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You Lose!

The Detrimental Effects of the Decline of Doctrine

by G. Richard Fisher

Modern theology is in a crisis. The Evangelical and Charismatic churches have a huge identity problem and they do not even know it. Discernment is declining and there is no doubting that the Church at large has lost its way. For a number of years the American Church has been the target of marketeers interested only in profit. These hucksters will sell anything regardless of its content. We are inundated and buried under a deluge of fads, countless vapid books, and "Jesus junk."

There is even a recent book on praying backwards and the cover of the volume assures you that you can "transform your prayer life by beginning in Jesus' Name."¹ What Bruce Wilkinson's *Prayer of Jabez* did not do, this one may — and all one has to do is use the mantra "Jesus" at the beginning of the prayer. The marketeers get rich while the Church is facing doctrinal poverty. The Church at large is sick unto death. The plague of doctrinal ignorance is stalking the land. As Isaiah once said, "The whole head is sick, And the whole heart faints" (Isaiah 1:5b).



Commenting on the book of Titus and the problems in Crete, author and pastor James Draper observes:

"God put a divine order in the church. He gave the church his Word, the basis for all we do and say. If our interpretation or creed contradicts at any point with the Word of God, the Word of God is to be our authority. To make sure this is done, God gave the churches pastors and leaders in the church. They are to keep pure the teachings of the church. These heretics in Crete had no willingness to accept the authority of the Word of God or the apostolic authority within the church."²

WHICH SIDE ARE WE ON?

The most basic question is not being asked. It is an absolutely fundamental question. That question is, "Are Evangelical pastors and leaders staying

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true and affirming good doctrine?" Unfortunately, the answer is, "Not always," and that is a huge part of the problem. Ken Blanchard, for instance, is selling us seminars entitled, "Lead Like Jesus," but he himself has hardly been leading like Jesus. These seminars have the endorsement of leading Evangelicals and no one can fault the premise. The rub is that Blanchard, for many years, has been personally endorsing and even more than that, writing endorsements for New Age authors including Deepak Chopra. He has sung the praises of the Hoffman Process, which is of the occult. He is promoting enemy doctrine. We used to call it working both sides of the street.

help us. Subjectivity is a counterfeit Christianity. People are looking for inner voices when they should be finding appropriate *verses*.

The psalmist David so often struggled with his roller coaster emotions, but he knew that the direction he ultimately had to go was not within his "guts," but outside of himself. He knew his help was not from within himself or his fluctuating emotions and thought processes, but from the living, reigning Lord. He declared, "I will lift up my eyes to the hills; From whence comes my help? My help comes from the LORD, Who made heaven and earth" (Psalm 121:1-2). Again he says, "Unto You I lift up my eyes, O You who dwell in the heavens" (Psalm 123:1). God within, for meditation and communi-

church *per se*, but is largely a protest against fundamentalism, evangelicalism, and the past. What it will emerge into is a big question. Men like Brian McLaren, Rob Bell, Dan Kimball, and even the writings of the late Mike Yaconelli are telling us that the emphasis of churches should be almost entirely on tolerance, feelings, affections, experimentation, and experience — but not doctrine.

The emerging church, though an amorphous group, protests against conservatives and the previous generation of evangelicals as if they did nothing right. They seem to be orphans with amnesia and no past. After all, everything but their groups is outdated, they say. They alone understand current culture. Further out are sub-groups like Pete Ward's "Liquid Church" and Spencer Burke's TheOoze.com.⁵

In truth, the emerging church is simply repackaged liberalism and what was called higher criticism.

Rob Bell is typical of the emerging church mentality. He actually calls his church Mars Hill (located just outside Grand Rapids, Mich.), and has a membership of 10,000. Mars Hill (Acts 17) was a place that existed to discuss every thought and theory that man could concoct. Bell's new book, regrettably published by Zondervan, is entitled *Velvet Elvis*. His premise is that the Evangelical church, until now, is like an old, outdated Elvis picture painted on a velvet backdrop. Bell says he has one collecting dust in the basement. Bell's goal is to paint a new Jesus and a new Church. *The Grand Rapids Press* reported:

Blanchard's zero-percent discernment level can also be questioned in regard to his endorsement of Henri Nouwen. Nouwen, a deceased Roman Catholic priest, was sympathetic to Hindu and Buddhist beliefs. Blanchard quotes Nouwen's words favorably:

"To pray is to let that voice speak to the center of your being — to your guts."³

Is "that voice" in your "guts" the voice of God? Here both Blanchard and Nouwen confuse prayer, which is speaking up and out to our Heavenly Father, with working up inner voices and falling into the tangle of our imaginations and emotions. Dangerous indeed. If faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God (Romans 10:17), our "guts" will not

cation, is a Hindu construct and leads to the illusion of human godhood.

Blanchard has released a statement saying he would no longer write endorsements for New Age and occultic books, but will he also condemn New Age and Hindu philosophy as non-biblical? And then, too, will he withdraw existing endorsements as he should? Only time will tell. He needs to make a stand. Theology without apologetics is not the robust theology of the New Testament. When Jesus led, He affirmed truth and condemned error.

