

Theology Matters

Answers
for the
Church
Today

In Honor of Harold Hazelip

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Introduction



Does Theology matter?



What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of *sound teaching*, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you — guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us (2 Tim. 1:13-14).

In the presence of God and of Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with *sound doctrine*. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear (2 Tim. 4:1-3).

There is an old piece of advice that is given to aspiring writers of western novels, "Always shoot the sheriff in the first paragraph." Somehow, I'm not sure the reader is going to be immediately grabbed by being told that this is a book of theology. You may have heard these only slightly tongue-in-cheek definitions of a philosopher and a theologian:

- A philosopher is a blind man in a dark alley looking for a black cat that isn't there.
- A theologian is a blind man in a dark alley looking for a black cat that isn't there, and who thinks he has found it.

Indeed, in Churches of Christ the mere word "theology" creates suspicion. This suspicion, of course, is not entirely without basis. Some serious pastoral and biblical malpractice has been committed under the auspices of "theology."

Introduction

Unfortunately, today, in many quarters, even the word doctrine is not welcome. "Doctrine" is associated with intolerant, mean-spirited sectarianism that leads to witch hunts, hard feelings, and division. And many have had their fill of that. So perhaps we need to be reminded of Paul's instructions to Timothy quoted above which emphasize the necessity of sound doctrine, especially when people lose their desire for it. But why is doctrine so important?

Let me offer three reasons. First, it is only by understanding doctrine or theology that we are able to give reasonable answers to those who inquire of us. I once had a person who had a religious background but who was now quite hostile to faith ask the following:

I was with a bunch of Christians one night and they all got to praying. They said things like "God, we know you are here because we can feel your presence." What I want to know is, how does that *feel*? Is it like when you go out with your bowling buddies and have a few beers? Is that what it feels like?

And by the way, how do you put your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee?

The questions may seem profane or absurd, but we must not miss the point. We ought to be able to provide answers for questions about what we say we believe.

In the above case, sloppy thinking may lie behind the sloppy language. Do we understand our own faith deeply enough to be able to explain it in ways an outsider can understand?.

What if we are asked about how the death of Jesus saves us? Is the end of the world coming soon? If prayer can make sick people well, why do Christians die? Do we really believe grape juice is the blood of Jesus? What makes one church better than another? I'm a good person, do you really think I'm a sinner going to hell? And the questions go on and on. Non-Christians deserve good answers when they inquire about faith:

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect . . . (1 Pet. 3:15).

Second, doctrine or theology is important in making us spiritually healthy. This is what Paul means by sound doctrine in the passages quoted above. Does our doctrinal diet produce health or disease? What one believes does matter, especially at those times when life is confusing or oppressive.

Does Theology matter?

I have from time to time discussed the old doctrine of "providence" in Bible classes at various congregations (this topic is discussed in chapter six of this book). When I asked people about their understanding of God's "providing," especially during the Persian Gulf War, they would often talk about how God provided protection in dangerous circumstances. Or others would talk about how God had granted health in answer to prayer against all medical odds. This is all fine, but I wonder what it says to the person who lives uprightly and prays passionately only to have a child die? If at times like these we are not doctrinally healthy (sound), we could produce some serious spiritual diseases. People can have their spiritual lives destroyed by bad teaching.

Third, doctrine is important because it helps us "think God's thoughts after him." It helps us draw closer to the one we claim embodies all truth. We generally consider it pitiful when people live their lives based on lies. We aspire to sound doctrine not because it makes our lives work better, but because it corresponds to the way things really are.

In a world of so many viable religious alternatives (some of which are increasingly bizarre) it is imperative that we attempt to find our way by the light of truth, not by the most interesting or entertaining fad of the moment. Even among proponents of "Christianity," the teaching often strays far from the biblical witness. For a people who claim to be guided by the truth of Scripture, there is no shame in putting forth our best effort to get it right, fallible as we are.

So, here you have a book of theology or doctrine. In different ways, all of the writers attempt to contribute to sound doctrine by providing answers to questions people ask, by giving us an understanding of our faith that will sustain us, and by drawing near to the truth of things as embodied in our God.

But I would issue a warning to you, reader, before you proceed. No one writing in this book claims the last word on his topic. The point is to stimulate you to understand your faith. You must finally answer for yourself on each topic. The pursuit of a true, full, spiritual life is the responsibility of all Christians, not just professional teachers and preachers. Of course the time will come when all will be more clear, when every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, when God will be all in all. Amen. Come Lord Jesus!

But in the meantime...

Move 1 – The importance of getting the story right.
Development

Move 2 – The double-touch healing.
Development

Move 3 – The true identify.
Development

Move 4 – The call to follow the way of shame.
Development

The God who brooks no rivals (I Kings 18)

Key Strategy: Show the relationship of O.T. idolatry to our divided commitments.

The God who creates (Genesis 1)

Key Strategy: Compare the creation story to other ancient near eastern creation stories.

The God who is sovereign (Habakkuk)

Key Strategy: Make the connection of the “international chaos” of Habakkuk’s time to our own.

The God of justice (Amos 5:21-24)

Key Strategy: Develop the nation of “anti-cultic” passages to emphasize God’s great concern for justice.

The God who loves all (Jonah)

Key Strategy: Move us to the question – who are the Ninevites in our world?

The God who loves forever (Hosea 11)

Key Strategy: Utilize the image of marital infidelity to emphasize God’s relentless love.

The Hidden God (Esther)

Key Strategy: God is not always in the limelight. Sometimes He works in the shadows.