high in the air, coach Lombardi would say, “Gentlemen, this is a football”

He certainly did not have to tell these men what that pigskin was. He was not trying to demean or belittle them. He was simply making the point that they were going to go back to the basics.

And that’s our intent with this class, too. Go back to the basics.

Coach talked to the men about the size and shape of the football, how it can be kicked, carried, or passed. Then he took the team out onto the field and said, "This is a football field." He walked them around, describing the dimensions, the shape, the rules, and how the game is played.

I’ve read that he did that every year -- even after the Green Bay Packers became NFL champs and then won the first two Super Bowls ever played. Can you imagine how "basic" and "fundamental" that must have sounded to his veteran players? And yet maybe that explains why Vince Lombardi was such a successful coach, because he began with the basics and was committed to the fundamentals.

There’s a lot of churches out there with more programs than us, we know we’re not as flashy or fine-tuned, we’re not on the cutting edge of Christian trends. But I hope we are not guilty of neglecting the core teachings of the Bible. Just like high school athletes who want to do what the pros do without really learning the fundamentals, we don’t want to get ahead of ourselves without making sure we’re grounded in the fundamentals of Christianity. This is not an exhaustive list of doctrines, and we will not exhaust these subjects to everyone’s satisfaction, but our hope is that these classes will be easy enough for a new Christian to understand and also will have something for veteran believers, and that all of us will be better grounded in foundational theology for life.

Last year some of the elders began talking about doing a class like this, and the need to really address a lot of subjects and doctrines that do not always get covered in this fashion when we do expository preaching of a biblical passage, like we usually do in the Sunday worship services. We agreed of the need for this class, and the timing seems perfect in Providence with a lot of new people, and we look forward to growing together.

FORMAT OF THIS CLASS

- <Put up overhead with schedule and talk a little about it>
- Class will continue thru end of year, welcome for all or to join at any time
- Taught by various men in the church, mostly elders
- Some of these subjects are not traditionally classified as “doctrines” (ex: expository preaching, legalism, guidance, etc.); in some senses this class is both “Doctrines and Distinctives” or what we believe, including ministry philosophy
- The focus is teaching; we’re not going to spend a ton of time with prayer requests – we want to of course begin and end with prayer, and include any important needs in the body – but please help us start on time and minimize talking and sharing before so that we can get to the subject and give the speaker at least 45 minutes, and time for interaction with questions at the end
- When appropriate, we want to welcome questions during the teaching as well, if the question seems valuable for all, but we also want to keep the lesson moving and not get too far off-track
- This is the first time we have done this, so please be patient with us as we work through things, and we’ll try to be sensitive to the Spirit as well as the saints in the class, not just rigidly tied to dates here which may change as need arises
- We are working on seeing if we can record the classes, as well as provide our notes in the future, available either in hard-copy or on the Internet
- Any suggestions on how to improve, let any of us elders know

Three questions I want to cover today:

1. What is doctrine?
2. Why study doctrine?
3. How should we study doctrine?

I. WHAT IS DOCTRINE?

<Ask audience to define>

According to Oxford English Dictionary, the English word “doctrine” comes from Latin and derives from the original meaning of *docere* (to teach) or *doctor* (teacher).

In an examination at a Christian school, the teacher asked the following question: “What is false doctrine.”

A little boy thought she said “doctorin’” so he raised his hand confidently and said: “It’s when the doctor gives the wrong stuff to people who are sick.”

Although the little boy had obviously confused *doctrine* with *doctorin’*, his answer is true for both. We have a sick world, and even the church at large is not in great health – we need to make sure we are giving the right stuff, right doctrine, rather than just talking about light and fluffy subjects and topics that people want about how to improve their life, tips for happy living, or any culture-driven approach that may be a mile-wide but is only an inch deep.

A good illustration of this and the Biblical words for doctrine are found in 2 Timothy 4
<TURN TO 2 TIMOTHY 4>

The N.T. Greek words usually translated “doctrine” or “teaching” are *didache* and *didaskalia*, which are either translated “doctrine” or “teaching” but it’s the same basic meaning and can either refer to the act of teaching or the content of the teaching / doctrine.

At the end of v. 2 is the word *didache*

- “doctrine” in KJV
- “instruction” in NASB
- “careful instruction” in NIV
- “teaching” in NKJV and ESV

Verse 3 talks about how many won’t endure sound doctrine, and the word there is *didaskalia*, but is basically a synonym for the word “teaching / instruction / doctrine” in v. 2. Part of preaching the Word faithfully includes doctrine, and we must do this as a church even though there will always be some who don’t want it.