THEOLOGICAL BUFFET

Add to the above the fact that we are contending with the writings from what is called the emerging or emergent church movement.⁴ It is not a

"Bell also shakes up traditional evangelical beliefs. While calling Christ's way 'the best possible way to live,' Bell writes Jesus did not claim one religion is better than another when he said he was 'the way, the truth and the life.' Rather, he writes, 'his way is the way to the depth of reality.'"⁶

Because Zondervan is publishing books both for and against the emerging church, the publisher might need to be renamed Mars Press. In truth, the emerging church is simply repackaged liberalism and what was called

higher criticism. Paul had a dogmatic message to those at Mars Hill.

NOT REALLY SENSITIVE

Some make the mistake of lumping in the “seeker sensitive” churches with the emerging church. This is not to give a thumbs up to seeker sensitive methods necessarily, but only to state they predate the emerging church by decades. The emergent groups even accuse the seeker sensitive groups of being behind the times.

Jesus instructed us to keep on teaching His commands until the end of the age. Surely the age has not ended unless one believes Harold Camping!¹⁷ Paul taught a definite cause and effect in 2 Timothy 4:3-4 and that when people turn from the truth they *will* turn to fables, “The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears from the truth and be turned aside to fables.” The trend to abandon doctrine for fads and myths is being fulfilled before our eyes.

Harry Ironside comments:

“And we see the evidence of that on every hand. People turn away from the truth and take up with — what? With Spiritism, Theosophy, and all kinds of other weird systems and strange cults. They turn away from the truth to satanic doctrines that lead men down to perdition.”⁸

The New Testament repeatedly warns us of disregarding apostolic doctrine and promoting false doctrine. The early gnostics were adept at this in the pre-Nicene period and the history of the Church can be viewed from the standpoint of the struggle against false teaching and heresies. Heresy abounded in the first few centuries of the Church, but the leaders and writers were rock-solid apologists. This is no longer the case. The big names and highly visible writers of our times are helping to spread the confusion and apologists are few and far between. Doctrine

and discernment are out, mysticism and subjectivism are in. Apologists are out, flakiness is in.

GNOSTICISM RIDES AGAIN

Philip Jenkins makes us aware of the fact that gnostic myths long ago trounced and defeated by the Church are enjoying a comeback and replacing sound doctrine today:

“...dense mystical texts written 1800 years ago by obscure Syrian and Egyptian heretics have demonstrated real appeal for a modern mass audience. The alternate gospels play a central role in the ‘Jesus books’ published by the major commercial publishing houses, which give the impression that *Thomas, Peter*, and the rest do in fact represent gospel truth, that they even predate the famous four evangelists. The picture of early Christianities described here has been popularized not just through academic books and articles but through many popular presentations, in television documentaries such as the PBS series *From Jesus To Christ*, broadcast in 1998. Through such means, texts like *Thomas* have become a familiar presence in religious debate and consciousness. As one orthodoxy is established, so older ideas are relabeled as deviant or marginal: in terms of understanding early Christianity, the heretical has virtually become orthodox, and vice versa.”⁹

Greek scholar Kenneth Wuest shows us the Greek nuances and tenses and renders Paul’s words in 2 Timothy 4:3-4 as follows:

“...dominated by their own personal cravings, they, having ears that desire merely to be gratified, shall gather to themselves an accumulation of teachers. In fact, from the truth they shall also avert the ear, and [as a result] they shall receive a moral twist which will cause them to believe that which is fictitious.”¹⁰

So there is this horrible danger and a detrimental effect when doctrine is

ignored and that ignorance justified. Philip Jenkins adds:

“...the emphasis on the ‘real’ Jesus of the alternative gospels ‘appears to legitimate precisely the sort of religion that a large swathe of America yearns for: a free-for-all, do-it-yourself spirituality with a strong agenda of social protest against the powers that be and an I’m-OK-you’re-OK attitude on all matters religious and ethical. You can have any sort of spirituality you like (Zen, walking labyrinths on church floors, Tai Chi) as long as it isn’t orthodox Christianity.’ Some have given this eclectic creed the suspect title of ‘flexodoxy,’ flexible orthodoxy.”¹¹

WELCOME TO WONDERLAND

In *Through the Looking-Glass and what Alice found there*, Alice asks the Cheshire cat, “Would you tell me, please which way I ought to walk from here?” The cat responds, “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” to which Alice responds, “I don’t much care where.” The cat then says, “Then it doesn’t matter which way you walk.”

Well, it does matter. And for the true Christian, it matters a lot. The discerning believer wants to walk a biblical path, knowing that a biblical path is the only path that is ultimately safe and has God’s blessing. How strange then that from within the corridors of the Charismatic and Evangelical churches (as we’ll see), some are suggesting that we can live without direction and doctrine.

The Apostle Paul also said, “Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine” (1 Timothy 4:13). The Greek word for attention, *prosecho*, was used of a priest attending to God’s altar. It means to give devotion of thought and effort, and to be wholly devoted to doctrine. It involves thinking about doctrine and working at knowing it. It also carries the idea of perpetuating good doctrine for the sake of Christ and others.

The Evangelical and Charismatic churches have lost their way and are

awash on a sea of fads and emotions. They have in many cases surrendered their doctrinal road map to the devil. We need those who will rise up and help others find their way again. Let us progress systematically through the problem and the solution.

