

Transformed by Theology

I'm sure you have heard people purport that doctrine is divisive, irrelevant, boring, or not practical. Yet, we must not, as Dr. Charles Ryrie so aptly retorts "forget that all practice (and every experience) must be based on sound Bible doctrine, and all Bible doctrine is expected to result in proper practice. Sound doctrine and biblical experiences have to be wedded. You must not have one without the other."¹

When the beloved theologian J. I. Packer was interviewed about why he devoted his life to theology, if theology is such a bad word, he said, "It helps me appreciate the greatness, goodness, and glory of God—lifting up the sheer wonder and size and majesty of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the providence of God, the Puritans and Calvin taught me that's what theology is about. The truth I try to grasp and share is truth that enlarges the soul because it tunes into the greatness of God. It generates awe and adoration."²

Doctrine matters. As Paul was instructing Titus on ministry priorities in the church, he charges him to "speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1). This is not merely for pastors and professors but for every Christian who hungers to know the central teachings of Scripture. This is a commitment to know the God of the Bible as He has revealed Himself. Such an endeavor forms the belief system that controls and compels behavior, so what could be more important or more practical? Paul develops throughout the Pastoral Epistles that the Scriptures are inspired (2 Tim 3:16), authoritative (1 Tim 5:18), furnish wisdom (2 Tim 3:15, 17), and are to be studied (2 Tim 2:15).

There is a great failure in the church of Jesus Christ to preach/teach sound doctrine that is healthy. Only sound teaching nourishes a church to be strong. So it must be sound (1 Tim 1:10; 2 Tim 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:9, 13; 2:1-2, 8), giving God's people wholesome words (1 Tim 6:3; 2 Tim 1:13). Without diligent attention the church will experience gangrene (2 Tim 2:17). Therefore we must be committed to teach no other doctrine (1 Tim 1:3), neither give heed to what is not expressly taught therein (1 Tim 1:4), but nourish God's people on the Word (1 Tim 4:6), giving attendance (1 Tim 4:13), taking heed (1 Tim 4:16), and laboring in sound doctrine (1 Tim 5:17). And note that sound doctrine (Titus 1:9) leads to sound words (2 Tim 1:13) and sound faith (Titus 2:2). Strong churches are those that are fed healthy doctrine and theology.

Back up just a moment. When talking of doctrine, we're speaking of truth extracted from biblical theology, that which is derived directly from the Bible. Throughout the Bible we have propositional statements, doctrine (simply meaning teaching), and ethics for how we live. What about *systematic* theology? This is the discipline of categorizing, systematizing, and synthesizing all that the Bible teaches on a given subject/doctrine. It is pulling together a full picture of what we have studied in bits and pieces throughout the Bible. We are responsible to unify the fruit

¹ Charles Ryrie, *Ryrie's Practical Guide to Communicating Bible Doctrine* (Broadman & Holman, 2005), 2-4.

² *Leadership*, Summer 1998, 108.

of what we glean in biblical theology into a cohesive whole. So while biblical exposition teaches doctrines a verse at a time, you cannot teach a whole doctrine from any one verse. We come to each text not to import all that we've learned in Genesis to Revelation but to guard frequent missteps in our exegesis because we know for the most part what the rest of Scripture teaches. Scripture speaks with one non-contradictory voice. This is why the great preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who was not closely tied to the text he was preaching on, did not preach error, because he was well-grounded in orthodox theology. A preacher without theology is like a doctor without training—he will kill you.

So what does this look like in training God's people in theology? I remember back over twenty years ago in my first pastorate when I taught systematic theology on Sunday evenings (yes, evening service☺). One lady was so excited when she came up to me and exclaimed, "Pastor, I thought I'd have to go to Bible college to learn these great truths." Why isn't her excitement more of the experience for those in our local churches? At another church where I served, we not only taught systematic theology on Sunday evenings to our first to sixth graders, but I engaged in developing a three-year curriculum for us to continue instructing our youngsters and youth workers in the precious doctrines of Christ, salvation, eschatology, and the like. Through the years we've been instructing our adult Sunday school classes in systematic theology to give folks the "big picture" of each doctrine that they get snippets of in our weekly expositions.

I cannot begin to tell you the multitudes of ways that this has benefited me as a pastor. Having taught through each of the ten majors doctrines, I can pull out the folder on each one when someone in the congregation has a question. Not to mention that my whole library (apart from commentaries) is categorized according to its doctrinal heading.

