

§ 1. Foundations of Christian Doctrine

Lecture 1

What is Christian Doctrine and Why Study It?

Today is a landmark day because we begin a new Defenders curriculum. For the next four years or so we are going to be studying together the entire range of Christian doctrine, from doctrine of revelation to doctrine of the last things. Today we begin anew. I want to welcome all of you who are joining us via live stream, both individual persons as well as Sunday School classes which will now be part of our wider Defenders family.

The purpose of our Defenders class is threefold. I want to remind us of what these purposes are as we begin anew.

1. The first and primary purpose of this class is *to train Christians to understand, articulate, and defend basic Christian truths*. Each of those verbs is important. This is not just lawyer-speak where you pile up a number of verbs in a sentence.

First of all, we want to train Christians to understand Christian truths – to understand what we as Christians believe.

Secondly, we want to help you to articulate what you believe so that you can explain it to others when they ask you exactly what it is that you as a Christian believe.

Thirdly, we want to help you to defend what you believe when you are asked for a reason as to why you believe as you do.

Our class verse is 1 Peter 3:15 which says, “Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that is in you, yet do this with gentleness and reverence.”

So the first and primary purpose of our Defenders class is to train you to understand, articulate, and to defend what you as a Christian believe.

2. *We also want to reach out with the Gospel to those who have not yet come to know Christ, always being ready to give a defense to anyone who would ask a reason for our hope*. We are an open class, an inclusive class, and we welcome not only Christians of various denominations but also non-believers as well. Atheists, agnostics, and anyone who is seeking to find the truth about God and Christianity is welcome here and welcomed to express his doubts, his skepticism, and to raise his questions. We want to reach out with the Gospel to those who do not yet know Christ.

3. *We want to be an incendiary fellowship of mutual encouragement and care*. In a large megachurch like Johnson Ferry Baptist, it is very easy to get lost in the crowd. Therefore it is important to have a sort of church within the church – a smaller group where, as they say, everybody knows your name. We can pray for one another, we learn to know each other, we can help one another when facing difficult times. As I say, I conceive of this as a sort of incendiary fellowship; that is to say, it is like the logs in a fireplace. You take those burning logs and separate them – put them apart – and they will soon go out. But as they are collected together, they mutually reinforce one another and you have a bright and warm burning fire. That is the way we want to be as we gather together to mutually encourage and stimulate each other in our discipleship for the Lord.

Our first section is an introduction to Christian doctrine. As I say, the Defenders class is going to be a survey of Christian doctrine. We will be hitting the main themes – the main topics – of Christian doctrine during this class. So we will talk, for example, at the beginning about the doctrine of revelation – how does God reveal himself to us. The reference there is not to the biblical book of Revelation, but rather to God’s revelation of himself, whether in nature or in Jesus Christ or in the Scriptures.¹ How do we learn truth about God? Then we will talk about the doctrine of God – what God is like and why we should believe that God exists. Then we will go on to talk about the doctrine of creation – how God relates to the world that he has made. We will focus then on the doctrine of Christ – the person of Christ as well as the work of Christ. We will talk about the doctrine of man – man as created in the image of God as well as man fallen and in need of God’s salvation and forgiveness. We will talk about the doctrine of justification, including doctrine of sin and doctrine of salvation. We will talk about the doctrine of the church. What is the church that God is establishing here on Earth? Finally, the doctrine of the last things which will be the end of human history and the eternal state.

These will be the broad topics that we will survey in this course. We will go as fast as discussion allows. We’ve got no agenda in the sense of a time table to get through. So there will be ample time for questions and discussion. Each class will just build on the previous week. We will cumulatively and slowly cover these topics.

My inspiration for the way I work is what Jan and I call the turtle method, after the famous story of the tortoise and the hare. You will remember the hare started off in a flash but then soon grew tired and rested, whereas the turtle’s steady, relentless, slow plodding eventually wins the race. It is the turtle method that we follow in this class. We will just go as fast as your questions and discussion allow.

We begin then by asking the question: what is Christian doctrine anyway? I am sure that for many of you, you don’t have a clue what we are even talking about. When I first went to Wheaton College I had to take an introduction to Christian doctrine, and I literally did not know what the class was about. I had been a Christian for two years, but in our church we never talked about doctrine so I had no idea what even was under discussion in this course.

I think Christian doctrine can be very well defined as suggested by the famous church historian Jaroslav Pelikan in his book *The Christian Tradition*, which is a history of Christian doctrine. Professor Pelikan defines Christian doctrine as what the church believes and teaches. Christian doctrine is simply what the Christian church believes and teaches. You might have some reservations about that definition. You might say, “Isn’t Christian doctrine what the Bible teaches and what we are to believe?” I think that Christian doctrine often involves human reflection upon the data of Scripture so that doctrine really isn’t complete until we have reflected upon the raw material of Scripture and attempt to systematically analyze it and put it into doctrinal form.

