

The Nature and Need for Christian Doctrine

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Advantages of the study of early Christian Literature and Doctrine.

This work professes to be a Critical History of Christian Literature and Theology from the death of the Apostles till the period of the Nicene Council. It is an attempt to investigate the authorship of the various works which have come down to us from that era, and to ascertain the influences which led to their production and determined their character. It also makes an effort to state exactly what were the theological opinions of each writer. The work is therefore an introduction to the study of the Christian writers, and prepares the way for a full consideration of the mode in which Christian theology was developed.

Such studies as these ought not to require any defense in the present day. Men have generally come to recognize the fact that every period of history contains a message from God to man, and that it is of vast importance to find out what that message is. Moreover it is ever a valuable exercise of the mind, to throw oneself into modes of thought and feeling widely different from our own. If we conduct our study in an honest spirit, we come forth from it more conscious of our own ignorance and weakness, and consequently much more charitable towards the failings of others. At the same time, our whole range of thought is widened.

These advantages flow in an especial manner from the unprejudiced study of early Christian literature. The point from which we start is the most momentous in the world's history. The fact which we have to consider is the greatest. Even to the most callous mind Christianity must appear a movement of gigantic importance. The student of early Christian literature traces this great moral movement in the words of those who were influenced by it. He as it were speaks with those who felt the first waves of the Spirit's influence; and he examines their modes of thought that he may see how Christ's Gospel changed their whole being, and how in consequence they worked in and on the world. At the same time he has to rid himself of most of his modern associations. He has to transport himself into a time when the very modes of conception and expression were widely different from those of this age, and he has to realize a thousand influences which acted most powerfully on them, but which have now vanished for ever. If he really feels that he is of one spirit with those old workers for Christ, if he is ready to stretch forth the right hand of fellowship to them, his sympathies will flow largely with most divisions of the present Christian Church, however diverse on some points their beliefs. A work like the present, as however being merely an introduction to this profitable study, is necessarily defective in several aspects.

It is defective in that it has to deal with the lives of those earnest men in a purely critical manner. It has to examine carefully every statement made in regard to them—it has to weigh the credibility of it; and thus it sifts the true from the false. It cannot therefore in many instances attempt a portraiture of the men as they lived and moved.

Besides this, the actual life of those men cannot be properly realized unless we realize the heathenism in the midst of which they lived and worked. A man's history is not merely an account of his religious life, but must embrace the whole of his relations, his political and intellectual aims and struggles. Still more so is this the case with the history of an age. And so in truth the history of the Church fails to be a true history, if we cannot bring up before our minds the physical, intellectual, and political features of the ages in which the Church is depicted as living and acting.

Yet no satisfactory History of the Church, either by itself or as working amidst heathenism, is possible without such preliminary works as the present. Literary criticism is the foundation on which ecclesiastical histories must rest. In a work like this we deal with the sources from which these histories derive their materials. We try to ascertain how far they are trustworthy. Unless this introductory work is carefully done, the history will rest on an insecure foundation. In no department of study has the character of the authorities been less sifted, and most histories of the Church abound in baseless statements and serious misrepresentations. Even those writers who have made careful investigations, as Mosheim and Neander, have often omitted to state the reasons of their conclusions, and the reader is left at the mercy of the historian.

Still more necessary is it that we should have exact information as to the opinions of the early Christian writers. Here nothing but the utmost care and impartiality will enable us to reach the truth. And here the misconceptions and mistakes that prevail are innumerable, and act on the present Christian life with injurious effect. My main effort has been simply to record the theological doctrines of the early Christian writers with an anxious desire to state accurately, without exaggeration or distortion, what they thought. I have occasionally attempted to throw light on the mode in which doctrines were developed. Let not the reader however be misled by this word "developed." A statement of the New Testament is often said to be the germ of a doctrine. The image used here is misleading. A doctrine is not a living thing, like a germ. And moreover, even if it were, it has to be remembered that even a germ is developed by attracting and assimilating to itself many foreign elements which are around it. It is by additions from without, and different from itself, that it grows. So in the case of a doctrine. The first statement of it is usually general, just as the first perception of an object by the eye is general. Thus we see and know a face before we have made any definite observation of the color of the eyes, or the form of the nose and chin. We know that the face is beautiful before we have examined it in detail. This is the first stage of the doctrine, if I may so call it. But we develop it by ascertaining exactly what is the character of each feature. It is to be noticed that our developments may be all wrong, while our general statement is correct. I may assert in an indefinite way that Ben Ledi is high. If pressed for the exact height in feet, I may be unable to give it, or if I do give it I may be wrong, and yet my first

