

UNDERSTANDING THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

SERIES 1

WHAT CHRISTIANS BELIEVE

INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

Understanding Some Basic Issues

Before we engage in our study of what the Bible teaches on a number of vital subjects, it is important that we understand some basic things about Christian doctrine. There are several issues that must be understood before one goes about studying what Christians believe. In this section we will look at these important matters.

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QUESTION 1

What Is Christian Theology?

Theology is the science of God. The term “theology” literally means, “the study of God.” It is derived from two Greek words. *Theos* is the Greek word for God while *logos* can mean “discourse,” or “the study of.” Theology, therefore, is thinking, or studying, about God. There is no higher activity that a person can pursue.

There are a number of important observations that we can make about the study of theology.

1. EVERYONE DOES THEOLOGY

Those who study theology for a profession are known as “theologians.” However, in a sense, everyone is a theologian for everyone has thoughts about God. This includes the atheist who believes that God does not exist. We all have our opinions about God. Consequently every human being has his or her own theology.

2. THEOLOGY AFFECTS HOW WE LIVE

The opinions that we hold about God affect the way we live our lives – it is not merely an academic pursuit. We will live in accordance to what we believe about God’s existence or non-existence. If we believe that God exists, and that we can personally know Him, then we will try to do those things that please Him. However, if we reject the idea that God exists, then we will act in whatever way that pleases us.

3. CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY IS A UNIQUE DISCIPLINE

While the word theology simply refers to the rational study of God, Christian theology is unique. It is the intelligent study of the Christian faith. It limits itself to the study of the God of the Bible.

4. THE TERM THEOLOGY IS USED IN TWO WAYS

The word theology, in Christian usage, is used in two ways. There is a narrow sense of the term as well as a wider sense.

The Narrow Sense Is The Doctrine Of God

In a narrow sense, the term theology refers to the specific study of the doctrine of the God of the Bible. It explores His existence, His character, and His works. In this sense of the term, the idea of theology limits the study to God alone. This is also known as “theology proper” or the “doctrine of God.”

The Broader Sense Is All Christian Teaching

In a broader sense, theology refers to the sum total of Christian teaching. Used in the broadest sense, theology can be described as the science that deals with our knowledge of the God of the Bible and His relationship to humankind.

5. THE JOB OF A THEOLOGIAN IS TO DISCOVER THE FACTS

Since Christian theology is a science, it does not create. The job of those who study Christian theology is to discover the facts about God that already exist. Like the scientist, those who study Christian theology look at all the available evidence and draw conclusions. It is an investigative process; not a creative process.

6. THERE ARE LIMITATIONS TO CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

The study of Christian theology is limited. It studies the facts about God as God has revealed them. Therefore God has determined the subject matter – it is not the determination of human beings. We can only know as much about God as He has chosen to reveal to us. It is impossible to discover truths about God apart from the things that He has revealed - we are not able to fill in the gaps. If human beings want to understand God, then they must study His written Word. The Psalmist wrote.

Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way (Psalm 119:104).

7. THE SOURCES OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Some people limit the study of Christian theology to the information found only in Scripture while others believe that all facts, from every source, should be considered when studying Christian theology. It is clear that the only infallible source for doing Christian theology is the Bible. Information that is discovered from sources outside the Bible must be evaluated in light of the Holy Scripture.

Summary

Theology means the study of God. Everyone is a theologian in the sense that we all have beliefs about God and we all live our lives in accordance with those beliefs. If we believe God exists, we will live differently than those who reject His existence.

Christian theology is a study of the God of the Bible. Christian theology can be defined in the narrow sense – it is the study of the doctrine of the God of the Bible. It can also be used in a wider sense to refer to the sum total of Christian teaching. This is the usual way in which the term is used.

The job of those who study Christian theology is to discover the facts as they are – it is not to create facts. The subject matter of the study of Christian theology is something that God alone determines. Therefore we can only understand as much about God as He has chosen to reveal.

The Bible is the only infallible source of Christian theology. Though certain truths about God can be derived from a study of things outside the Bible these truths must confirm to that which is recorded in Scripture.

QUESTION 2

What Is Christian Doctrine? (Teaching)

The word “doctrine” comes from the Latin *doctrina*. It can be defined as, “teaching or instruction.” Christian doctrine simply means the beliefs of Christians.

