

LET'S GET ACQUAINTED SERIES
GOSPELGRACE101

week #4

UNDERSTANDING OUR MESSAGE

Why Does Doctrine Matter?

Without question, **the most important part of any church is what the leadership and congregation believe.** The word “doctrine” comes from the Latin doctrine, which means “*a code of beliefs,*” “*a body of teachings,*” or “*instructions.*” When we speak of biblical doctrine, it refers to the body of timeless, universal, unchanging truths delineated in the teachings, instructions, and precepts of Scripture.

These common beliefs comprise the doctrine of the church and are often collected and spelled out in a doctrinal statement. The doctrines in our doctrinal statement are commonly held by the leadership and the congregation and are representative of what you can expect to hear at all levels and venues of Gospel Grace’s preaching and teaching ministries.

A word of explanation might be prudent at this point in our discussion. When it comes to identifying and explaining the biblical doctrines that Gospel Grace Church believes, promotes, and is willing to defend, it is important to note that **not all beliefs or doctrines taught in the New Testament are at the same level of emphasis and clarity.**

“[3] For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, [4] that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4)

“[37] And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. [38] This is the great and first commandment. [39] And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. [40] On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.’” (Matthew 22:37-40)

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42)

Before we jump into a study of the important doctrines we believe at Gospel Grace Church, we need to answer several important questions.

1. Why does doctrine matter so much at Gospel Grace Church?

God the Father took doctrine seriously.

HE REVEALED IT.

Doctrine matters to us because it matters to God.

He gave us an inspired Bible full of His self-revelation. Much of what is in the Bible is instruction or teaching about topics like the nature of God, the nature of Man, the nature of sin and the Fall, the way of salvation through faith in Christ, the nature and purpose of the church, the future of God's people and the end of the age, and many other doctrinal truths. Since God has taken the time to speak to these matters of doctrine, we as a church and you as an individual Christian should take the time to understand what God has said. This means we need to take doctrine seriously.

Jesus took doctrine seriously.

HE TAUGHT IT.

When Jesus spoke to the disciples, He often stressed the importance of knowing and believing His teaching. **It was important that they understand His teaching, because through it they would find eternal life.**

"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." (John 6:63)

*"Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works."
(John 14:10)*

Jesus said right doctrine would be an identifying mark of those who truly love Him and the Father.

*"Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me."
(John 14:24)*

Because doctrine/instruction was so important to Jesus, it must be important to us.

Paul and the Apostles took doctrine seriously.

THEY PRESERVED IT.

Jude stated that there is a body of doctrines called "the faith" that has been authoritatively and fully delivered to the Church and for which the Church must at times be willing to fight for.

"Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints." (Jude 1:3)

Paul instructs believers to stand firm in this body of doctrine.

*"Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong."
(1 Corinthians 16:13)*

He said we are to guard the deposit of this body of truth...

“O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge,’” (1 Timothy 6:20)

“and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also”. (2 Timothy 2:2)

...to test ourselves to make sure we remain true to this body of truth

“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Corinthians 13:5)

...and to be careful not to stray away from the doctrines that make up “the faith.”

“O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called “knowledge,” for by professing it some have swerved from the faith. Grace be with you.” (1 Timothy 6:20-21)

Because Paul and the Apostles were serious enough about doctrine to write it down and preserve it for future generations (2 Timothy 2:2), we must take it seriously as the present day recipients of what was passed down.

Christian heroes took doctrine seriously.

THEY DIED FOR IT.

Over the 2000 years of Church history there have been **men willing to suffer and even lay down their lives**

for the doctrines that make up “The Faith.” In other words, some doctrines are so important that the Christians charged with guarding and teaching them to the next generation of believers were willing to die for them if necessary—and many of them did. We know them as the Martyrs for the Faith, and their deaths testify to the importance of doctrine. Let’s look at two examples of men who were willing to stand for doctrines that cost them their lives.

Polycarp was a well-known, highly respected pastor of the church at Smyrna, a town in Asia Minor. In his youth, he studied at the feet of the aged Apostle John himself and learned the precious doctrines of the faith from the lips of the last living apostle. At the age of 86, he was brought before the Roman governor and asked to deny Christ and swear allegiance to Caesar or be cast to the beasts or burned in the arena. Here is an abridged version of the story as recounted by the first historian of the Christian church, Eusebius.