1. *There is a definite neglect of doctrine:* The Church has battled the issue of doctrinal neglect and false doctrine for centuries. In the book of Acts, Paul constantly countered false teaching with sound doctrine. From the beginning of the Church, Jenkins tells us, "Christian communities already believed there was true doctrine, and there was false, and such a dichotomy is evident throughout the New Testament, ... the concept is assuredly present, in the stark enunciations of 'deceivers,' 'antichrists,' and false prophets; ... For these early writers, it was quite conceivable for an intellectual current to place itself completely beyond the bounds of the Christian movement."¹²

SMALL BEGINNINGS

Those who neglect good doctrine *always end up in heresy*. However, when the good guys began to neglect doctrine, problems really mounted. In our day, there are those we thought were the good guys who are not only neglecting good doctrine, but denying it and denigrating it. Like the Israelites of old, good is being called evil (Isaiah 5:20).

The slippery slide among Protestants really began in the 17th century with George Fox and the Quakers. Apologist Ron Rhodes gets to the core of Quakerism and the "Inner Light" concept:

"This Inner Light doctrine ultimately meant that revelation was no longer limited to the Scriptures. Even though the Bible is to be valued, its words should not be taken as God's final and definitive revelation. New revelations could come today just as they did in the days of the apostles. After all, the men who wrote the Bible did so under the power of the Holy Spirit. Since that same Holy Spirit works

through us today, revelations can continue today."¹³

Here is the frightening part: While Quakerism was once a marginalized minority, it is *the face of and the working philosophy of the Charismatic and Evangelical church by and large today*. The Latter Rain Apostles and Prophets Movement is repackaged Quakerism with a vengeance. Henry Blackaby's "Experiencing God" is a euphemism for experiencing one's own emotions.¹⁴

Quaker Richard Foster is one of the hottest tickets today.¹⁵ Medieval Catholic mysticism is now being touted as a deeper and more spiritual way. Contemplative practices from the Dark Ages are being dragged out of the attic and dusted off and sold as the newest form of spirituality. Presbyterian feminist Mary Ann Lundy is right when she said that "yesterday's heresies are becoming tomorrow's Book of Order."¹⁶ And it is all under the guise of "evangelical" and "spiritual" and "deep."

Added to the mysticism that leavened Christianity since the time of the Quakers was the ferment in the Academic world called the "Enlightenment." Some would argue that the word enlightenment is a misnomer. It was more the "Endarkenment." The period of so-called "Enlightenment" was the "rationalist, liberal, humanitarian, and scientific trend of thought of the 18th cent[ury]."¹⁷ Names such as Voltaire (Francois-Marie Arouet), David Hume, Thomas Paine, and Immanuel Kant are associated with the movement. In essence, the idea that seemed most prevalent was that knowledge did not begin with God and the revelation of God in the Word, but with man. However, we know from Scripture that the inexorable law is that when man rules God out and is left to himself, he begins to invent superstitions. As John Calvin said, "man's nature ... is a perpetual factory of idols."¹⁸

Mysticism and "enlightenment" thought merge as man tries to figure things out apart from Scripture and

moves into all kinds of mystical subjective extremes. In some extreme Charismatic circles, clichés are being used comparing Scriptures to moldy bread, old words, and other such things. The "soaking" prayer centers of John Arnott, which are just repackaged and renamed Toronto blessing replete with altered states and visualization, encourage seeking God within emotions and experiences as not only an adjunct to the Bible, but superior to it. There is really nothing new in Toronto. Kits to set up your own soaking center can be purchased, of course.

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

We see here Quakerism and enlightenment at full tilt. Mystical writers are being touted as if they were Protestant saints. But it gets worse. Some people within the extreme wing of the Charismatics actually denigrate and despise doctrine. Trinity Broadcasting Network founder and president Paul Crouch has gone so far as to ridicule doctrine and call it "doo-doo." There is an obvious hatred and venom as far as doctrine is concerned. Crouch obviously has many other motives in trying to "deep six" Bible doctrine. Most of what is promoted on his TBN would fold if anyone there were observing what the Bible really says.

A more credible Paul, this one a true apostle, advises, "Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, *contrary to the doctrine which you learned*, and avoid them. For those who are such *do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ*, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple" (Romans 16:17-18, emphasis added). Paul also commands the elders to "labor in the word and doctrine" (1 Timothy 5:17). Additionally, Paul commands respect for doctrine, saying it is to be shown "integrity" and "reverence" (Titus 2:7).

Kevin Reeves, a former Charismatic extremist, in considering modern day false prophets and prophecies, expresses his concerns about the growing rejection of doctrine:

“Due in large part to a variety of powerful movements within the Church during the 1990’s, Christianity itself is undergoing a dramatic redefinition. Despite its description for the pure doctrine of the gospel once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3), the word ‘orthodox’ has taken on almost profane connotations. For a Christian to stand up and declare a simple faith in the written text of Scripture is to invite almost certain ridicule in some sectors of the believing community. It is becoming an increasingly common practice to openly denigrate adherence to the Scriptures alone. The familiar mantra of ‘God is doing a new thing’, has effectively squelched sincere examination of certain doctrines making an impromptu appearance in the average congregation. The peer pressure to ‘jump into the river’, no matter how muddied the theological waters, has proven to be an impetus hard to resist. No one wants to be thought ‘unspiritual’, and that is exactly the inference applied if a church member refuses to ‘get with the program’ — even if the program is Biblically flawed.”¹⁹