statement is quite correct. So in the case of doctrines. They generally present themselves first in history as broad indefinite truths. Subsequent generations try as it were to fill up these truths by endless particulars, explanations, and additions. And in our efforts to ascertain the particular opinions of a writer, we have to take the greatest care not to give greater precision and definiteness to his thoughts than he himself gave to them. We are to be on our guard against supposing that he was aware of difficulties which only the long course of time discovered, or of shades of difference which only the most searching thought was after long endeavour able to distinguish. Especially in starting we must take care not to identify broad general statements with those minute theories which are called their developments. We shall thus be fitted in some measure for one of the great tasks of the age, namely, to distinguish between what is essential and what is non-essential in Christianity.

There is one advantage which some will expect from a study of early Christian theology in regard to which they will be disappointed. Many theological questions agitate men's minds in these days; and some will turn to investigations like ours, in hopes that new light may be thrown upon them. This is a mistake. The questions which agitate one age are never precisely the same as those which agitate another. They may be fundamentally the same; but the circumstances in which they are taken up are so widely different, that they require different solutions. Thus the question of inspiration as it presents itself to us, never so presented itself to any previous generation. In former times there was not the same strictness in regard to historical criticism; there was a vast amount of carelessness in regard to textual criticism; there was not the same desire for uniformity in history as in nature; there was not the same chronological accuracy; and many other such circumstances, the results of the civilization and thought of this and past centuries, unite to present this question of Inspiration in a light different from that in which it appeared to the early Christian writers. Therefore their decisions are nothing to us, because they did not feel our difficulties, nor had they our desire for precision.

Let's take a look at the NEED for Christian Doctrine

Why should Christians be familiar with the great doctrines of the Bible? Let me give you four reasons.

1) The first is the simplest of all: Because we love God. And if you love someone, you want to know everything about them. If a young man meets a girl and falls in love, he'll want to find out all sorts of things about her – what sort of family she's from, which school she went to, what her hobbies are, whether she's had other boyfriends, whether she prefers Indian or Chinese food ... And if we love God, we'll want to know all about him – about his nature, his character, his purposes, his commandments; about the work he's doing in the world, about his work in saving people, about his plans for the future. In other words we'll want to study 'doctrine'. If I ask you what 'justification' means, what I'm really asking is, 'how does God justify sinners?' If I ask you what the Lord's Supper

is for, what I'm really asking is 'what does God do for us through the Lord's Supper?' All our doctrines are about God.

2) A second reason why Christians should study doctrine: Because what you believe will shape your spiritual life. It's obvious isn't it? The way you think about God will affect the way you relate to God. If you don't believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, you can't believe that God is eternally love. It's the doctrine of the Trinity that gives us confidence to believe that love is in the very nature of God. Again, if you believe that God is only in control when good things happen, you can't trust him in the times when everything goes wrong. It's the doctrine of God's total sovereignty that enables us to say in the darkest hour, 'I don't know why this has happened but I know you planned it, and that you planned it for my good'. Or again, if you've never realised that God's ultimate purpose is to glorify himself, every part of your relationship with him will be distorted. Instead of having him at the centre, you'll go through life thinking that human happiness is the most important thing of all – and expecting him to think so too.

I said above that studying doctrine is really just finding out the truth about God. And we need to do that so that we can relate to the God who's really there, not the God we imagine him to be.