Puritan sermons would often have a section called “Doctrine” and then another section called “uses” (page upon page of application based on the doctrine of the text)

<Question: Why does this text say some won’t endure sound doctrine?>

The N.T. words *didache* and *didaskalia* are used a total of 51x and reveal that ‘Christian doctrine refers to Scripture, whether read, explained, or even theologically systematized.

Perhaps the modern avoidance of doctrine lies partially in the fact that “doctrine” has been understood too narrowly like a doctrinal statement or theological essay, rather than more broadly in the Scriptural sense of biblical content. The Scriptures never envisioned doctrine referring to ivory tower musings over theological speculation or minutiae.’¹

<Illustration: husbands arguing over extent of the atonement while camping and wives did all the work>

Another reason is laziness or lack of concern about truth or we don’t think it’s “relevant.”

Spurgeon lamented: *Everywhere there is apathy. Nobody cares whether that which is preached is true or false. A sermon is a sermon whatever the subject; only, the shorter it is the better.*

[John MacArthur tells of his experience visiting Spurgeon’s grave]

THOSE WORDS from Spurgeon were written more than a hundred years ago. He might have been describing the state of evangelicalism at the end of the twentieth century.

Last summer I stood by his tomb in London—a heavy stone vault, blended into the cemetery between a road and a large building. If I hadn’t had someone to lead me there, I would not have found it. Spurgeon’s and his wife’s names are engraved in stone, but there is no information on the tomb itself about who he was. The average sightseer might miss the stone vault (there are larger, more impressive ones all around), or on seeing it, not realize it is the burial place of a man who in his time was perhaps more well-known and more influential than England’s Prime Minister.

As I stood by Spurgeon's grave, I couldn't help thinking how much the church needs men like him today. Spurgeon was not afraid to stand boldly for the truth, even when it meant he stood alone. Preaching the Word of God was his sole passion. He believed the church's tolerance of preaching was beginning to decline, while some ministers were experimenting with alternative approaches and abbreviated messages. He saw in that a great danger, and his concern thrust him into a battle that ultimately led to his death. He had been placed in that grave exactly a hundred years before my visit.

Contrast Spurgeon's attitude toward preaching with the prevailing opinion of our day. In fact, Spurgeon's lament is diametrically opposite the perspective expressed in a column that appeared a few years ago in a popular Christian magazine. A well-known preacher was venting his own *loathing* for long sermons. January 1 was coming, so he resolved to do better in the coming year. "That means wasting less time listening to long sermons and spending much more time preparing short ones," he wrote. "People, I've discovered, will forgive even poor theology as long as they get out before noon."

Unfortunately, that perfectly sums up the predominant attitude behind much of modern ministry. Bad doctrine is tolerable; a long sermon most certainly is not. The timing of the benediction is of far more concern to the average churchgoer than the content of the sermon. Sunday dinner and the feeding of our mouths takes precedence over Sunday school and the nourishment of our souls. Long-windedness has become a greater sin than heresy.

The church has imbibed the worldly philosophy of pragmatism, and we're just beginning to taste the bitter results.²

Definition of Doctrine: Doctrine is basically teaching of the Bible. We often use the word for when you systematize or summarize what the Bible teaches on any subject of theology, this is closely related to the idea of systematic theology.

Wayne Grudem defines systematic theology this way: 'any study that answers the question, "What does the whole Bible teach us today?" about any given topic.' (from John Frame in Westminster Seminary, Escondido)

So when we teach about various doctrines in this class, we want to present the systematic teaching of the Bible. We don't want to be ignorant about church history, but our focus will not be on all the different views through the centuries or even going through a confession or doctrinal statement – the Scriptures will be our focus for this class. I am not ashamed to stand on Reformation soil, or even call myself "reformed" with a little "r" but I want to be Biblical with a capital "B." After all, the key Reformation motto was *sola scriptura* – scripture alone. I'll take labels like evangelical with little "e", calvinist with little "c", premillennial with little "p" and even baptist with little "b" – but Biblical is with a capital "B". That doesn't lessen the importance or conviction I have in those other areas, but my allegiance is not to a label, it is to the Bible. We as teachers will do our best to summarize what God's Word has to say about each the distinctives / topics covered in our course. And we as teachers will learn new things in this process as well. And where other good teachers from the past or present have given sound biblical and doctrinal observations, I'm not shy to quote them, since I'm not the source of truth.