MASS CONFUSION

Sensationalist author Jim Rutz gives himself to ranting and creates a straw man regarding doctrine when he claims that the Catholic Church has killed “25 million over the centuries ... for being heretics.” Whether this figure is accurate or not is not the point. Rutz argues the deaths occurred and it “all started with doctrine. Following the early church’s struggles with heresies, finely tuned systems of doctrine were hammered out. Eye-crossing, i-dotting precision was achieved, even in issues like the nature of the Trinity, the incarnation of Christ, and the conflict between predestination and free will, all of which are beyond the abilities of men’s minds to explain fully.”²⁰

Rutz needs to learn the difference between Roman Catholic dogma and biblical doctrine. That is, the differ-

ence between true doctrine and false doctrine. He also needs to understand that true doctrine did not lead to Catholicism’s programs and inquisitions, but rather their false view of having the power of the State and the power of capital punishment for all dissenters to Roman Catholic dogma and tradition. This was not about the Bible or Bible doctrine, but about everyone in those times being subject to the Pope and Rome’s whims. The Roman Catholic Church was willing to use sword and flame to force total compliance to their false teachings and authority. This certainly is a misplaced absolutism. For Rutz to equate sound doctrine in Scripture to Catholic heresies is a horrible distortion and is downright irresponsible. No wonder the people reading Rutz (mostly Charismatic audiences) equate true doctrine with evil.

And there are others. A true believer can only shudder as they hear the following from religious writer Frederick Buechner as he gives his opinion about the Bible:

“In short, one way to describe the Bible, written by many different men over a period of three thousand years and more, would be to say that it is a disorderly collection of sixty-odd books which are often tedious, barbaric, obscure, and teem with contradictions and inconsistencies. It is a swarming compost of a book, an Irish stew of poetry and propaganda, law and legalism, myth and murk, history and hysteria.”²¹

DEFINITION, PLEASE

Before proceeding, it is essential to pause and establish a definition of doctrine. The Greek words for doctrine are *didache* (pronounced did-ah-kay) and *didaskalia*. Both basically mean instruction, teaching, or what is taught. The Scriptures circumscribe the word so that we know what it is, and what it is not. It is not just teaching in general or just anyone’s teaching, but is the *teachings of the apostles and those authorized by the apostles*. Everett Harrison defines doc-

trine as “the teaching of Scripture on theological themes.”²² The following Scriptures reveal how we are to view New Testament doctrine:

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42).

“That you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior”²³ (2 Peter 3:2).

“If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 14:37).

Fred Zaspel and Tom Wells elaborate on the uniqueness of the apostles’ teaching and doctrine, showing the centrality of the Holy Spirit and how the Holy Spirit gives their doctrine final authority:

“His promise is to his apostles. This is the task for which he had called them. *They* will be taught ‘everything.’ The Holy Spirit will remind *them* of ‘everything’ which Jesus had spoken. The Spirit will guide *them* into ‘all truth.’ This is the Spirit’s role. Jesus’ teaching ministry to his disciples was not complete when he died, but through his replacement, the Holy Spirit, he had provided for its continuation and completion.”²⁴

They continue:

“There is something of a parallel here. Just as the Son had come to speak for the Father, so also the Spirit would come to speak for the Son. ‘He will not speak on his own’; he will speak for and of Christ. This is his great role in the history of revelation. He is commissioned to ensure that these chosen men will recall all that the Lord had taught them when he was with them, to guide them into a fuller understanding of it, and to continue that teaching until it is complete. He will

give them illumination, fuller revelation, and new revelation. This 'other helper' will bring the climactic revelation of the Son to its culmination."²⁵

These authors then press home all the implications of the Spirit's special ministry to the apostles and why their *didache* is so singular and to be heeded by all the Church:

"Jesus, then, is emphasizing not only the uniqueness of the Holy Spirit, he is also stressing the uniqueness of the apostles. They are the repositories of God's full and final revelation. God has spoken fully and finally in no less than his Son. God's climactic word 'was declared at first through the Lord, and it was confirmed to us by those who heard him' (Heb. 2:3)."²⁶

That is why Paul can say to Timothy, "you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine" (1 Timothy 1:3). However, because so many in the Church today are ignoring these words, the Church has become a sieve instead of a fortress, and everything is getting through. The wall between true and false doctrine has become so porous that the average Christian is not only confused, but defenseless.

BY ANY OTHER NAME

Doctrine could be referred to as teachings, commands, and even the apostles' "tradition," or "our word" as in 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14. The apostles' traditions or literally teachings (*paradosis* is the handing down of instructions or laws) were ultimately written down in our New Testament.

F.F. Bruce clears up any confusion that might occur when we speak of the apostles' traditions:

"...revelation and apostolic tradition are but two sides of one coin. Jesus does not figure simply in apostolic tradition as Moses does in rabbinic tradition: as the ever-living Christ He maintains and authenticates the tradition throughout the apostolic age until it ceases to be oral tradition and becomes Holy Scripture. ...

Whereas Western Christians tend to set 'scripture' and 'tradition' over against each other, as though tradition were oral only and not written, there is no reason why tradition should not take written form. If it is apostolic tradition, in due course it takes written form and becomes apostolic scripture."²⁷

Another way in which doctrine is referred to is the "form" or "pattern of sound words." Paul says to "hold fast the pattern of sound words which you heard from me" (2 Timothy 1:13). In Romans 6:17, Paul says, "yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered." As Bernard Ramm suggested many years ago, apostolic doctrine was the pattern of authority for the Church.