3) And then thirdly, we need to study doctrine, because without it we won't understand the world in which we live. Or to put it differently, we won't know how to live in the world. A friend whose husband is suffering with a crippling and painful illness asks you whether you think euthanasia is wrong, and if so, why. Or somebody asks you why the Bible is against homosexuality. You're not going to be able to answer those questions in any consistent way unless you understand the doctrine of Man as the image of God. It's the fact that every human being is God's image-bearer which gives every human life – however damaged – infinite value. It's the fact that Man and Woman in their union are supposed to mirror the diversity in the Trinity, which makes homosexuality such an unnatural thing.

You're trying to sort out your children's behavior problems. How far are they to blame for the tendencies that they've inherited from you? When do you restrain a child? When do you punish him? When do you encourage him? The only way you'll get clear answers to those questions is by taking seriously a whole string of Bible doctrines: the doctrine of God's justice; the doctrine of the Fall and the effect of Adam's sin on all his descendants; the doctrine of total depravity; the doctrine of common grace ... No wonder that parents in our society are at sea when it comes to bringing up children! They don't know what human nature is, they don't know what justice is, they don't know what authority they themselves have. But the doctrines of the Bible give you compass and chart through the storms.

A thorough knowledge of Bible doctrine will give you the tools to sort out all the practical problems of living in this complex fallen world – even in matters where the Bible doesn't speak directly.

4) And fourthly, we need to study Bible doctrine because without it we won't know what to say to the unsaved people we meet. Peter tells us that we must be 'prepared to give to every man a reason for the hope that is within us' (1 Peter 3:15). We have to be competent to answer questions. So what do you say when someone asks how God can allow a tsunami to sweep away scores of thousands of people? How can you answer that question if you've never grappled with the doctrine of God's sovereignty? How do you answer when your child says to you 'I've tried to become a Christian but it didn't work?' You'll need a very clear grasp then of just what saving faith is, and how it relates to the human will, and where assurance fits in. Your atheist friend sneers at the food laws of Leviticus and asks why God changed his mind; why he lets you eat prawns and pork. Are you going to be able to sum up clearly the function of the Old Testament law and how it's fulfilled in Christ?

Let's take a look at the Nature and Importance

IS BIBLE DOCTRINE IMPORTANT?

One of the fundamental marks of liberalism is its constant attack against "doctrine." A growing number of people are now saying, "Doctrine is not important. Jesus is important. Let's lay aside our petty doctrinal differences and get back to Jesus." Friend, Bible doctrine is SO IMPORTANT that God made sure II John 9-11 was recorded: "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds." If doctrine is not important, then these verses do not mean anything. Doctrine is of utmost importance!

The word doctrine means: "instruction, teaching." Therefore, the "doctrine of Christ" is the instruction or teaching that Christ gave. Is the teaching of Christ important? Is the truth important? Is sound doctrine important? YES! A thousand times YES!

Just how important is the doctrine or teaching of Christ? Paul told Timothy to "give attendance to...doctrine" and "charge some that they teach no other doctrine" (I Timothy 4:13,16; 1:3). Titus was told to "speak the things which become sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1). Paul warned that some "will not endure sound doctrine" (II Timothy 4:3), that we are as "children" when we are "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:14), and to "mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine" (Romans 16:17). Elders are to be able "by sound doctrine both to exhort and convict the gainsayers" (Titus 1:9). Every Christian is to "hold fast the form of sound words" (doctrine) and "earnestly contend for the faith" (doctrine) (II Timothy 1:13; Jude 3). Therefore, we see not only the importance of doctrine but also the strict warning to anyone who would pervert or change Christ's doctrine.

If doctrine is unimportant, then what parts can be changed? Can we do away with the doctrine of: the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, the church of Christ, the acts of worship,

the plan of salvation? If any point of doctrine can be changed, then WHO has the right to change it and HOW FAR can he go in changing it? Let's submit to Christ's doctrine, for therein only do we purify our souls (I Peter 1:22).