Doctrine Is Different From Theology

Sometimes the word doctrine is used interchangeably with the word theology. However there is a difference between the two terms. Theology is a more general term. It refers to the study of God. Doctrine refers to the specific teaching about God that is found in a study of theology.

THE NEW TESTAMENT REFERENCES TO CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

While the word theology is not found in the Bible, there are over forty New Testament references to Christian doctrine. They include the following.

The People Were Amazed At Jesus’ Doctrine

When Jesus completed the Sermon on the Mount we are told the people were amazed with His teaching.

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching (doctrine), because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law (Matthew 7:28).

The teachings of Jesus were given with divine authority and the people recognized this authority.

The Source Of Jesus’ Doctrine Was God The Father

Jesus told the religious leaders where His doctrine originated.

So Jesus answered them and said, “My teaching (doctrine) is not mine, but his who sent me. If anyone is willing to do his will, he will know of the teaching (doctrine), whether it is of God or whether I speak from myself” (John 7:16,17).

According to Jesus, His doctrine comes from God the Father.

The Early Church Was Devoted To The Apostles’ Doctrine

We find the early church devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles.

They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching (doctrine) and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42).

The Apostles Were Ordered Not To Teach Their Doctrine

As Jesus’ apostles spread His teachings many people were converted. This caused the religious leaders to order the apostles not to teach His doctrine.

We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching (doctrine) and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us (Acts 5:28).

Although the apostles were commanded to stop proclaiming the teachings of Jesus, they would not stop, neither could they stop.

The Doctrine Was Cause For Belief In Jesus

We are told that the doctrine of the Lord caused the proconsul to believe.

Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching (doctrine) of the Lord (Acts 13:12).

The People In Athens Wanted To Hear Paul's Doctrine

When the apostle Paul went to Athens the people wanted to hear his doctrine.

And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching (doctrine) is which you are proclaiming?" (Acts 17:19).

Paul then taught them the doctrine of Jesus.

The People Were To Obey The Doctrine Of Christ

Paul wrote to the church at Rome concerning the doctrine they followed.

But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching (doctrine) to which you were committed (Romans 6:17).

The writer to the Hebrews wrote about the basic teachings, or doctrines, of the Christian faith.

Instruction (doctrine) about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment (Hebrews 6:2).

The Importance Of Correct Doctrine Is Emphasized

Scripture emphasizes the importance of correct doctrine. John wrote.

Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching (doctrine) has both the Father and the Son (2 John 9).

Paul wrote to Timothy about the importance of doctrine.

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching (doctrine) (1 Timothy 4:13).

Jesus Spoke Of the Source Of All Error – Wrong Doctrine

Jesus told the religious leaders of His day what was the source of their errors.

You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God (Matthew 22:29).

Among their problems, the religious leaders did not understand the Scriptures – they did not really know the doctrine, or teaching, that came from God.

From this brief survey we find that Christian doctrine is of the utmost importance.

Summary

Doctrine means teaching or instruction. While some use this term interchangeably with the word theology there is a difference between the two.

Christian doctrine is basically the teachings of Christ. The New Testament has a number of references about the importance of Christian doctrine. We find the people amazed at the doctrine of Jesus. Jesus Himself told the religious leaders that His doctrine came from God the Father. The early church continued teaching the doctrines of Jesus. The doctrines were causing many people to believe in Jesus. This led the religious leader to command the apostles not to teach about Jesus.

When the apostle Paul came to Athens the people wanted to hear his doctrine. When the opportunity arose, he preached Christ to them.

Paul wrote to the believers in Rome about the importance of following the teaching that had been given them. In the same manner, the writer to the Hebrews listed some of the basic doctrines of the Christian faith. We find from both the writings of John and Paul an emphasis on correct doctrine. Finally, Jesus told the religious leaders that the source of all error was their lack of understanding the doctrines, or teachings, that God had revealed. Consequently the study of doctrine is crucial if one wishes to understand the Christian faith.

QUESTION 3

What Are The Various Sources Of Authority For Christian Doctrine?

From where do Christians derive their beliefs? What is the infallible source or sources of authority in which doctrines are based?

There Is A Big Difference Of Opinion Among Professing Christians

With respect to the source of authority for Christian doctrine there is a big difference between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. The basic differences between the two can be summed up as follows.