Missed by some is the fact that when Paul refers to "*the faith*," he is referring to doctrine. To say *the faith*, is a way of referring not to our personal, individual, subjective faith, but rather the content of our faith, that is, what we believe. *The faith* is what we believe in. When faith is preceded by the Greek word *tas* (the), it is a synonym for doctrine or as Ernest Wilson states, it's a "synonym for the message itself. ... the doctrine believed."²⁸ It is "*the faith* once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3, emphasis added).

Listen again to Paul:

"Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from *the faith*, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, ... If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed" (1 Timothy 4:1, 6, emphasis added).

Nowadays no one seems to carefully follow doctrine, so no wonder the devilish doctrines are so prevalent. How fitting then for our Lord to have asked, "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find

the faith on the earth?"²⁹ (Luke 18:8).

HUNG UP

New Age adherents and others often accuse believers of being "hung up" on doctrine. Would to God that more Christians were. The derogatory statements in regard to our attachment to doctrine should not throw us off from realizing that false teachers are following and espousing doctrine as well. The problem is it is false doctrine as Paul predicted.

Benjamin Creme pontificates on God:

"In a sense there is no such thing as God, God does not exist. And in another sense, there is nothing else but God, only God exists. ... This microphone is God. This table is God. All is God. And because all is God there is no God."³⁰

Realize it or not, that is doctrine. It is foolish, contradictory, and false doctrine, but it is doctrine nevertheless.

Pop-icon Madonna can obfuscate and play word games all she wishes when she says:

"I can disagree with doctrines and dogmas, and still celebrate them. I go to the synagogue. I study Hinduism. [Religion is] about realizing that all paths lead to God in the end, and that everybody decided ... to sort of segregate and say, 'No, these are my rules. No, I believe that God came from here. No, I believe that Jesus is not the Son of God. No, I believe in this, and I believe in that.' And the thing is ... they're all the same."³¹

Unfortunately like Creme, Madonna needs a course in logic. Something cannot be different and the same. This kind of rambling nonsense and stacking of contradictions is her own doctrine and dogma, as false, silly, and illogical as it is. Madonna may hate and reject biblical doctrine, but she is espousing false doctrine.

Across the board there is not only the neglect of apostolic doctrine, but

the despising and denigrating of that sound doctrine. This leads, as Paul says, to the promotion of mythical doctrine.

2. *Distinctions and nuances that need to be addressed:* One of the nuances that needs to be stressed is that a group may call its teaching doctrine, but that does not equate it with the Bible or the apostles' doctrine. The Bible is very clear that there is false teaching, heresy, and error contrary to the doctrines we have learned in the Bible. You can call something a rose, but if it looks like a dandelion and smells like one, it probably is a dandelion. That the apostles' doctrine was the bedrock of the orthodox Church and for the early Church Fathers and the Reformers, there is no doubt. It is only in these modern times of relativism and mysticism that the Church has moved away from propositional truth.

Ignatius, in A.D. 105, declared, "Study, therefore, to be established in the doctrines of the Lord and the apostles."³²

In A.D. 180, Irenaeus stated that the Church "is guarded and preserved without any forging of Scriptures, by a very complete system of doctrine."³³

Tertullian, in A.D. 197, asserted, "We hold communion with the apostolic churches because our doctrine is in no respect different than theirs. This is our witness of truth."³⁴

Cyprian, in the mid-third century, upheld biblical doctrine, stating, "So, then, neither the apostle himself nor an angel from heaven can preach or teach anything other than what Christ has once taught and that His apostles have announced. Therefore, I wonder very much from where this practice has originated. For it is contrary to the evangelical and apostolic discipline."³⁵

John Calvin reflects the Reformers and their realization of and insistence on the absolute necessity of a fixed body of doctrine:

"For if we reflect how prone the human mind is to lapse into forgetfulness of God, how

readily inclined to every kind of error, how bent every now and then on devising new and fictitious religions, it will be easy to understand how necessary it was to make such a depository of doctrine as would secure it from either perishing by the neglect, vanishing away amid the errors, or being corrupted by the presumptuous audacity of men."³⁶

How desperately we need the doctrines of Scripture. Sane voices in the Church echoed it over and over.

WORN OUT CLICHÉS

A second nuance is: Clichés that are often used in an attempt to silence us.

This "you are narrow" put-down is often thrown out along with the cliché that "doctrine divides." Yes it does; it divides truth from error, right from wrong, and good from evil.

Name calling is often used and discerning people are called "heresy hunters" or "Pharisees" or other derogatory names. A discernor is said to have a "religious spirit."

Another cliché is that doctrine is too narrow. Since Jesus talked of the narrow way (Matthew 7:13-14), that should not bother us at all. This "you are narrow" put-down is often thrown out along with the cliché that "doctrine divides." Yes it does; it divides truth from error, right from wrong, and good from evil.

