

Why Study Doctrine?

By David Feddes

Why study doctrine? To answer that question, let's first think about what doctrine is and what our source of doctrine is. Then we'll deal with some objections that people have against doctrine, and we'll see why it is so important to study doctrine.

What is a doctrine?

“A doctrine is what the whole Bible teaches about a particular topic” (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*). A doctrine answers the question, “What does the Bible say about _____?”

What is our source of doctrine?

Our source of doctrine is God's written revelation in the Bible.

The Bible is not the only source of information about God. There is *general revelation*. Some things about God are reflected in things God has made. “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands” (Psalm 19:1). “God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (Romans 1:20).

Still, although general revelation shows some things about God, it is not our source of doctrine. Why not? One reason is that general revelation in the creation around us has been distorted and flawed by the impact of sin on the world. Many things in a fallen world are not in line with God's original design and send wrong signals about God. Another reason not to base doctrine on general revelation is that our minds have been warped by our fall into sin. We have a tendency to misread the signals that are coming to us from general revelation. Many people respond to general revelation with a sense of awe but then invent their own gods and goddesses and make up their own doctrines and morals.

Therefore, our source of doctrine must be God's *special revelation*. God has spoken and acted in special, saving ways. The actions and words God wants everyone to know have been written in the Bible. Doctrine comes from special revelation. The Bible is without error. That's the source to count on when we formulate doctrine. We can learn from other things. We can learn from history. We can learn from God's general revelation. But the source of doctrine and the test of all true doctrine is God's error-free special revelation as recorded in the Bible.

Complaints about doctrine

Not everybody is excited about studying doctrine. In fact, some people complain about doctrine. Here are three common complaints:

1. Isn't doctrine just a bunch of boring, big words?
2. Isn't experiencing God more real and important than studying doctrines?
3. Isn't dead doctrine a problem?

Let's think about each of these more carefully.

1. Is doctrine just a bunch of boring, big words?

Doctrine sometimes involves big words or difficult ideas. Here are a few examples: original sin, total depravity, condemnation, atonement, redemption, reconciliation, regeneration, justification, and sanctification.

Before we tell ourselves that big words aren't worth bothering with, here are some other big words: ventricular tachycardia, defibrillation, atherosclerosis, revascularization, and percutaneous transluminal coronary angioplasty. Those are huge words, but should we say, "All those big words are just a waste of time?" Well, consider how those words are used. When you have a heart problem, you need a doctor who knows the heart. You want your doctor to be able to recognize ventricular tachycardia (an irregular heartbeat) and to know about defibrillation (a procedure to get the heart beating in the proper rhythm again). You want a doctor who understands atherosclerosis (hardening or blockage of the arteries) and to understand percutaneous transluminal coronary angioplasty (a procedure to clear out blocked arteries). You don't want a doctor who says, "I want only small words and simple ideas." You want a heart specialist who understands the proper terms for the problems and the proper terms for the procedures that will help to solve those problems.

A church leader should be a heart specialist. To deal with the problems of your own heart and to help others with their heart problems, you need to understand some big words. Original sin is not just a phrase; it's a real problem that afflicts all of us. Total depravity means that sin affects every part of us and makes us unable to save ourselves. You face God's condemnation and punishment unless atonement pays the penalty for those sins. Redemption rescues you from evil. Reconciliation removes the distance between you and God. Regeneration gives you new birth and a new heart from God. It is important to understand doctrinal words that describe our spiritual heart problems. It is a joy to know words that explain how God saves us. As we experience these realities and grow in our understanding of doctrine, knowledge of these words can help us explain to others the impact of sin and the wonders of salvation.

2. Isn't experiencing God more real and important than studying doctrines?

Is experience better than doctrine? In a sense, yes. It's better to know God personally through encountering him and relating to him than just knowing some ideas about God. But that's not quite the whole story.

