



RIGHT DOCTRINE VERSUS RIGHT LIVING

In Christ's letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), we notice the importance the exalted Christ puts on right beliefs (or doctrine) and right living. For example, he tells the church of Ephesus that they got their doctrine right and refused to allow false teaching to prosper, but that they had forgotten to love God—the one of whom the doctrines speak (Rev. 2:1-7). Conversely, he alerts the church at Thyatira to the fact that they had excelled in practically outworking the faith but were insufficiently knowledgeable and discerning in regard to it. The church suffered accordingly (Rev. 2:18-29). Clearly, then, right belief and right living matter to Christ. His is a balance we must always strive for, not only because of his example but because it is Christ's will for us that we grow in both our knowledge of the faith (through Bible study and theological instruction) and in its practical outworking (works of mercy and kindness, and evangelism and mission).

RIGHT DOCTRINE

For some the very idea of doctrine leaves a bad taste in the mouth. Mental pictures of harsh, argumentative and divisive folk come to mind; the type of folk who are nowhere to be seen when an expression of the practical love of Christ is needed.

We need to distinguish, however, between the rejection of the doctrinaire and the rejection of doctrine. Certainly, we ought not to make the former an excuse for the latter, but it matters what we believe. As Christians, we follow the One who is “the truth” (John 14:6). Doctrine—from the Latin *doctrina*, a derivation of *docere* meaning “to teach”—is merely the word we use to capture what Scripture teaches about who Jesus is and what he taught (Jn. 5:39). Given the vital nature of this subject matter, it is essential that our doctrine be orthodox (from the Greek *orthodoxia*; *ortho* meaning “right” and *doxia* “belief” or “praise”). If what we believe is

wrong, then we must ask God to lead us by his Spirit into all truth (Jn. 16:13). Likewise, if our understanding is shallow.

Our doctrine matters, first, because of its subject matter. If God has taken the trouble to reveal himself to us in nature round about us and in His Word (written and Living), then it is incumbent on us to understand that revelation aright. To twist its data or to treat it lightly is to fail to appreciate how lost we would be without the light we have received from God. God wants us to know the truth and to come to Him.

Second, our beliefs or doctrine hold us fast in days of uncertainty. The New Testament authors spoke so much of truth, precisely because they were writing from a context of polytheism (many gods). Our day is no better.

Third, believing aright is an important gauge of our loving faithfulness to God. Indeed, in the Old Testament we are told that the existence of false prophets was a test of whether God's people love him with all of their hearts and their souls (Deut. 13:3).

Fourth, the better we grasp Christian doctrine the greater our usefulness to Christ. Some need a mature understanding for leadership in the church, but we all need it for explaining our Christian hope (1 Pet. 3:15). Indeed, our ineffectiveness in sharing and defending the faith and in discerning error (Acts 17:11) is, in many cases, directly attributable to the paucity of our understanding of Scripture.

RIGHT LIVING

Attending to what we believe should never leave us careless about how we live. Christianity certainly engages the head, but it does so that the heart may be changed. While Christ was in need of no change of heart, his life nevertheless stands as our abiding example. The prologue of John's Gospel teaches us that he was as full of grace as he was of truth, and as full



of truth as he was of grace (Jn. 1:14). In other words, he balanced perfectly the dual importance of Christian belief and grace. To this day, his example is our ideal.

Right living is important, first, because it glorifies God. “By this my Father is glorified,” said Jesus to his disciples, “that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples” (Jn. 15:16). Right living—i.e., living as God intended (which is ultimately possible only in relationship to him)—demonstrates God’s power in recreating fallen sinners in the image of Christ.

Secondly, right living furthers the work of the church. While the world is not looking for perfect Christians, it is looking for the changed lives Christ promised. Changed lives make real to unbelieving eyes Christ’s saving power.

Thirdly, right living is best for us. Our personal histories tell us of the havoc of sin. When, through the power of Christ, we live as we should, we come to realize more fully the *shalom* or blessedness of being a Christian.

In short, writes commentator J. C. Ryle, “Christianity is eminently a practical religion: sound doctrine is its root and foundation, but holy living should always be its fruit.” Let us then seek, for all these reasons, to live as much as we know, and then set about knowing and living some more.

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