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DOCTRINE AND DEVOTION

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“Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine...Take heed unto thyself and unto the doctrine; continue in them; for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee”

—1 Timothy 4:13, 16

These two passages of Scripture bring together what should never be separated, that is, *doctrine* and *devotion*; *belief* and *practice*—Biblical truth clothed with genuine Christian experience. What God has joined together let no man put asunder (Mat 19:6; Mar 10:9).

Part 1: Doctrine

Doctrine is to Christian experience what bones are to the body. A body without bones would be a lump of “glob,” utterly useless. Likewise, Christian experience without roots is like cut flowers stuck in the ground—they may look pleasant for awhile, but ultimately they will wither and die. The other side of this truth must also be taken into account, that is, bones without flesh are but a dead skeleton

The *Westminster Confession*, the *Second London Confession*, and the *Heidelberg Catechism* are the clearest expressions of the doctrinal truth from the Bible. However, there is one thing lacking in these respected confessions. What is lacking? People! Christian experience! It has been a life-time goal and desire to bring together sound Biblical doctrine and genuine Christian experience, both in my own life and in my teaching and practice. I have not arrived at this goal, but I am still seeking, desiring and yearning for this rare combination.

There are those who cry “down doctrine” and cry “up experience.” Some think it quite pious to say, “Christ is our creed and the Bible is our textbook.” On the surface that sounds good. But which Christ are they talking about? There are a thousand “christs” on the religious market. The Jehovah Witnesses have a “christ,” but it is not the Christ of the Bible. The Mormons have a “christ,” but it is not the Christ of the Bible. Christian Science has a “christ,” but it is not the Christ of the Bible. The liberals have a “christ,” but not the One who came to us by a virgin’s womb, suffered vicariously on a Roman cross, and rose victoriously from a borrowed grave. *There is only one Biblical Christ.* The cults also say the Bible is their textbook. You see, someone must proclaim what this infallible Bible says, and what it means and how it applies to our lives and the life of the church.

B. H. Carroll, in his commentary on Ephesians, underscores the importance of doctrine and creeds:

“A church with a little creed is a church with a little life. The more divine doctrines a church can agree on, the greater its power, and the wider its usefulness. The fewer its articles of faith, the fewer its bonds of union and compactness.

“The modern cry: ‘Less creed and more liberty,’ is a degeneration from the vertebrate to the jellyfish, and means less unity and less morality, and it means more heresy. Definitive truth does not create heresy—it only exposes and corrects. Shut off the creed and the Christian world would fill up with heresy unsuspected and uncorrected, but nonetheless deadly.

“Just so, it is not good discipline that created backsliding and other sins of Christians. But discipline is oftentimes the only means of saving a church. To hold to discipline for immoralities and relax it on doctrine puts the cart before the horse and attempts to heal a stream while leaving the fountain impure. To Christ and the apostles, false creeds were the most deadly things, and called most for the use of the knife...

“Again, I solemnly warn the reader against all who depreciate creeds, or who would reduce them to a minimum of entrance qualifications into the church” (*An Interpretation of the English Bible: Colossians, Ephesians, and Hebrews*, pp. 140-141, 150).

Now, I hope we are all against substituting a dead, doctrinal creed for a living Christ. But our creed need not be dead—just as our faith should not be dead faith. We do not reject true faith because there is dead faith (James 2:20: “Faith without works is dead”).

It is not enough to speak of a mystical experience with God without doctrinal knowledge. We must worship God in truth as well as spirit. Truth can be stated in real words, and when truth is stated in real words, it is doctrine.

This effort, to be a practicing Christian without knowing what Christianity is all about, will always fail. The true Christian has a doctrinal foundation. The conflict between our Lord and the Pharisees was over the question of *Who He was*—the doctrine of the Messiah.

To believe savingly in Christ involves believing the right things about Him. *Who He was*—the virgin born Son of God. *What He did*—suffered vicariously on a Roman cross. *Why He died on that cross*—because of a covenant with God the Father to redeem an innumerable company of sheep (His people) from every tribe, nation, and tongue.

What is true religion? It is not some mystical, nebulous thing, floating around in the sky. True religion cannot be less than:

- Right thinking in respect to God
- Right feeling in respect to God
- Right acting in respect to God.

True religion must reach the whole man, including his *mind*. It must reach his mind because that is what he thinks with, it must reach his affections because that is what he feels with, and it must reach his will because that is what he decides with.

What Is Christian Experience?

Christian experience is the influence of sound Biblical doctrine applied to the mind, affections, and will, by the Holy Spirit. J.C. Ryle said, “You can talk about Christian experience all you wish, but without doctrinal roots it is like cut flowers stuck in the ground—it will wither and die.”