Then we hear that doctrine boxes us in to exclusive truth claims. In a day of political correctness, claiming to

know truth is an abomination. When we hear that doctrine forces us into exclusive truth claims, our first response should be, "So what!" After all, we serve an exclusive Savior who will have no rivals. Acts 4:12 reminds us that, "There is no other Name under heaven whereby we must be saved." We do not hear Muslims apologizing for Allah and Mohammed. It is difficult to imagine the godly remnant of the Old Testament being convinced by the pagan Canaanites to abandon Yahweh because they were being too exclusive.

D.A. Carson says of an exclusive way of salvation:

"When all the world is appealing to the finality (!) of religious

pluralism, the insistence that there is only one way of salvation may be the mark of faithful witness, not least when those who bear the witness are willing to suffer and die for their confession of the truth. So it was during the first three centuries."³⁷

Our second response should be that we are not the only ones with claims of exclusive truth. All religions have them: Roman Catholicism, Islam, even Baha'i. If two plus two equals four, then so does mathematics. We should all be glad the next time we step onto an airplane or undergo a surgeon's scalpel, that there are exclusive truth claims in aviation and medicine.

Many years ago John Hatchard penned a children's book titled *Hedge of Thorns*. It told of a small village which had a huge thick hedge of thorns about ten feet high running through the village and all the way to the school. It protected the children from a sheer cliff on the other side.³⁸ In the mercy of God, He has given us sound doctrine as a hedge to protect us from the precipice of false teaching and deadly error. Good doctrine keeps us from teachings that would harm both physically and eternally. Absence of good doctrine always leads down the path of speculation. We flounder around looking for secular and cultural versions of truth and destroy the hedges that were meant to keep us safe.

Another practical nuance is that we must be careful never to put doctrines in conflict, but to hold them in balance. Yet writers make this error all the time. How so? Sometimes writers with a cultic agenda cast the love of God against the justice and truth of God as if they are in real contradiction. They suggest that hell could not be that real or that bad if God were all that loving. Yet how loving would God be if he dragged a Hitler, or a Judas, or a Stalin into heaven and subjected heaven to unjudged sin and unrepentant sinners? Revelation 22:11 assures us this is not the case. Doctrines must always be held in balance. One of God's attributes cannot be used to distort or silence His other attributes.

Doctrine cannot be put at the mercy of our emotions. Truth is truth and we cannot declare something true only if it agrees with us and makes us feel good. *There are no doctrines in conflict* because God is perfectly consistent.

Another almost unrecognized nuance is the realization that correct doctrine can be so layered over with incorrect doctrine that it puts the correct doctrine completely out of reach. A prime example is the Pharisees and the rebuke of Jesus, "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips,

but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew 15:8-9). The point Jesus makes is also stated in verse 6, "You have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition." We can believe the right — wrongly.

AT THE CORE

Do we really get the point? At times we are told that we cannot critique a false teacher or group because they have an "orthodox core." No one had a more orthodox core than the Pharisees. Many false teachers talk about Jesus and even "accepting Jesus." An orthodox core does not ensure orthodoxy if one is kept effectively from that core.

Let me illustrate. I see a \$100 bill below a sewer grate in the street. It is a perfectly good \$100 bill and there is no doubt about it. I see it, I know it is there, so I lay down and slip my arm through the grate, but my arm is too short! The money is out of reach. Suppose I get a long stick and put some chewed gum on the end, but I notice the bill is laying precariously over the outflow and even slight pressure will only push it in. No matter how good that money is, it is unreachable to me. It is genuine, but I cannot really access it.

If someone offered you an apple that was all rotted and covered with green and black fuzz, there is little chance that you would want it, even if the core was okay.

You can have a correct theology (doctrine of God) and even a correct Christology (doctrine of Christ), but if you have a defective soteriology (doctrine of salvation), your arm is too short. I can have a correct Christ, but no way to reach Him. If a cult layers over the Savior with dozens of rules and regulations I could never fulfill, my arm is too short. Even if the Mormons adopted a correct view of God and Christ overnight, but still kept the blockades and steps to try to reach Him, their orthodox core would be layered over by the traditions of men, and my arm would still be too short.

A correct view of God is of no help if I have no correct way to reach Him and vice versa. If Jesus is layered over by Mary, saints, rituals, and dozens of other impediments, then my arm is too short. We need not only a correct Christ, but also a correct access to Him. This is another reason why doctrines must be held in balance.

Suppose one even talked about "accepting Jesus," but then has a skewed view of the Trinity and nature of God, as does T.D. Jakes. I have the wrong Jesus. I have a fictional Savior.

3. The desperate need for doctrine: We desperately need doctrine. This is urgent because doctrine directs, corrects, and protects us. As Paul stresses the importance of the inspired Word, he says it is profitable for, first of all, doctrine (2 Timothy 3:16). Without doctrine, there could not be reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness; things we urgently need. We would be left to our own imaginations and self-striving.

Jay Adams stresses the urgent and desperate need for doctrine along with responsible eldership:

"Sheep are naturally stupid. One theologian who lived with a shepherd in Palestine told me that they are so foolish that they will eat themselves lost. So long as they find grass they will go on eating it, regardless of where this may take them, even if they leave the rest of the flock behind. Sheep need the everyday oversight of a shepherd who lives with and guides them so as to see to it that they don't do such things. Isaiah attested to this 'straying' character of sheep when he wrote 'All of us like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way' (Isaiah 53:6, KJV). That is why the sheep often get 'lost.' Of course, poor shepherding itself also may lead to such a condition: 'My people have become lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray' (Jeremiah 50:6)."³⁹

Adams stresses what good leadership is to be doing, "They not only 'teach' all that Christ 'commanded,' but assist the members of the flock to 'observe' those commandments."⁴⁰

Hear the urgent words of the Apostle Paul, "Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you" (1 Timothy 4:16).

