

Faith and Doctrine

We live in a world where the necessity for faith and truth is played down and minimised. The worldly concept of faith and truth is fluid, flexible, and without absolutes, to the point of irrelevance, except where faith and truth can be used for personal advantage. This is not new, as the world has always resisted the absolutes of spiritual and moral laws, especially ones found in God's Word. Believers were confronted in New Testament times with the same battles against faith and truth as we are today.

When speaking of faith in Jesus Christ we are forced to think through the matter of truth and doctrine.

“Doctrine refers to a set of beliefs that are held by a group of people. In this case, we are talking about a set of beliefs that are held by the church. The beliefs are clear enough to be taught by or to them. Doctrine can also refer to one of those beliefs, e.g., the doctrine of justification by faith. Again, it is sufficiently clear that it can be taught to people.” (Mbewe, Conrad. God's Design for the Church. Crossway. Kindle Edition.) For the Christian, doctrine should rise from the Word of God as the only authoritative source of truth which governs our beliefs and our teachings.

The importance of believing truth and translating those truths into doctrines that we teach cannot be overstated. Our living is always determined by what we believe, therefore, to grow the Church to maturity we must have sound doctrine. Doctrine is a central expression of our faith in God and our service to those we disciple. The Church must express faith in Christ through understanding God's truth and teaching those doctrinal truths to others. Wrong belief always leads to wrong living, and the Church is not exempt from this rule.

This is so central to Church life that the Lord made it a requirement of those who lead His people. Elders *“must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it”* (Titus 1:9). Beginning with the shepherds of the body of Christ, a tight grip on the doctrines taught through the Old Testament, plus those taught by Christ and the apostles must be maintained.

Elders are to be clear in their understanding of doctrine so that they are able to defend it when others come against it. Should the opposition to sound doctrine be aggressive, an elder should be able to rebuke the error of those who fight

truth with the Sword of the Spirit, exposing the error for what it is.

Satan, being *“the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God”* (2 Corinthians 4:4). Satan’s highest priority is to prevent people from knowing the truth of Jesus Christ. By doing this, he prevents unbelieving people from understanding the majestic glory of Christ who could be their Saviour if only they would repent. Unbelievers need to be taught the doctrine of Christ, even in the simplest of ways, so that they can see the son of God correctly. In understanding Christ correctly, a sinner will see themselves correctly, which leads to belief in the gospel truth.

Paul instructed Titus to warn God’s people against those who devote *“themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth”* (Titus 1:14). Resistance and even rebellion against the absolutes of God lives in the heart of sinful mankind. Paul wanted Titus to realise the severity of this problem which can easily impact the Church if we allow it. If we fill our minds with cultural myths and human thinking about spiritual matters,

we will certainly end up believing everything EXCEPT the truth. *“For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers”* (Titus 1:10). Titus had the job of countering all the false ideas and false beliefs through the clear teaching of truth. This is why biblical truths are called doctrines, and they are to be taught authoritatively.

As in all ages, we live in a time where people, generally speaking, do *“not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions,”*⁴ *and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths”* (2 Timothy 4:3-4). This is perhaps one of Satan’s most effective strategies within the Church, to convince people that they should only listen to teaching that satisfies their fleshly passions. Such people will only tolerate listening to sound doctrine for a short time. They will invariably rise to challenge Church leadership, demanding softer, more accommodating teachers. Sadly, if they do not get what they want, they will either go to war against the elders by causing division in the Church, or they will leave the Church all together.

These types of people can creep into the Church without being recognised for who they really are. Typically, they are

people who are *“always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth”* (2 Timothy 3:7). The absolutes of God’s Word are ugly to these people, and to be avoided at all cost. They will resist and complain about all kinds of definitive and authoritative teaching that makes the truth of God’s Word clear and believable. They are content to be on a journey of never ending spiritual exploration without ever arriving at the truth.

The apostle Paul addressed these kinds of people in the Corinth Church when he wrote *“I could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ”* (1 Corinthians 3:1). Towards the end of the same letter Paul again challenges these people by saying *“do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature”* (1 Corinthians 14:20). God’s desire for the Church is for believers to grow to maturity in their applied knowledge of doctrinal truth. Mature believers are strong believers who remain faithful to Christ.