It is impossible, therefore, to over-emphasize the importance of sound doctrine in the Christian life. Right thinking about all spiritual matters is imperative if we are to have right living. As men do not gather grapes of thorns, nor figs of thistles, so sound Christian character does not grow out of unsound doctrine. Someone may ask, “How do we test true Christian experience in the midst of so much spurious experience and religious confusion?” Let me suggest three tests:

Is this professed religious experience produced by the truth plainly and faithfully presented? It must be Biblical truth—not only feeling and emotion, or religious excitement.

Is this professed religious experience regulated and governed by Biblical truth?

Do the subjects of this professed religious experience manifest a general and cordial love of Biblical truth?

Biblical doctrine is more important than most church members realize. Doctrine not only expresses our experiences and beliefs, it also determines our direction. Doctrine shapes our lives and church programs. Doctrine to the Christian and the church is what the bones are to the body. It gives unity and stability.

The church that neglects to teach sound Biblical doctrine weakens the church membership. It works against true unity. It invites instability in its fellowship, lessens conviction, and stalemates true progress in the church.

I suppose that not many would disagree with what I have said up until now. But I do not just want to speak in general, nebulous terms. Take, for example, the word “*doctrine*.” By itself it is almost meaningless. All the cults have a doctrine. I want to be more specific and speak of the doctrines believed and preached by our Baptist fathers—men such as James P. Boyce, John A Broadus, B.H. Carroll, John L. Dagg, Luther Rice, P.H. Mell, John Bunyan, Charles H. Spurgeon, William Carey, Andrew Fuller. Yes, those doctrines expressed by The Philadelphia Association out of which we came. The doctrines that were the foundation of their devotion, of their worship, their witness, and all their service to Christ and His church.

Before I mention specifically some foundational doctrines let me just make one simple but weighty point: if what our Baptist fathers believed and taught was true, then it is just as true and just as important today, because *the Bible has not*

changed, truth is unchanged, and God is unchanged. The minds of men are like porous sieves out of which truth can leak and into which error may seep to dilute the truth. But truth does not change because God Himself does not change.

What Doctrines?

Specifically, what doctrines am I talking about? Foundational doctrines. Not secondary matters. I am talking about those doctrines that were set forth, defined, and defended at the Synod of Dort in 1618—later expressed in The Westminster Confession and The Baptist Confession of 1689, called The Second London Confession.

I mean those doctrines that set forth a God who saves. Not this little god who just helps man to save himself. Those doctrines that reveal the three great acts of the Trinity for the recovering of poor, helpless, lost men. What are these three great acts?—

- Election by the Father
- Redemption by the Son
- Calling by the Spirit.

All are directed to the same individuals and secure their salvation infallibly. Away with this wicked idea of giving each act of the Trinity a different reference:

- The objects of redemption being *all* mankind
- The objects of calling being those who hear the Gospel
- The objects of election being those hearers who respond.

No! No! I mean those doctrines which *give all the glory of saving sinners to God* and do not divide it between God and the sinner. Those doctrines which see the Creator as the source and the end of everything, both in nature and in grace. Those doctrines which say history is nothing less than the working out of God's preordained plan. Those doctrines that set forth the God who was sovereign in creation, sovereign in redemption (both in planning it and perfecting it), and sovereign in providence—sovereign on the contemporary scene and sovereign right now. Those doctrines that set forth a Redeemer who actually redeems; a God who saves by purpose and by power; the Trinity working together for just that—the salvation of sinners. The Father plans it. The Son achieves it. And the Holy Spirit communicates and effectually applies it to God's elect. Those doctrines that set forth a God who saves, keeps, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners—and loses none in the process.

God saves sinners! We must not weaken this great truth that God saves sinners by disrupting the unity of the work of the Trinity, or by dividing the achievement of salvation between God and man. Jonah had it straight in Jonah 2:9: "Salvation [past, present, and future] is of the LORD."

These doctrines trace the source of every spiritual blessing—faith included—back to that great transaction between God and His Son which was carried out on Calvary's Hill.

The Spirit's gift is not just an *enlightening* work. It is also a *regenerating* work of God in men: taking away their heart of stone and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills; and by His almighty power determining them and causing them to come—not against their will, but to come most freely, being made willing by His grace (Psa 110:3).

"Blessed is the man whom thou choosest, and causest to approach unto thee, that he may dwell in thy courts: we shall be satisfied with the goodness of thy house, even of thy holy temple" (Psa. 65:4). And in this sense grace proves to be *irresistible*. Why? because grace subdues man's power to resist.

Though this is all the sovereign work of God, let us not suppose that God's decision to save a man by a decree leaves man passive and inert. It is the opposite that takes place! The covenant of grace does not kill man, it does not regard man as a tin can, a piece of wood, or a robot. It takes possession of the man, it lays hold of his whole being with all his faculties and power of soul and body, for time and eternity.