<Read 2 Timothy 3:16-17>

A.W. Pink: ‘How sad then that doctrine is now decried as “unpractical” when, in fact, doctrine is the very base of the practical life. There is an inseparable connection between belief and practice— “As he thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Pro. 23:7). The relation between Divine truth and Christian character is that of cause to effect— “And ye shall know the truth, *and* the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32)—free from ignorance, free from prejudice, free from error, free from the wiles of Satan, free from the power of evil; and if the truth is not “known” then such freedom will not be enjoyed. Observe the *order* of mention in the passage with which we have opened. All Scripture is profitable *first* for “doctrine”! The same order is observed throughout the Epistles, particularly in the great doctrinal treatises of the apostle Paul. Read the Epistle of “Romans” and it will be found that there is not a single admonition in the first five chapters. In the Epistle of “Ephesians” there are no exhortations till the fourth chapter is reached. The order is first doctrinal exposition and then admonition or exhortation for the regulation of the daily walk.

The substitution of so-called “practical” preaching for the doctrinal exposition which it has supplanted is the root cause of many of the evil maladies which now afflict the church of God. The reason why there is so little depth, so little intelligence, so little grasp of the fundamental verities of Christianity, is because so few believers have been established in the faith, through hearing expounded and through their own personal study of the doctrines of grace ... It is *ignorance* of doctrine that has rendered the professing church helpless to cope with the rising tide of infidelity. It is *ignorance* of doctrine which is mainly responsible for thousands of professing Christians being captivated by the numerous false isms of the day. It is because the time has now arrived when the bulk of our churches “*will not endure* sound doctrine” (2 Tim. 4:3) that they so readily receive *false* doctrines. Of course it is true that doctrine, like anything else in Scripture, may be studied from a merely cold intellectual viewpoint, and *thus* approached, doctrinal teaching and doctrinal study will leave the *heart* untouched, and will naturally be “dry” and profitless. But, doctrine properly received, doctrine studied with an *exercised* heart, will ever lead into a deeper knowledge of God and of the unsearchable riches of Christ.”³

II. WHY STUDY DOCTRINE?

Jesus commanded us in the Great Commission – not just evangelism but “teaching to observe all that Jesus commanded” (same root as word translated “doctrine”)

<Read 2 Timothy 3:7-10>

- Verse 6 speaks of the hucksters and salesmen of false religion who can deceive and lead astray the weak housewife who is not grounded in sound truth (same would be true for a lot of weak and naïve men in our day as well)
- Verse 7 warns of the danger there is to be continually learning but never coming to true knowledge of the truth – we need to be careful of this even in learning correct doctrines
- Verse 9 says their fruit and folly should be evident to all believers, and verse 10 commends Timothy: “you followed my doctrine” [or teaching]
- Notice that it was not only doctrine, but what else in that verse?

‘The seriousness of errant doctrine can be compared to a missile aimed a mere one degree off target. The difference seems slight and negligible at first, yet the results of the error increase dramatically throughout the flight of the missile, until it totally misses its intended target.

So it is with false doctrine. At first it may seem to be a tolerable mistake, a little error—but not that serious. But, as with all errors, the effects compound over time until they become so serious that they may not be correctable.’⁴

1 Timothy 1:3 (NKJV)

3 As I urged you when I went into Macedonia—remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine,

1 Timothy 4:1 (NKJV)

1 Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons,

The Puritan John Flavel wrote: ‘By entertaining of strange persons, men sometimes entertain angels unawares: but by entertaining of strange doctrines, many have entertained devils unaware.’⁵

<Are there any groups you know of that teach the false doctrines mentioned in verse 3?>
<Where does verse 1 say these doctrines come from?>

1 Timothy 4:6 (NKJV)

6 If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed.

1 Timothy 4:11-13 (NKJV)

11 Prescribe and teach these things ... 13 Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.

Verse 12 reminds us that we are not just to tell people, we are to set an example as well with the way we live our lives.

1 Timothy 4:16 (NKJV)

16 Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.