When the hour was come for him to go, conducted him to the city where he was met by the governors who, taking him into their vehicle, said “What harm is there in saying, Lord Caesar, and to sacrifice, and thus save your life?” He replied, “I shall not do as you advice me.” Failing therefore to persuade him, they uttered dreadful language, and thrust him from the car with great vehemence, so that as he descended he sprained his thigh. But not at all moved from his purpose, as if nothing had happened, he eagerly went on, and was conducted to the stadium. As he advanced, the proconsul attempted to persuade him to renounce Christ saying, “Have a regard for your age. Swear by Caesar and recant by saying ‘away with those who deny the gods.’ If you so swear I will dismiss you. Simply revile Christ.” To this, Polycarp responded, “Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me wrong; and how can I now blaspheme my king that has saved me?” The governor continued to urge him saying, “I have wild beasts at hand and I will cast you to them unless you change your mind.” Polycarp responded, “Call them. For we have no

reason to repent from the better to the worse.” The governor continued his threats, “I will cause you to be burned with fire should you not change your mind.” Polycarp’s final answer was, “You threaten fire that burns for a moment and is soon extinguished, for you know nothing of the judgment to come, and the fire of eternal punishment reserved for the wicked. But why do you delay? Bring what you wish.”

Someone once observed, *“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”* Polycarp was not the first or the last Christian to give up his life for the doctrines of Christianity. In England alone, 288 Christian leaders were burned at the stake during the reign of “Bloody Mary.” J.C. Ryle, a bishop in the Church of England at the turn of the 20th century, observed,

“It is a broad fact that these 288 sufferers were not put to death for any offence against property or person. They were not rebels against the Queen’s authority, or unbelievers, or men and women of immoral lives. On the contrary, they were with barely an exception, some of the holiest, purest, and best Christians in England, and several of them the most learned men of their day.”

So why were these Christians burned? Simply for holding fast to doctrines Evangelical churches still claim to believe—doctrines that were defended and re-established for the Christian church by Martin Luther and those that launched the Protestant Reformation. In particular, these men and women were willing to die for the doctrines specifically related to Christ, the atonement, and justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Doctrine mattered greatly to these Christians in whose line we stand, and it is a shame and dishonor on our heads when doctrine matters less to us than it did to them. We must give doctrine its proper importance given the price others paid that we might have these truths to believe.

Satan takes doctrine seriously.

HE ATTACKS IT.

It might surprise you to learn that Satan takes doctrine seriously. **One of his primary strategies to destroy the church is to pervert her doctrine.** His attacks come from without and from within the Church. Peter and Paul warn us that false teachers will come, unstable Christians will twist the teaching of Scripture to their own harm and that of others, and that as the age progresses more and more, people will have less and less interest in sound doctrine.

“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.” (2 Peter 2:1)

“as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.” (2 Peter 3:16)

“For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions,” (2 Timothy 4:3)

In short, as we have seen, doctrine is very important. Because it was important enough to Christians of the past to die for, it must be important to those of us who are living in the present or else there won't be a Christian faith worthy of dying for in the future.⁵

⁵ Sam Horn, Outline from “Why Does Sound Doctrine Matter?”

2. If sound doctrine is so important, how am I going to know it, so I can guard it, obey it, and pass it along to others?

The primary way to learn sound doctrine is to study the Bible in order to rightly understand the doctrinal truth it teaches. The Apostle Paul said to:

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15)

The writer of Hebrews goes even further and rebukes a group of Christians who, after years of being Christians, were still ignorant of the basic teachings of the Christian faith they claimed to follow.

“[11] About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. [12] For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, [13] for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. [14] But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.” (Hebrews 5:11-14)

3. Why do good people seem to disagree over doctrinal matters, and how should we handle those who disagree with us? Shouldn't we just set aside our differences and agree to get along for the sake of unity?

No matter what your background might be, **we are thankful God brought you to Gospel Grace Church**, and we think it is important for you to understand our

commitment to unity. We take the unity of God's Church very seriously. We do so because biblical unity was important to Jesus (John 17). However, it is important to recognize this in order to preserve the kind of unity that would please the Father; Jesus stated His Word as truth, which would sanctify all genuine believers (John 17:17-21.) In other words, genuine unity is built on agreement on biblical truth. Careful study of the New Testament reveals neither Jesus nor the Apostles were willing to give up true doctrine for the sake of unity. What this means for us in order for biblical unity to exist is that it must be built on the common ground of right doctrine. To set aside our doctrinal differences when they are settled around a proper understanding of biblical truth simply to preserve unity is to make a compromise not permitted by the New Testament. Listen to the words of Erwin Lutzer on this point from his book, *The Doctrines That Divide*:

To speak of unity and to minimize doctrinal differences is to sacrifice truth on the altar of wishful thinking. Unity, unless it is based on agreement regarding the content of the gospel, would not be worth the price. To this day, irreconcilable differences exist within Christendom on the most fundamental teaching of the gospel... There is no need to repent for doctrinal differences if the truth of the gospel is at stake. When Peter began to misrepresent the gospel by withdrawing from the Gentiles and siding with Jews who believed circumcision was necessary for salvation, Paul rebuked him publically (Galatians 2:14). Just giving the wrong impression about the content of the gospel gave Paul the right to rebuke publically the most prominent apostle. There is no such thing as a harmless addition to the gospel. Indeed, Paul was so concerned about the purity of the message that he wrote, "If any man is preaching to you a gospel that is contrary to that which you have received, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:9). Without agreement on this central point, all attempts at unity are misguided.

Obviously, as we have observed, not all doctrines taught in the New Testament are of the same level of importance or are taught at the same level of clarity. Because all

biblical doctrines are authoritative, we should work hard to understand them in order to obey what they teach. However, there will be room for legitimate differences over certain doctrines that are less important or taught with less clarity by the New Testament writers. However, when the Bible speaks clearly on a doctrinal matter such as the inspiration of Scripture, the nature of Christ, the way of salvation, etc., believers must be willing to defend these doctrines when they are attacked by apostates and false teachers or betrayed by disobedient Christians.

The teaching of the New Testament on this point is very clear. The Apostle John instructs believers to avoid any contact with apostate teachers who deny Christ.

“[9] Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. [10] If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, [11] for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.” (2 John 1:9-11)

Paul addressed a similar issue at Corinth and instructed them through a series of penetrating questions designed to force these believers to think about the very character of God as a basis for making decisions about truth and doctrine.

“[14] Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? [15] What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? [16] What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. [17] Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, [18] and I will be a father to

you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.” (2 Cor. 6:14-18)

Paul also tells us to mark men who twist doctrine or bring heretical teaching into the church and after warning them, to withdraw from them.

“[17] I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. [18] For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.” (Romans 16:17-18)

Paul goes on to tell us we are to withdraw from any Christian who betrays the faith by refusing to withdraw from unbelievers who deny it.

“Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.” (2 Thessalonians 3:6)

4. If Doctrine is so important to God, why does He allow wrong doctrine to creep into the church?

Two Bible passages help us answer this question by providing some important spiritual insight into God’s purposes for His people.

“If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, (Deuteronomy 13:1)

“for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.” (1 Corinthians 11:19)

God tells us He allows these men to come among His people to put us to the test so that those who are “approved” may be recognized! How we respond to divisive and disobedient teachers and their teaching will

reveal what kind of a believer we really are. When we encounter people that claim to be spiritual teachers of truth from God but their teaching produces attitudes, actions, and speech that is clearly unbiblical, how we respond is important.

5. How should the Spiritual Leaders in the Church respond to False Teachers?

False doctrine and false teachers must be dealt with very seriously, very firmly, very directly, and very decisively. False doctrine and those who teach it are not new problems for the modern church. Sadly, false teachers existed in Paul's day, and his instruction to the leaders and members of those early churches is as important now as it was then. Here are some of the more important instructions regarding the matter of false teachers and their bad doctrine.

- ✘ Guard the truth vigilantly against them. – 1 Timothy 4:1-5,16
- ✘ Note divisive or disobedient teachers or leaders and stay away from them. – 2 Timothy 3:1-5
- ✘ Warn them and then eject them from the church. – Titus 3:10

6. How can I avoid being influenced by them and their teaching?

The best defense is a good offense. And **the best offense against error is to aggressively pursue knowing God through His Word.** Often believers want to protect sound doctrine by studying false doctrine in an effort to refute it.

While such studies have limited profitability in certain settings, by far the best approach to false doctrine is to avoid it entirely. You will recognize error when you see it if you have filled your mind with truth from God's Word. Someone once observed that the sign of a growing Christian is a well-marked Bible. Here are some quick suggestions to get you started.

- ★ **Be Word-filled**
Love and study the Word of God.

- ★ **Be obedient and holy**
Deny self, resist sin, and mortify the flesh.

- ★ **Be humble and submissive**
...to God and to God-appointed authorities who are over you.

- ★ **Be supportive and serving**
...in the Church of Christ. Declare your loyalties. Don't allow disgruntled or disobedient people to feel comfortable confiding in you. When you are constantly refusing to tolerate or condone evil, then those who are involved will soon avoid you!