It does not annihilate his powers, but it does remove his powerlessness.

It does not destroy his will, but frees it from sin.

It does not stifle or obliterate his conscience, but sets it free from darkness.

It regenerates and recreates man in his entirety; and in renewing him by grace, causes him to love and consecrate himself to God most freely.

These doctrines show the cross as revealing God's power to save, not His impotence. The cross was not a place just to make salvation possible, but to actually secure the salvation of sinners, fulfilling that prophecy of the great evangelical prophet Isaiah. "*He shall see the travail of his soul and be satisfied*" (53:11). God was not frustrated at the cross.

The Bible says, "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:23). *God was the Master of Ceremonies at the cross!*

William Cowper expressed it in his hymn, "*There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood*"—

*"Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood
Shall never lose its power,*

*Till all the ransomed Church of God
Be saved to sin no more."*

These doctrines will drive us to proclaim to every one:

- All are sinners—not sick and needing help, but *dead* and needing life.
- Jesus Christ, God's Son, is a perfect, able, and willing Saviour of sinners—even the worst, yea, even the chiefest!
- The Father and the Son have promised that all who know themselves to be such sinners and put their faith in Christ as Saviour shall be received into favor—and none cast out.

God has made repentance and faith a duty, requiring of every man who hears the Gospel, a serious and full casting of the soul upon Christ as an all-sufficient Saviour; ready, able, and willing to save *all* that come to God by Him.

To the question: "What must I do to be saved?" we must answer, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Act 16:31). What does that mean? It means: (1) Knowing one's self to be a sinner. (2) Knowing Christ to have died for sinners. (3) Abandoning all self-righteousness, self-confidence and self-effort. (4) Casting yourself wholly upon Him for pardon and peace. (5) Exchanging your natural enmity and rebellion against Him for a spirit of grateful submission to the will of Christ, through the renewing of your heart by the Holy Spirit.

He Will Give What He Requires

To the question, "How am I to go about believing on Christ and repenting if I have no natural ability to do these things?"

Answer: Look to Christ—Seek Him—Cry out to Christ just as you are, casting yourself upon His mercy. He will give what He requires. Turn to Him. Trust Him as best you can and pray for grace to trust more. Use the means of grace, expectantly looking for Christ to draw near to you as you seek to draw near to Him.

Watch and pray. Read and hear God's Word. Worship and commune with God's people, and so continue until you know within, without a doubt, that you are indeed a changed being, a penitent believer, believing the new heart that you desired has been put within you. Calling upon Him directly is the first step.

The hymn writer puts it like this:

*"Let not conscience make you linger,
Nor of fitness fondly dream,
All the fitness He requireth
Is to feel your need of Him."*

Christ is not passively waiting, but working with and through the Word to bring His people to Himself.

Much of contemporary Christianity is sick because it lacks a doctrinal foundation. The religion of our day is a curious mixture of Bible, philosophy, notions of the day, and a strange combination of methods. In spite of its numerical increase and the millions of dollars raised for religious purposes, much of present-day religion is spiritually and morally sick; it is like a body without bones. *Doctrine is to Christian experience what bones are to the body.*

Part 2: Devotion

Our focus to this point has exclusively been on the importance of sound doctrine; I want to call your attention now to the other side of the same coin—*devotion*.

I am using devotion and Christian experience synonymously. To put it another way: the devotional house must be built on a doctrinal foundation. We must ever keep before us, however, the realization that doctrine and creeds are not an end in themselves. Many fail at this very point. That is, they make doctrine an end in itself. This will produce nothing but dead orthodoxy. Many never get off the foundation. They are doctrinally as straight as a gun barrel, and just as empty. They are very sound doctrinally, but unfortunately, they are sound asleep.

A devotional house, therefore, must be built on a sound doctrinal foundation. The Holy Spirit uses this doctrinal foundation to produce a *holy life because the Gospel is a holy-making Gospel*. Some Christians are afraid of Biblical holiness. I wish they were as much afraid of *sin* as they are of holiness.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne said,

"It is a holy making Gospel. Without holy fruits all evidences are vain. Dear friends, you have awakenings, enlightenings, experiences, and many due signs; but if you lack holiness, you shall never see the Lord. *A real desire after complete holiness is the truest mark of being born again*. Jesus is a holy Saviour, He first covers the soul with His white raiment, then makes the soul glorious within—restores the lost image of God, and fills the soul with pure, heavenly holiness. Unregenerate men among you cannot bear this testimony."

It is strange that so many church members either have a false standard of holiness, or else they are afraid of holiness altogether. If you cannot persuade yourself to be holy you will have no success with others. We must taste and see that the Lord is good. We must taste before we can tell. One thousand wonderful sermons on holiness will not cover a cold, carnal, careless life. *A holy sermon is but for an hour, but a holy life is a perpetual sermon*. Richard Baxter said, "A minister's life is the life of his ministry." I say, a Christian's life is the life of his Christianity.