Think of it this way. The experience of shaking hands with a great person is more direct and real than reading about the person. But what if you only shook hands with somebody and that's all you ever knew of them? You wouldn't know them very well, would you? Now suppose you read letters from that person written for the very purpose of helping you to get acquainted with him, and suppose you read things written about him by people who know him better than you do. Your reading would help you to know him in ways that a handshake wouldn't.

Encountering and experiencing God directly is wonderful. You might have a powerful experience of God in his awesome creation. Or you might experience in your spirit an overwhelming touch from God. But that doesn't mean you should avoid reading. An experience is no substitute for paying attention to God's written Word. God wants us to understand him more, as well as to encounter him more and have stronger feelings about him. It is important that our hearts be stirred with feeling for God but also that our minds be informed by God's truth. Doctrine and experience belong together.

Experience of walking in a forest is more real than looking at a map. Seeing the trees, feeling the ground under your feet, breathing in the air—experiencing the forest is a stronger taste of reality than just looking at a map of the forest. A map is just colored paper. However, that piece of colored paper is based on many travelers' experiences, and you need the map if you want to make it safely to the forest lodge.

Christian doctrine is like a map. It's based not just on one person's experience but on the experiences of many people who knew God better than we do. We would not be wise to ignore the experiences recorded and explained in the Bible, or to ignore the truths mapped out by centuries of Christians who have studied the Bible and encountered God. We need to know the doctrinal map that guides us to God and to our eternal home. Experiencing God is great, but let's not just breathe in the sweet forest air; let's study and follow the map.

3. *Isn't dead doctrine a problem?*

A third objection to studying doctrine is the problem of dead doctrine: knowing lots of theology but not being spiritually alive and vibrant. Why study doctrine if it's just a lifeless skeleton, a bunch of dry bones?

A human skeleton by itself, without flesh or breath or a beating heart, is dead. That's true. But does that mean all bones and skeletons are bad? Would a living human body be better off without any bones, without a skeleton? It would just be a shapeless blob. While you wouldn't want to be just a skeleton without flesh and organs, you also wouldn't want to have no skeleton.

Churchgoers without doctrine have about as much shape as a formless blob. They are know-nothings without any firmness or or shape or backbone. While dead doctrine can be a problem, having no doctrine is also a problem. A Christian who is alive and healthy in Christ should have a doctrinal skeleton *and* have the living, breathing reality of the Christ-life.

We've considered three common complaints about doctrine, and we've found answers:

1. Big words can be valuable (and can also be explained in smaller words).
2. We need not just experiences but information and maps.
3. Lively Christianity has strong bones as well as a healthy heartbeat.

Why study doctrine? 4-D impact

Now back to our original question: Why study doctrine? Here are four reasons:

1. Discover truth and meaning
2. Deliver from sin and hell
3. Defend against Satan's lies
4. Delight in God's glory

First, we study doctrine to *discover* the truth of things and what they mean. Second, we need doctrine to *deliver* us from sin and hell. We find God's way of salvation by understanding and embracing sound doctrine. Third, we need doctrine to *defend* against Satan's lies. If a skilled liar is telling all sorts of falsehoods, we need to know what the truth is, or we'll be fooled and misled. Fourth, we need to study doctrine so that we can better *delight* in God's glory and give him the honor he deserves. Doctrine helps us to know God better and to adore him more.

1. Discover truth and meaning

Most people say they believe in God. But what God? Who is God? What is God like? Doctrine helps us discover what it means to believe in the true and living God.

Jesus died on a cross. All Christians believe this. But so what? Countless other people were also crucified during the time of the Roman Empire. How is Jesus' death any different? Why does Jesus' death matter more than those others? We need doctrine in order to discover the deeper truth about the purposes of Jesus' death.

The gospel is the power of God for salvation. But what is the gospel? What is salvation? To discover gospel truth, and to learn what salvation means, we must study sound doctrine.