Paul uses the word "save." Weren't Timothy and his hearers already saved? The Greek root for save is *sozo* and has a range of meanings. It can often mean to preserve or keep safe and healthy. Its range of meanings have to do with ongoing spiritual health and growth. Larry Dixon sees the issues clearly:

"It's commonly said that 'what you don't know can't hurt you' — but is that really true? If we don't know that God is everywhere, the resulting loneliness could cripple our Christian lives. If we know little about the doctrine of God's goodness, then we may struggle for years, afraid to surrender ourselves completely to Him. The doctrines of the Christian faith should not only inform us of what we need to know, but should also *form* us into the people we should be. Ignorance of the truths of biblical Christianity hinders growth in godliness."⁴¹

As a new believer, I did not know much. I encountered my first Christian Scientist when I was barely months in the Lord. Sitting in her living room she went on about the illusion of reality, the non-existence of matter, and sin as an error of mortal mind. In my naive innocence, I could already see through what she was saying because I, at least, knew Genesis 1:1 and that our God created the world.

I said to her, "You eat, right?" She responded, "Yes," with a puzzled look and I then asked her to explain why she was feeding a non-existent body. After gaining her composure she offered that she was not yet that

far along in her faith and went on sharing the views of Mary Baker Glover Patterson Eddy.

I again caught her off guard when I inquired about the picture of the pretty young lady on the mantle. It was, as I suspected, her daughter. I then completely flustered her once more when I asked how she managed to give birth to a non-existent baby. Her reply again was she had not gotten that far along in her faith yet. Though humorous at times, it can take on a more menacing tone. The denial of sickness could lead to more disastrous consequences. Some Christian Scientists have gone as far as withholding medical attention from their children with heart wrenching outcomes. Good doctrine keeps us spiritually healthy and helps us to not make foolish decisions when it comes to our physical and spiritual care.

How about those who have an incorrect doctrine of redemption and do not realize that they are freed from the past. They go on playing "old tapes" in their head and do not work at forgetting the things that lie behind as Paul commanded (Philippians 3:13).

If one goes on living in a cesspool mentally, he can expect to be down, depressed, and his growth stunted. He may come to believe that he needs an exorcist to heal his "woundedness" when what he really needs is a larger view of God, forgiveness, and the doctrine of redemption. He needs to rejoice daily that God remembers sin no more (Hebrews 8:12) and set his mind on true, noble, pure, and lovely things (Philippians 4:8). He is set free from the guilt and hold of his past. There is a desperate need for good sound healthy doctrine. It protects us because it is truth that sets us free and as well sanctifies us (John 17:17).

But not only does sound doctrine sanctify, correct, and protect us — it directs us. We need to study doctrine for our own spiritual health and growth, but also share it for the sake of others. We need to be sheep and shepherds simultaneously. We need

to "save" ourselves and those who hear us. Are we ready for that?

SHEEP, SHEPHERDS AND WORK

Mark Hamby ministers largely at homeschool conventions. He shares at one point in his life he had struggles in his marriage and had tough times parenting. Part of his struggle was his self-willed and controlling nature. His inability to totally control others often left him angry and frustrated. He was very hard and very heavy-handed, and it took God to break him and change him. He often had unexpressed expectations of others that set them up for failure. Worst of all, he thought he was always right. He would take his family for counseling to try to get the counselor to "fix" and "align" them to his own agenda.

One huge event in his life occurred while he lived on and managed a farm. It seemed to be an idyllic setting, but he drove his family with many of the farming chores. Hamby recalls how he had oversight of a flock of sheep, but they would never follow him. He knew he was a terrible shepherd. One winter evening he could not get them into the barn, and in total anger and frustration he left them out, and overnight they all froze to death. This was a terrible price to pay for his anger. As he dug a hole and began dumping the frozen carcasses in for burial, his daughter about eight years of age saw the sight and was traumatized. All she could say through her tears and sobs was, "Daddy, you are not a good shepherd — you are not a good shepherd!" For months after the incident the relationship between father and daughter was strained at best. This would be a lesson in the patience and love of God.

In the spring with a new flock of sheep, lambing time came. Hamby recounts how he and his daughter were midwives to a new lamb being born. However, it was obvious that the new born was in deep distress with its throat and nose filled with mucous making it unable to breathe. His daughter panicked and kept

pleading, "Daddy do something, do something, daddy, please do something."

DESPERATION TIME

In desperation, Hamby did all he could do. He pulled the lamb into his arms and put most of its little face into his mouth and began to draw out the mucous and spit it on the floor. He continued the unimaginable process until the lamb was breathing without difficulty. There was dead silence and for long moments the mother of the lamb just kept staring at Hamby. She tilted her head back and forth and stared. As Hamby got up to exit the barn the whole flock led by the mother followed him. Just amazing. As he strode out of the barn into the yard with the whole flock at his heels he said he felt like Moses crossing the Red Sea. Any direction he turned they followed. His daughter seeing all this could only say with proud admiration, "Oh daddy, daddy, you *are* a good shepherd — a very good shepherd."