So, for example, doctrines like the Trinity and the two natures of Christ are not explicitly taught in Scripture but rather they are the result of the church’s reflection upon the raw material of Scripture and an attempt to systematize it into a coherent statement of what we, as Christians, believe. I think that the necessity in many cases of having rational

¹ 5:03

reflection upon the data of the Bible indicates that doctrine is more than simply what the Bible says; it is what the church believes and teaches as it reflects upon the data that is in Scripture.

Also, I think Pelikan's definition is better because the church is a very broad institution that often has different interpretations of what the Bible teaches. As we will see in this class, very often Catholics and Orthodox and Protestants of all sorts will differ doctrinally on the way they read the Bible.² There is, therefore, both true doctrine as well as false doctrine. That wouldn't make sense if you just say doctrine is what the Bible teaches. Doctrine is a reflection and systematization of what the Bible teaches, and therefore can be different for different denominations and persons. I think some doctrines can be false and other doctrines will be true.

So I would say that Pelikan's definition is a good one. When we study Christian doctrine, we are studying what the church believes and teaches in all of its diversity. Then we will attempt to discern what is true doctrine – what is the truth about God or the issue that we are discussing.

We may ask as our next question: why study doctrine after all? Why not just be content to enjoy the Christian life and go through life attending church, going to prayer meetings, doing evangelism, and all the other practical aspects of the Christian faith? Why should we study doctrine? I can think of at least four reasons why I think it is important to study doctrine.

1. *Every Christian is a theologian.* It is not just professors of theology or those who have academically studied in seminary who do theology. Every Christian is a theologian. In virtue of the fact that you are a Christian you are committed to certain beliefs about reality – a certain worldview that God exists, that God is three persons, that Christ is both human and divine, that God has created the world, that we are morally fallen before God and in need of his forgiveness and cleansing. All of these are Christian doctrines, or the stuff or subject of Christian doctrines. Therefore, the question isn't whether or not you are going to be a theologian; the question is whether you are going to be a poor theologian or a good theologian. Just by being a Christian, you are committed to being a theologian.

Look at what Paul has to say about this in Ephesians 4:13-15. Here Paul talks about the gifts that God has given to the church. He says,

until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles.

Here Paul indicates that part of spiritual Christian maturity is doctrinal discernment so that you won't be buffeted about by every new wind of doctrine that comes along. You will have a grasp of what is true and what is false and therefore able to be doctrinally discerning.

²

Or look at Paul's letter to the Galatians, Galatians 1:6-9. Here Paul is so angry with these false apostles who have come to the churches in Galatia and are teaching false doctrine. He says,

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.

Here Paul is literally saying these purveyors of false doctrine to the Galatian churches should go to hell!³ He says let them go to hell, these purveyors of false doctrines. That is how strongly he feels about the importance of having the right teaching about Christ and about the Gospel of grace that he preached.

Finally, look over at his letter to Titus, Titus 1:9. The context here is Paul's list of the qualifications to be an elder in the church. Of the various qualifications that he lists to be an elder he says in verse 9, "He must hold firm to the sure Word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it." I don't know about you, but even if you are not an elder in the church (if you never have the opportunity to be an elder) surely all of us would want to have this sort of Christian maturity and character qualities that qualify you to be an elder. I've never been an elder in a church, but I want to meet as best I can this list of qualifications that goes toward being a mature Christian. Part of those qualifications are to be able to give instruction in sound doctrine, and then also to refute those who contradict it.

To repeat: every Christian is a theologian, and it belongs to Christian maturity to have a correct understanding of right doctrine and to be doctrinally discerning when people come to you bringing false doctrine.

2. *Right living presupposes right thinking about God.* Notice the pattern in Paul's epistles. In his letters, typically the first half or so of the letter will be devoted to doctrinal teaching. Then in the second half of the letter he will switch to practical application and your life application of the teachings that he's given. Look, for example, at his letter to the Ephesians. In Ephesians 1-3 he gives instruction in Christian doctrine. Then beginning with Ephesians 4:1 you see the transition: "I, therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." The "therefore" indicates the transition between these doctrinal truths – if these are true, therefore now live a life that is worthy of this calling that you have.

Look over in Philippians, too, for the same pattern. In Philippians 1-3 we have his doctrinal teaching. Then beginning in chapter 4 he says, "Therefore, my brethren, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved." He then begins to give practical application.