7. What does the importance placed on doctrine mean on a practical level for Gospel Grace Church?

Since we take these biblical instructions about sound doctrine seriously, there are some practical implications for our ministry. If we take doctrine seriously and commit ourselves to teaching, obeying, and contending for it when necessary, then there are certain events we can't sanction or participate in without compromising the gospel outright, or sending a mixed message about the importance of right doctrine, or disobeying one or more of these clear New Testament texts. Let us give you two specific examples.

Because we value clear teaching in the New Testament regarding the importance of protecting the gospel of Jesus Christ, we are not able to promote or participate in an ecumenical evangelistic crusade where leaders of churches that do not line up with the Bible teaching on salvation or other important doctrines, such as inspiration, are welcome as a part of the platform team or where "converts" of such an effort are sent back to these kinds of churches. We certainly rejoice when anyone is truly saved and born again, but because the New Testament clearly teaches the "end does not justify the means" (2 Corinthians 4:1-6), we sorrowfully can't participate.

Another important implication for us as a church involves our commitment to protect biblical doctrine in a clear, loving, and balanced way so we don't engage in activities that create confusion about what we really believe regarding the major doctrines of our faith. For example, when we are asked to participate in a cooperative event in a context where our commitment to certain doctrines must be temporarily set aside so we can work together for a common cause with those who either deny those

doctrines or have no problem with those who deny those doctrines, our commitment to those core doctrines must come first.

8. How can I find out more about the major doctrines of the Christian faith?

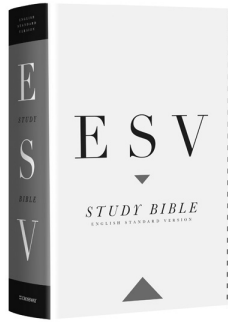
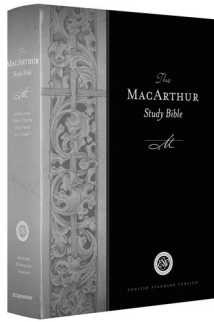
There are three important ways you can grow in your understanding of biblical doctrine.

- ✓ **The first is to be an attentive and aggressive listener in all of our services. Gospel Grace's preaching philosophy is based on preaching through the different books of the Bible paragraph by paragraph.** If you listen carefully and preserve your learning by taking notes, you will be amazed at how quickly you will begin to make connections about the major doctrines taught in the Bible.

- ✓ **A second important way you can connect doctrinally is through our community groups, which currently meet on Wednesday evenings in various homes of Gospel Grace Church family members.**

- ✓ **A third way you can connect doctrinally is by investing in a good study Bible that will give you important information about the passage you are reading or hearing preached. There are many good study Bibles available, but there are a couple we would most recommend.⁶**

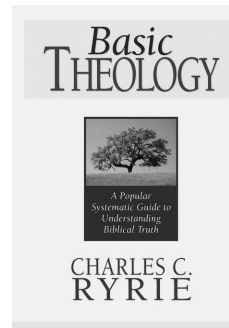
⁶ Sam Horn, "Why Does Sound Doctrine Matter"



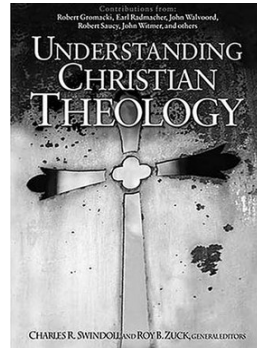
One of them is the **MacArthur Study Bible**, which is available in New King James, New American Standard, and English Standard versions. Crossway Books has also published a very helpful Bible study tool with its **ESV Study Bible**.

Finally, if you want to connect quickly and thoroughly with the major doctrines that we hold at Gospel Grace Church and you want something a bit more thorough than our doctrinal statement, you may want to consider reading one or more of the following books.

- **Basic Theology** by Charles C. Ryrie. This is a good basic, entry-level doctrines book that covers all the major doctrines in a fairly simple and understandable manner. Obviously, you will want to read thoughtfully since, as with all such theological treatments, there are a few places where we differ from Ryrie on debatable interpretations. But for the most part, this is a fair and balanced treatment of the major doctrines taught in the Bible.



- A second resource along these lines worth reading is ***Understanding Christian Theology*** edited by Charles Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck.



- If you are a more serious student and you want to tackle something a bit more thorough, the book you want is ***Systematic Theology*** by Wayne Grudem. We wouldn't necessarily agree on every single interpretation of doctrine, but as a whole, this is a thorough but balanced presentation of the major biblical doctrines of Christianity.