A. W. Tozer has written:

*It would be impossible to overemphasize the importance of sound doctrine in the life of a Christian. Right thinking about all spiritual matters is imperative if we would have right living. As men do not gather grapes of thorns nor figs of thistles, so sound character does not grow out of unsound teaching.*⁶

1 Timothy 6:3 says that doctrine and godliness go together. There is no dichotomy – let’s put aside all our doctrine and just focus on loving each other and living the Christian life – your behavior is always driven by your belief. Theology is practical, and everyone is a theologian – the Jews knew what someone really believed by how they life.

<According to verse 1, what is at stake in the way we behave and live?>

It’s true both ways: Life and doctrine are inseparably joined.

Titus 2:7 (NKJV)

**7 in all things showing yourself to be a pattern of good works; in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, incorruptibility ...
10 not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things.**

In v. 1 when Paul instructs Titus to “speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine,” he in the next verses gives several practical instructions. Anyone who thinks doctrine isn’t practical hasn’t read the N.T. very closely.

Titus 1:9 says it is a requirement of an elder that he be “holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught [*didaskalia*], that he may be able, by sound doctrine [*didache*], both to exhort and convict those who contradict.” This is not an optional thing, or something for seminary professors – or even just the pastor in the pulpit, every lay elder has this responsibility; in fact every believer is to contend earnestly for the faith

<READ JUDE 3>

2 John 9 (NKJV)

9 Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.

Revelation 2:14-15 (NKJV)

**14 But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.
15 Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.**

So, why study doctrine?

Ephesians 4:14 (NKJV)

14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting,

III. How Should We Study Doctrine

1. With commitment and involvement in the church

Acts 2:42 (NKJV) **And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.**

- Continuing in the doctrine or teaching is the mark of a true Christian (John 8:30 "if you remain in my word then you are my true disciples ...")
- Many churches today don't like the word "doctrine" but the Word of God lists this as the top of the list of what God's first church devoted to
- It's no accident that doctrine / teaching comes first, it must always come first:
 - o Doctrine comes before duty (Ephesians, Romans, Hebrews, etc)
 - o Biblical truth must precede biblical transformation
- The main verbs in the rest of this chapter are imperfect tense, which stresses a continuous pattern.
- When Acts 2:42 says they "continued steadfastly" in the doctrine, it means remained constantly, it's to "adhere with strength ... a steadfast and single-minded fidelity to a certain course of action."
- The Greek prefix intensifies the action with the idea of doing something persistently in the face of opposition.
- It means desiring something intensely, or aggressively pursuing a desired object.
- This word is also used to describe the strong devotion and singular desire of the 120 in the upper room as they gathered together for prayer after Christ's ascension (1:14).

2. With Berean discernment

Matthew 15:9 (NKJV) **And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' "**

Acts 17:11 - Search the scriptures yourself to see if these things are so

1 Thess 5:21 – examine everything carefully

3. With application, obedience, and praise

Romans 6:17 (NKJV) **But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered.**

Christianity is a way of life founded on doctrine. Some disparage doctrine in favor of the spiritual life. Paul, however, taught that spiritual growth in Christ is dependent on faithfulness to sound doctrine, for its truth provides the means of growth ... Faithful obedience and love, then, are not alternatives to sound doctrine. They are the fruit of right doctrine as it works itself out in the believer's character and relationships.⁷

Doctrine proves as indispensable to Christianity as a skeleton to the body or oxygen to breathing. Without Christian doctrine, believers would be stripped of truth. The NT epistles overflow with exhortations to make "sound doctrine" the very heart of Christian faith and ministry.⁸

END NOTES

¹Richard Mayhue, "Editorial" in *Master's Seminary Journal* 13:1 (Spring 2002) p. 2-3

²MacArthur, J. (1993). *Ashamed of the gospel : When the Church becomes like the world* (11). Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books.

³Pink, A. W. (1996). *The sovereignty of God*. (213). Simpsonville SC: Christian Classics Foundation.

⁴Green, M. P. (1989). *Illustrations for Bilical Preaching : Over 1500 sermon illustrations arranged by topic and indexed exhaustively* (Revised edition of: The expositor's illustration file.). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

⁵Thomas, I. (1996). *The golden treasury of Puritan quotations*. Includes index of authors. General index created by Christian Clasics Foundation. (electronic ed.) (106). Simpsonville SC: Christian Classics Foundation.

⁶Morgan, R. J. (2000). *Nelson's complete book of stories, illustrations, and quotes* (electronic ed.) (241). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

⁷Elwell, W. A. (1997, c1996). *Evangelical dictionary of biblical theology* (electronic ed.). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

⁸Mayhue, 3.