The Church is the Buttress of Truth

The Church has both the privilege and the responsibility of being God’s truth bearers to the world. Paul gave Timothy a number of precise instructions for this very purpose, so that

he *“may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth”* (1 Timothy 3:15). The Church is God’s household, God’s place of dwelling through the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Twice in Isaiah 65:16, Isaiah states that Yahweh is *“the God of truth.”* Intrinsic to God’s holiness is His truthfulness. He is incapable of anything other than absolute and definitive truth. Therefore, the Psalmist proclaimed, *“the sum of your word is truth”* (Psalm 119:160). Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman at the well, *“God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth”* (John 4:24). The only acceptable expression of worship that accurately reflects the nature of God is worship permeated with truth.

The Church is the household of God’s people who manifest truth. Therefore, the teachings of the Church must be characterised by a consistent presentation of God centred, God authored truth which flows out of God’s Word of truth, the Bible. Doctrine is simply the structured and orderly presentation of biblical truth on God’s behalf as His ambassadors (2Co 5:20). The Churches’ presentation of

God's truth is evidence that they are the living human
"church of the living God."

Paul unashamedly tells Timothy, that the Church, regardless of age or maturity, is *"a pillar and buttress of the truth."*

Paul uses common building terminology to describe the importance of these qualities. The pillar would have been a stone column that held up the upper levels of the building as well as the roof. While the buttress would have been any supporting structure, from the foundation to any other supporting or stabilising materials used in the building. Many Bible translations simply refer to the buttress and the foundation, which is true, but a little limiting.

Paul's point is clear, as *"a pillar and buttress of the truth"* the Church is where people go to be presented with consistent and strong truth from God. In order to be a *"pillar and buttress"* the truth that is proclaimed must be strong enough to support the entire structure of belief and life as representative of God Himself. Paul is impressing heavily upon Timothy the absolute essential nature of teaching sound doctrines as structures for a correct faith in God. When the whirlwinds of life and error blast against the Church, it stands firm in Christ because it has been

methodically built using Biblical *“pillars and buttresses.”* The Church is therefore, to be the safe house where people run for spiritual safety and security because the Church is built strong with the building material of God’s truth.

Paul’s description of God’s building material used in the Church enables us to understand more clearly the intensity of his exhortation to the Corinth Church. Having been purified by the Lord from all the fleshing sins detailed in 1 Corinthians, Paul writes again for restoration, reconciliation and strengthening of this revived Church. *“For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. ⁵ We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ”* (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

The *“strongholds”* Paul speaks of are the *“arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God.”* The Church is the strong house of God where truth is proclaimed with strength and clarity for the purpose of destroying wrong thinking about God. Whether it’s a non-believer with a completely wrong understanding of God, or a believer with an inaccurate or distorted understanding of God, Church is the place to have them corrected. In fact,

the truth of God's Word is to have the effect of destroying error.

Not only so, but the *divine power* of God through His Word goes onto *"take every thought captive to obey Christ."* Every time Scripture is proclaimed it is an offensive weapon of God, the Sword of the Spirit, attacking Satan's wrong thinking in the minds and hearts of the hearers. The Church is the household of God's people who have had their thoughts, their beliefs, taken prisoner by Christ. The evidence of this divine work is that the Church is to obey the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sound Doctrine Sanctifies

The Church is unique, it stands alone in a privileged place of service for Christ as a body of redeemed sinners. *"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God"* (Ephesians 2:19). Paul specifically told the Galatian believers that they were part of *"the household of faith"* (Galatians 6:10), as it is faith which is given by God (Eph 2:8) and it is faith that initiates salvation through the gospel. Saved sinners are immediately baptised into Christ and made members of Christ's body, the Church (Rom 6:3).

Now, joined together as saints of God they live for a new purpose, with new connected relationships with other saved sinners. Owned by God, for God, and energised by God, these citizens function as a family household for the pleasure and glory of their heavenly Father. This justified body of believers now wish to *“do all to the glory of God”* (1 Corinthians 10:31).

But the problem is, we saved sinners know that we *“have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out”* (Romans 7:18) in our own strength. We all know that we are not as holy in our living as we wish we were. Praise God, He has provided the lifelong ministry of the indwelling Holy Spirit to persistently carry on with the work of sanctification. Sanctification is the constant development of increasing holiness, increasing purity. Paul described it this way, *“may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Every part of our lives is being purified continuously, and this will continue until the Lord Jesus returns. Sanctification is a spiritual work that practically strives to change us so that we become closer and closer to

being blameless. This takes time and much patience, and the God of all grace perseveres at this work in our lives.

