

Does Doctrine Matter Anymore?

This month I am departing from my routine of writing the cover article and passing that duty on to someone else. John Piper recently wrote an article entitled *A Surprise Endorsement of Doctrine* which reminds us why the content of our beliefs is so vital. Remember that when it comes to our justification before God what truly matters is what we believe, not what we do. The Gospel invites us to come and believe not come and do. Ours is a revealed faith. That is, Christianity is based on a body of doctrines given to us from the mind of the Creator. Nevertheless, recent research has shown and experience has confirmed that within the evangelical church there is an alarming biblical illiteracy which threatens our health and witness. Let us not forget the firm foundation that Jesus has laid for His church in His excellent word.

A Surprise Endorsement for Doctrine

By John Piper

God gives good press to doctrine. But surveys of evangelicals usually do not—until recently. In God’s book, knowing his Son and believing true things about him is liberty. “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). God’s self-revelation in the Bible is not a wax nose. Paul calls it “the standard of teaching to which you were committed” (Romans 6:17). It’s a standard, a yardstick, a pattern. You measure truth by it. Elsewhere he calls it “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), and the “pattern of the soundwords” and “the good deposit entrusted to you” (2 Timothy 1:13-14). It does not change. Our everlasting salvation is determined by whether we believe it: “Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son” (2 John 1:9). Depart from the doctrine, and you depart from Christ. Or, better, keep watch over your doctrine and “you will save . . . yourself” (1 Timothy 4:16).

That’s high praise for good doctrine. You would think evangelicals would agree. But we are more likely to hear things like, “Christ unites; doctrine divides,” or, “Ask, ‘Whom do you trust?’, not ‘What do you believe?’” The minimization of biblical doctrine is common. But if we are not willing to get a high estimation of doctrine from God, perhaps we can get it from George Barna.

He has been surveying American evangelicals to see if we practice what we preach. He is finding that we don’t preach doctrine from the Bible, and therefore don’t practice differently from the world. For example, he says that evangelicals divorce at about the same rate as the nation at large. Only 9 percent of evangelicals tithe. Of 12,000 teenagers who took the pledge to wait for marriage, 80% had sex outside marriage in the next 7 years. Twenty-six percent of traditional evangelicals do not think premarital sex is wrong. White evangelicals are more likely than Catholics and mainline Protestants to object to having black neighbors.

According to Barna's definition an "evangelical" is willing to say, "I have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in my life today." In addition, they agree with several other things like: Jesus lived a sinless life; eternal salvation is only through grace, not works; Christians have a personal responsibility to evangelize non-Christians; Satan exists. Barna says that 7 to 8 percent of the US population is in this group. And they do not live substantially differently than the world.

But Barna has now developed a new set of criteria that defines a group within evangelicalism who has a "biblical worldview." This means they say that "the Bible is the moral standard" and "absolute moral truths exist and are conveyed through the Bible." In addition they believe that God is the all-knowing, all-powerful Creator who still rules the universe, and that salvation cannot be earned by their deeds, and that the Bible is totally accurate in all it teaches. This group is substantially smaller than the broad evangelical group.

For those who belittle doctrine as troublesome, it may come as a surprise that this group lives differently from the world. Ronald Sider, in his new book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, describes the difference:

They are 9 times more likely than all the others to avoid 'adult-only' material on the Internet. They are 4 times more likely than other Christians to boycott objectionable companies and products and twice as likely to choose not to watch a movie specifically because of its bad content. They are 3 times more likely than other adults not to use tobacco products and twice as likely to volunteer time to help needy people. Forty-nine percent of all born-again Christians with a biblical world view have volunteered more than an hour in the previous week to an organization serving the poor, whereas only 29 percent of born-again Christians without a biblical world view and only 22 percent of non-born-again Christians had done so.

The conclusion is that doctrine matters. Sider puts it like this:

Barna's findings on the different behavior of Christians with a biblical worldview underline the importance of theology. Biblical orthodoxy does matter. One important way to end the scandal of contemporary Christian behavior is to work and pray fervently for the growth of orthodox theological belief in our churches.

Who would have thought that the very survey system that lures so many to put their finger in the wind of opinion would tell them, Take your finger down and teach the people what the Bible says?

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