Doctrinal illiteracy is pervasive. The consequences are disastrous. The task is arduous. Study takes work and acquiring doctrine takes even more work. Shepherding takes much hard work. To be good shepherds we may have to get into the dirt. Some are choking and dying because they have been digesting the foul mix of false teaching. They are choking and strangling on the swill of false prophets and false teachers. Who will help them? Who will offer them life?

We may have to intersect with people and situations that are uncomfortable and difficult. Our comfort zone may be violated. The sheep need to know we care. We have to get down to where they are and do some rescue work, even though it may be strenuous, dirty, unpalatable, and uncomfortable. Apologetics is about struggle and rescue. It's about shepherding. No one ever said it would be easy. It was not easy for Jesus, the Great Shepherd. We must, absolutely must, take seriously the dangerous decline in doctrine and the desperate need for sound doctrine. Know it, give it, and live it. It is our only hope,

and our only light out of a very dark place.

"So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32).

Endnotes:

1. Advertisement, *Charisma* magazine, August 2005, pg. 28.
2. James T. Draper, Jr., *Titus Patterns for Church Living*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1978, pp. 32-33.
3. Henri Nouwen quoted in Ken Blanchard, *We Are the Beloved*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994, pg. 61.
4. See further, Gary E. Gilley, "The Challenge of the Emerging Church," *The Quarterly Journal*, April-June 2006, pp. 1, 17-26.
5. See further, D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 2005.
6. Charles Honey, "Repainting faith: Dynamic pastor's new book encourages a fresh look at beliefs," *The Grand Rapids Press*, July 30, 2005, pg. D3.
7. See further, G. Richard Fisher, "The Hazardous Hermeneutics of Harold Camping — The End of the Church or His End?," *The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 1, 16-24.
8. H.A. Ironside, *Timothy, Titus and Philemon*. Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1965, pg. 237.
9. Philip Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, pg. 11.
10. Kenneth Wuest, *The New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William Eerdmans Company, 1965, pg. 505, brackets in original.
11. *Hidden Gospels*, op. cit., pg. 17.
12. *Ibid.*, pg. 123.
13. Ron Rhodes, *The Complete Guide to Christian Denominations*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 2005, pg. 158.
14. See further, G. Richard Fisher with M. Kurt Goedelman, "Experiencing Mysticism — Critiquing the Teachings of Henry Blackaby," *The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 4-16; and G. Richard Fisher, "The Mindless Mysticism of Madame Guyon," *The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 4, 12-15.
15. See further, Gary E. Gilley, "The Lure of Mysticism — A Path to Spiritual Growth or Road to Deception?," *The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 1, 13-23; and G. Richard Fisher, "What a Marriage! Why Did Evangelicalism Marry Catholicism's Stepchild?," *The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 2, pg. 17.

16. Lundy quoted in *Hidden Gospels*, op. cit., pg. 151.
17. "Enlightenment," *The Columbia Viking Desk Encyclopedia*. New York: Viking Press, 1953, pg. 390.
18. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960, Vol. 1, pg. 108.
19. Kevin Reeves, "The Final Question?," *Discernment*, July/August 2001, pg. 3.
20. Jim Rutz, galley proofs of *The New Christianity*, no date, pp. 188-189. This is the original draft for his published book titled *Megashift*.
21. Buechner quoted in Larry Dixon, *DOCDEVOS*. Camp Hill, Penna.: Christian Publications, 2002, Section 2, day 8, "Real Life Says."
22. Everett F. Harrison, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1960, pg. 171.
23. In this verse, Peter calls apostolic teaching "commandment." The apostles' words, teachings, commands, and doctrines are basically equivalent terms.
24. Fred Zaspel and Tom Wells, *New Covenant Theology*. Frederick, Md.: New Covenant Media, 2002, pg. 37, italics in original.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. F.F. Bruce, *Tradition Old and New*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970, pp. 32, 37.
28. T. Ernest Wilson, *Mystery Doctrines of the New Testament*. Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1975, pg. 15.
29. In the Greek of Luke 18:8, *thn* (the) proceeds *pistin* (faith) in Jesus' question.
30. Creme quoted in Brian Flynn, *Running Against the Wind*. Silverton, Ore.: Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2005, pg. 104, ellipsis in original.
31. Madonna quoted in *ibid.*, pg. 106, brackets and ellipsis in original.
32. David W. Bercot, Editor, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998, pg. 28.
33. *Ibid.*, pg. 28-29.
34. *Ibid.*, pg. 29.
35. *Ibid.*, pg. 30.
36. John Calvin, *Calvin's Institutes*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957, Vol. 1, pg. 66.
37. *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, op. cit., pg. 91.
38. *Hedge of Thorns* was written and first published by John Hatchard in 1819. It has been rewritten by Mark Hamby and is now published by Lamplighter Publishing (Waverly, Penna., 1999) as part of the Lamplighter Rare Collector's Series.
39. Jay E. Adams, *The Use of the Rod and Staff*. Stanley, N.C.: Timeless Texts, 2003, pg. 4, italics in original.
40. *Ibid.*, pg. 5.
41. *DOCDEVOS*, op. cit., Section 1, day 2, italic in original. 