So if we want to live correctly for Christ as his disciples we need to first think correctly about Christ. If your thinking is skewed and off-base, it is going to affect your life and your Christian discipleship.

3. *The study of doctrine is an expression of loving God with all of our minds.* Matthew 22:37-38. Jesus, when asked what is the greatest commandment, said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.” So we are to love God with our whole being – all aspects of our personality.⁴ That includes loving God with your mind. I would say that one of the best ways that you can fulfill this command to love God with your mind is to study his truth. Reflect on his truth. Know his truth accurately. Explore his truth. This is a way of expressing your love to the Lord because you love his truth and want to study it.

4. *Christ cannot be separated from truths about Christ.* Look at 2 John 9-10. Here John is warning about people claiming to be Christians – claiming to follow Jesus – but who are teaching false doctrine. In verse 9 he says,

Anyone who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God.

[That is really interesting. Notice that he doesn’t say anyone who goes ahead and does not abide in Christ. He doesn’t say that. He says someone who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God.]

He who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting.

What John is telling us there is that it is not enough to say, “I love Jesus, and I follow Jesus, and I have warm, fuzzy feelings about Jesus.” If you are not abiding in the doctrine of Christ, he says you do not have Christ. You can’t separate Christ from the truths about Christ. These go together hand-in-glove. So we need a combination of both doctrinal wisdom along with a spirit-filled enthusiasm for Christ. Doctrine without the Holy Spirit leads to legalism. The dead letter. But the Holy Spirit without doctrine leads to fanaticism. You have no controls on that subjective experience. You need the combination of good doctrine with a spirit-filled Christian experience. Therefore, you can’t separate Christ and the truths about Christ. A vibrant living relationship with Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit should be one that involves appreciating Christian doctrine.

For all of these reasons, I think that the study of Christian doctrine is an integral part of Christian discipleship and of becoming a mature Christian. Every Christian is a theologian, right living presupposes right thinking about God, the study of doctrine is a way in which we express our love for God with our minds, and Christ can’t be separated from truths about Christ.

START DISCUSSION

Student: As you are going through the doctrine piece, my question was do you see the differences in doctrine as the genesis of denominational thoughts so that the disagreements about doctrine really have generated a lot of denominations? And what are your thoughts on your point 4 – you can't separate Christ from the truth about Christ? About the recent Presbyterian splits and things of that nature.

Dr. Craig: I do think that denominational differences do tend to be rooted primarily in doctrine. They differ on what they think Christian teaching is. There are some denominations that are very close (they are almost doctrinally indistinguishable), but maybe there will be different styles of worship, or maybe even racial or ethnic differences that might cause different denominations. But I think for the most part the major fault lines in the Christian church today would be drawn along doctrinal lines.

The second part of the question was . . .

Student: Number 4. When you talked about Christ cannot be separated from the truths about Christ. You see some of these denominational splits like the Presbyterian church where one part of the denomination seems to go way off of point 4.⁵

Dr. Craig: There is a huge demographic shift going on in the United States since really about the 1950s. The old mainline denominations – your United Methodists, your Congregationalists, your Presbyterians, your Episcopalians – used to be the cultural heavyweights in American society. Those denominations have in many cases drifted from fidelity to biblical orthodoxy, and they are now in free fall. Their seminaries are closing, their attendance is waning, whereas denominations that were not in this mainline group but have remained biblically orthodox tend to be the ones that are still growing or holding their own. I think there is a huge demographic shift going on in this country in that respect.

I do want to just say one more thing lest I be misunderstood. I don't mean to suggest that every doctrine is a cardinal doctrine. That is to say, if you disagree doctrinally therefore you are a heretic. There are fine points of doctrine that can almost be like hair-splitting and that don't really matter. There are really very few doctrines that we would say are cardinal doctrines. That is to say, doctrines that are essential to salvation. Certainly the existence of God would be such a doctrine, wouldn't it? You couldn't by any conceivable imagination be a Christian if you don't think God exists. Or that Jesus Christ rose from the dead and died for your sins. Those would seem to be cardinal doctrines. But in many other cases, the doctrinal differences between Christians will be slight. I think there are still truth about these – there is a truth and falsity about these. It is not as though just anything goes. But nevertheless not a great deal of consequence will hang on some of these doctrines.

END DISCUSSION

With that we are out of time. Next week I want to share something about why we should study apologetics as well as doctrine, because in the course of this curriculum we will occasionally take excursions, or side trips, where we will explore why one ought to believe that these doctrines are true. That will take us into Christian apologetics. Next week I

want to say a few words about why the study of apologetics as well as doctrine is also important for Christian maturity.⁶

⁶ Total Running Time: 28:00 (Copyright © 2014 William Lane Craig)