Realising this, the members of God's household treat each other differently, *"speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ"* (Ephesians 4:15). When truth is spoken with a loving attitude and in a loving tone of voice, in loving relationships, truth becomes a powerful and effective tool for God. The goal of truthful love is Christlikeness. This is the wonderful ministry of sanctification, growing, changing, developing, forgiving, and kindly reconciling relationships for the glory of Christlike character. This is holiness in practice. This is the desire of the Head of the Church for His body.

Sanctification must touch every relationship in a believer's life with the truth of God's Word so that the fruit of righteousness can be produced. Paul taught on the ways in which believers are to treat each other in many of his letters. And he made an interesting application to Titus regarding the behaviour of Christian slaves towards their masters. *"Slaves are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative,"*¹⁰ *not pilfering, but showing all good faith,*

so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour" (Titus 2:9-10). Even in the most difficult and demanding relationships, the believer is to live Christ's submission. A submissive attitude resists arguing, and it submits for the blessing of the other person.

This Christlike submission is the manifestation of *good faith*, genuine faith, a faith that comes from God. Now watch the connection Paul makes not in verse 10. Faith is to *adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour*. That is, faith decorates the believer for the public display of doctrine. God intends faith to be displayed for everyone to see the truths and teachings of God's Word in your life. Doctrine is central to living by faith and living a sanctified life for Christ. Without doctrine we cannot know how to live because we cannot know the truth of God that is to be applied. Members of the Church are constantly *"being transformed into the same image* (Christlikeness) *from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit*" (2 Corinthians 3:18). The Holy Spirit relentlessly works in our lives, through joyful and painful times, through victories and failures, to transform God's children to be more like His Son. And sanctification requires the truth of doctrine to do this.

Some will resist doctrine

As we noted earlier in this lesson, wherever God is at work you will also find Satan at work. Satan will use any method at his disposal to dilute God's truth and convince people that the doctrines of God are of no value. Most often Satan will employ the services of people who are happy to become a member of a local Church, because that is where they can cause the most damage on Satan's behalf. Large portions of the New Testament are dedicated to instructing the Church on how to deal with such people and with their wrong teachings.

In the closing chapter of Paul's letter to the Church in Rome, having written the most detailed and exquisite explanation of the gospel, he ends with a warning. *"I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them."*¹⁸ *For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve"* (Romans 16:17-18). Fifteen chapters of the most majestic doctrinal truths of God and salvation with many practical applications given, equipped the readers to defend against the enemies' attacks from within. No matter how nice, how attractive, how

smooth talking, or how wealthy a person may be, if they cause division over the doctrines taught in God's Word, they are to be avoided. Doctrinal error can never produce purity. Error always promotes the self-righteousness of the person promoting the error, and it always seeks to divide the Church instead of building unity.

Often, Satan uses *smooth talk and flattery* (to) *deceive the hearts of the naïve* people in the Church who are not mature in their faith. This happens partly because those who are not knowledgeable with applied theology have minds open to worldly or fleshly thinking. Often error will sound appealing because it seeks to satisfy fleshly *appetites*. It is up the mature Church members, especially elders, to keep an eye out for such divisive people sneaking into the Church.

Paul carefully instructed the Ephesian Church on this very matter. Pastors, Teachers, and Evangelists all minister in the Church for the spiritual growth of believers. This is for the purpose that all members of your Church *“may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes”* (Ephesians 4:14).

Faithfulness in teaching the whole counsel of God (Act 20:27) to the whole assembly of God's people grows inoculation against Satan's devious schemes of error, division, and sinful living. As the writer to the Hebrews cautioned, *"let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God"* (Hebrews 6:1). Gifted teachers are to be careful to mature the diet of Bible teaching as the Church ages. Satan uses *human cunning* to deceive believers who permanently remain babylike in the Christian faith.

Resistance against sound biblical doctrine is the devil's work. Resistance never causes sanctification for greater holiness. Resistance always produces more and more sins of the heart. The sinful heart will eventually leak out sins of anger, unforgiveness, lying, carnal behaviour, outbursts of temper, and division of Christ's Church. So, Paul says, *watch out* for such people, and protect God's Church from such people.

Conclusion

The local Church is to be the school of truth, the local school of biblical theology, of gospel compelled doctrine.

The local Church is to be the place where people in the community go to discover spiritual realities as spoken by God. It is the Church that teaches God's truth for the purpose of persuading others to become believers of truth. There is to be NOTHING random, haphazard, or casual about the local Churches proclamation of sound doctrine. Biblical doctrine is evangelistic, it's practical by nature, and it's satisfying. Doctrine happily expresses faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We shall give the last word to our brother Paul.

"It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (Philippians 1:9-11).