The importance of a devotional life (sometimes called "religion") is clearly brought out by our Lord's rebuke of the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-6. Here we note that Jesus commends this church for:

Their service: “I know thy works, and thy labor.”

Their sacrificial life: “Thou hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name’s sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.”

Their separation (ecclesiastical separation): “Thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars.”

What, then, was their problem? They were lacking in their love for their Lord—devotion: “Thou hast left thy first love.”

What equipment is needed to maintain this devotional life? I suggest three things:

- A Quiet Place
- A Quiet Hour
- A Quiet Heart.

Consider Paul’s deep personal hunger expressed in Philippians 3:10 “That I many know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his suffering, being made conformable unto his death.”

Paul’s doctrine led to his deep personal hunger for *Christ-likeness*. Notice also that Paul’s devotion affected him in *his desire for souls*. Romans 9:1-3: “I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.” This tells us something about his devotional life.

The Shulamite’s testimony is too frequently true of ministers and other Christian workers: “They made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard have I not kept” (Song 1:6).

The New Testament corollary passage is 1 Corinthians 9:27: “But I keep under my body and bring it into subjection; lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.” This graphically describes Paul’s concern for his own spiritual life.

We must keep the weeds out of our own garden by maintaining a devotional life. *We must never be satisfied with being the instrument of grace without being the subject of grace.*

What does it cost if you are to have a doctrinal foundation and a devotional house?

I once heard Dr. Gwin Walters preach to seminary students, and I remember his warnings. He warned the young ministers of *laziness*. He warned them of *looseness*. He warned them of *levity* and he warned them of *lethargy*—that is, morbid drowsiness, an inertia arising from soft living.

To build a devotional house there must be some self-denial. Self-denial is not denying oneself of sin. The Christian is never at liberty to sin. Self-denial is foregoing *lawful* liberties.

The following principles must always guide the Christian’s exercise of liberty:

(1) *Fear of God*. As the servant of Christ, all actions must be moved by a motive of love to God, and all objects must be used for his glory. The term “liberty” is often used as a cloak of malicious self-indulgence, which is sin (1Co 10:31; 1Ti 4:4-5; 1Pe 2:15-16).

(2) *Love of Brethren*. Though no man may dictate to the Christian’s conscience, the welfare of fellow-saints must always deeply affect his decisions. In a spirit of serving the brethren, he must do that which he judges will edify them and prevent their stumbling (Gal 5:13; 1Co 8:9; 10:23).

(3) *Compassion for Sinners*. Use of liberty must always be regulated by its effect upon sinners, and that behavior chosen which is likely to win some (1Co 9:19-22).

(4) *Watchfulness over the Soul*. Though the believer is free in conscience to use all of God’s creation, carefulness in practice is demanded of him because of remaining lusts. Where the Christian judges himself weak through lust, he must abstain for the sake of perseverance (1Co 9:23-27).

Self-denial is the character of the cross. “Be not conformed to this world” means something. “Be not entangled with the affairs of this life” means something. Self-denial is subordinating every secondary point to the primary object—it is singleness of mind.

Whatever experience (1) chills our fervor, (2) dissipates our mind, (3) diverts our attention, or (4) occupies an inordinate proportion of our time or interest is the right eye that we are called to pluck out and cast from us.

I do not mean that there should be *no diversion*. There is the other extreme of rendering the bow useless by always keeping it bent. Inordinate use of legitimate things is where most good men go down (family, home, position, sports, T.V.). Let me suggest a little paperback on self-denial called *The Shadow of the Cross*, by Walter J. Chantry (Banner of Truth).

A very simple test on self-denial is as follows:

- What has the supreme place in your affections?
- What is the dominating power in your life?
- What is it that has the molding influence on your heart?

Never has apostasy from the faith (doctrine or practice) been connected with a prayerful and diligent study of God’s word. If the great doctrines we have mentioned do not produce and develop (1) true zeal, (2) true holiness, (3) self-denial and (4) evangelism, be sure they are not held properly, or else they have become an end in themselves.

Our dealings with infidels and skeptics of Christianity cannot consist of cold metaphysical reasoning and dry scientific arguments. Rather, our evangelistic efforts must extend from believing the whole Gospel and living the whole Gospel. Liv-

ing epistles known and read are better than all the scholarship in the world. Oh, for men and women who know Gospel truth and live Gospel lives!

I pray this little article will be used to sharpen us doctrinally and shape us devotionally to be conformed to the image of Him whose we are and whom we serve, whom having not seen we love. Though now we do not see Him, yet believing, we rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory. ✨

*Taken from the Founders Journal—Issue 3 & 4.
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