Furthermore, though I'm just a small-church pastor, I've had the privilege of instructing university students in theology and writing articles to clarify issues for them, and then reuse those articles to benefit our congregation. Several of my theology students have never had any interest in theology, though it is required for their degree. They come from various churches around the globe. A recent email from a current student gives appropriate testimony to his benefit from theological training. He writes, "My theological essay will explain how I have suffered, like Luther in the genuineness of my repentance. However, through this research and writing of this paper, I have found hope and see that the Holy Spirit is producing the fruit in my life. Today, after three years of struggling, I have assurance of my salvation. I see the series of 'tests' and 'holy affections' in my life. I am so happy and I have a sense of freedom, the Son has set me free indeed. Today, I have victory in Jesus. I love theology! I just couldn't keep this news quiet and am shouting from the rooftops today." God graciously put to flight a three-year struggle by anchoring this student's hopes in sound doctrine.

When any given doctrine comes up in a text, I can pull a folder and easily refresh my mind on the main issues at hand or the best resources to consult. Then I can easily have a momentary topical teaching on a doctrine during the exposition—i.e., it aids in theological exposition.

I can think of little else that has contributed so highly to the spiritual growth and vitality of the flock as our studies in theology. The deeper into God's truth we dive, the loftier our worship becomes. The greater we understand how desperate our sinful condition was and how wonderful our gracious Savior is, the more grateful we are in the service that we render to Him.

There is no room for anti-intellectualism in the Christian life [or church], nor intellectual egotism and pride. The frame of God's glory reminds us that all we know of God and his ways is given us by grace. We are absolutely dependent upon revelation, for God's ways are unfathomable and his judgments are unsearchable. Theological education exists, at least in part, to equip believers with the ability to think, to reason, to analyze, to learn, and to synthesize biblical truth, so that this truth may be imparted to others through preaching and teaching and ministry. We dare not lose sight of this great purpose. Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ must be thinkers whose minds are captive to the Word of God, and whose entire intellectual structure is shaped and determined by biblical truth...We must wear our captivity to the Word of God as a badge of intellectual honor and integrity.³

Every pastor is called to be a theologian.⁴ As we shepherd God's people, we teach them His precious truths, including the hard things of God. The NT knows nothing of a pastoral office that is not theological, as we saw earlier in the pastorals.

Are you interested in more intentionally incorporating systematic theology into your church's ministry? Over at *thomrainer.com* you can find some helpful suggestions from Chuck Lawless.⁵ Among some of the suggestions are:

1. Don't assume church members don't care about beliefs;
2. Include theology in a required membership class;
3. Raise the bar for small-group leaders who teach the Word;
4. Emphasize the importance of parents instructing their own children (Deut 6:7; Eph 6:4); and
5. Be willing to start with just a few. Invite a few men to join you once per week.

Does doctrine divide? Yes, it creates a rift from that which is false. However, it unites too. It welds the saints together around a common goal and belief. Since we have already been informed of the time "when they will not endure sound doctrine...they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires" (2 Tim 4:3), we preach and teach the Word in season and out of season; when it's popular to do so and also when people foolishly state that this is the surest way to kill a church.

³ Daniel Akin, *A Theology for the Church* (B & H Publishing Group, 2014), vii.

⁴ See Albert Mohler's chapter "The Pastor as Theologian" in Akin, *A Theology for the Church*, 723-28.

⁵ Chuck Lawless, "Teaching Theology in Church," *thomrainer.com*, accessed 5/4/16.

So Titus was to hold firm to the trustworthy message...so he could encourage others by sound doctrine (Titus 1:9). Confusion and unanswered questions hardly enable one to give such instruction.

Finally, God never intended the study of theology to be dry or boring. I recall the esteemed Professor Howard Hendricks who warned Bible teachers not to bore people with the Word of God. This is, after all, the study of our majestic God and His marvelous works. Study of this nature is to be lived, prayed, and sung. Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* is appropriately structured in a doxological fashion, ending each chapter with suggested songs to express our worship and praise to our worthy Lord. Theology, when studied correctly, will lead to great spiritual growth and true Christian worship. Never allow it to be merely an academic exercise. God's truth was not given to us just for information to win the theological arguments but for transformation.

For Further Reading:

"Expository Preaching, Doctrine, and Theology", Jack Hughes, www.drivennails.com (<http://static1.squarespace.com/static/54444d8be4b015161ccf180f/t/573b13841d07c083c75ef8ca/1463489412912/Doctrine+Theology+And+EP.pdf>).

"Teaching Theology in Church", Chuck Lawless, www.thomrainer.com
Ryrie's Practical Guide to Communicating Bible Doctrine, Charles Ryrie (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005).

For Further Study (single volume systematics):

A Systematic Theology, Roland McCune
Basic Theology, Charles Ryrie
Evangelical Theology, Michael Bird
Systematic Theology, Louis Berkhof
Systematic Theology, Wayne Grudem
Systematic Theology, Robert Culver
The Moody Handbook of Theology, Paul Enns
Theology for the Church, Daniel Akin

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