2. Deliver from sin and hell

Doctrine is a matter of life and death. Bible-based doctrine shows how to be delivered from sin and hell. “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Timothy 4:16) There is a lot at stake! Good doctrine is key for your own salvation and the salvation of your hearers: family members, people you work with, members of a Bible study, people in a church that you lead.

Bad doctrine leads to hell. Jesus said, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are” (Mathhew 23:15). With false doctrine, you might be eager to make new followers and get them to join your group, but you don’t know the truth of Christ or the way of salvation. With false doctrine, if you succeed in making a follower, you just make him into a son of hell like you are. Those are tough words, but they come from the Son of God Himself.

In order to be delivered from sin and hell and to help others be delivered from sin and hell, we must learn sound doctrine and guard it closely.

3. Defend against Satan’s lies

Satan is a counterfeiter, a liar and the father of lies. Satan will come with all kinds of clever deceptions, so we need to have sound doctrine to defend against his falsehoods. “The Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and the doctrines of demons” (1 Timothy 4:1). Today it’s common to say, “All religions are true. Whatever you believe will work for you. All religions lead to the same God.” But that’s a lie. Doctrines that contradict the Bible are not merely alternate opinions from nice people; false doctrines come through the influence of deceitful demons. To recognize and reject the doctrines of demons, we must be well versed in the God-given doctrines of the Bible.

In studying true doctrine, we also look at false doctrines that have arisen during the history of the church. Remember, Satan believes in recycling: he takes a lie that worked centuries ago, and he uses it again and again. When people are doctrinally ignorant or don’t know the history of doctrine, they can be fooled by a lie that sounds good to them and seems like a new insight. But in reality it’s just an old lie of Satan that the church exposed and rejected long ago.

We need sound doctrine to defend against the devil. “An elder must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9). The devil is real. His fallen angels who work with him are real. Teachers who deceive others are real. Sound doctrine defends us against them.

4. Delight in God’s glory

A fourth reason to study doctrine is to delight in God’s glory. Scripture reveals “the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God” (1 Timothy 1:9). A more literal translation of the original Greek wording would be “the healthy teaching that matches the good news of the glory of the happy God.” What a great view of doctrine! It’s healthy teaching, and it matches up with the good news of the glory of the happy God. If you want to be happy in God’s happiness, then study some doctrine, some healthy teaching. I don’t blame you if you don’t want to study dry, boring books full of empty theories. But not all doctrine is dry. When you study healthy doctrine, you get living, vibrant good news of the glory of the happy God.

When we study doctrine, we need a good starting point. The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins by asking, “What is the chief end of man?” What’s it all about? Why do we exist? The answer: “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” John Piper puts it this way: “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.” All doctrine flows out of this understanding that humans are here to glorify God and to delight in him.

The Heidelberg Catechism gives a great starting point for doctrine in its first question and answer.

What is your only comfort in life and death?

That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me whole-heartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

That is a heartfelt expression of faith and a statement loaded with great doctrine.

When doctrinal viewpoints differ, it’s helpful to ask: Which approach makes me smaller and God bigger? Which approach makes me bigger and God smaller? Usually the better doctrine is the one that exalts God over me. The Heidelberg Catechism says my only comfort is that I’m not my own. I belong to Jesus. It’s not all about me or what I’ve done. It’s all about Jesus, the Father, and the Holy Spirit, and what the Lord does to save, protect, and lead me. This is doctrine that magnifies God, not me. Likewise, the Westminster Shorter Catechism says humanity’s main purpose is to glorify and enjoy God. God is the point. Any time you are evaluating a doctrine, ask yourself: Does it make me bigger and God smaller, or me smaller and God bigger? That’s a quick test of doctrine.

In summary, why study doctrine? Because of its 4-D impact. First, to *discover* the truth and what it means. Second, to *deliver* ourselves and others from sin and hell. Third, to *defend* against Satan’s lies. And fourth, to *delight* in God’s glory, to revel in him, to enjoy Him now and look forward to enjoying him forever. As you study doctrine, I pray that God will bless you as you walk with him and feast on his truth.