The Views Protestantism Holds: The Bible Alone Is The Final Authority

Protestant Christianity places its ultimate source of authority in the Bible alone. The Scriptures are the final authority on all matters of faith and practice. There is no church leader or council who makes decisions that affect the entire church. It is the Bible and it alone that settles all questions concerning spiritual truth. No other source has any authority whatsoever. Holy Scripture alone is the infallible guide.

The Views Of Roman Catholicism: The Church Is The Final Authority

The Roman Catholic Church, however, believes that ultimate authority does not reside in the Bible, but rather in the church – the Roman Catholic Church. The church, they contend, has the final say on all matters of faith and practice. It has the infallible authority to add to that which is contained in Scripture. They believe that written Scripture and unwritten tradition are in total harmony. The Roman Catholic Church argues that all the doctrines they teach are in accord with Scripture.

They believe that Jesus gave this infallible authority to Simon Peter. Peter's authority has been transferred to a continuous succession of human beings since that time. The Pope, or the Bishop of Rome, supposedly has the same authority as Christ. The Roman Catholic Church believes the present Pope, as well as all past Popes, speaks infallibly on all matters of doctrine.

The Roman Catholic View Is Rejected By Protestants

Protestants reject the doctrine of apostolic succession, the authority of the Pope, and the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church. They believe none of these ideas are taught in Scripture.

They Both Cannot Be Right About Where The Final Authority Rests

There are wide differences of opinion between Protestants and Roman Catholics as to where ultimate authority comes from. They both cannot be right about this issue. Someone has to be wrong. Although many have tried to forge some sort of compromising position between the two - it simply will not work. The Roman Catholic Church has the final authority or the Bible alone is the final authority – it cannot be both.

There Is No Evidence For Roman Catholic Position

There is no biblical evidence for the Roman Catholic position. While those who have believed in Jesus have been given His authority in some things, Scripture does not give the slightest hint that the church on earth is to have the same infallible authority as Jesus Christ. The New Testament emphasis is on the Word of God – written and spoken. It is the only infallible authority – not the church. The church is to submit to the Word of God – the Word is not to submit itself to the church.

Summary

When it comes to final authority concerning spiritual matters there is a difference of opinion among those who profess to be Christians. While Protestantism believes final authority is derived from the Bible, and the Bible alone, Roman Catholicism teaches the final authority resides in the Roman Catholic Church. This is a crucial issue. Because of the wide differences between the two groups they both cannot be correct at the same time. Either Protestantism or Roman Catholicism is wrong as to where ultimate authority comes from. There is no meaningful middle ground.

The Roman Catholic position of authority cannot be sustained biblically. There is no evidence that when Christ left the earth He gave His followers the same infallible authority that He had. The Bible alone, the written Word of God, is the ultimate authority for all matters of faith and practice.

QUESTION 4

What Is The Place Of Tradition In Determining Christian Doctrine?

An important issue is the place of tradition in the determination of authoritative Christian doctrine. What role, if any, does tradition have?

The Word “Tradition” In The New Testament

The word “tradition” comes from a word meaning, “to hand over.” It has the idea of accepting beliefs or practices that have been handed down. Any group that exists for a period of time will develop its own traditions.

Before the New Testament was put into writing, the message was conveyed by word of mouth, or tradition. For example, Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which he was betrayed took bread (1 Corinthians 15:23).

Paul taught Timothy to faithfully pass on the traditions that he had been taught.

Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 1:13).

Once the traditions were committed to writing there was an authoritative source for all Christians for all time – the New Testament.

There Are Non-Biblical Traditions

The Bible also mentions traditions that are not good. Jesus warned against such traditions that contradict the Word of God.

Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, “Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.” He answered and said to them, “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?” (Matthew 15:1-3).

New Traditions Arose That Differed From Scripture

Eventually a number of church practices arose that differed from that which was taught in Scripture. These non-biblical traditions brought a strong reaction from those who accepted the truth of Scripture. They were rejected because they contradicted what the Bible clearly said.

All Traditions Must Be Tested

Tradition, therefore, can be either good or bad. Scripture must test them. The traditions that have been passed down can be helpful in understanding biblical truth. However the light of God’s Word must test them all. The psalmist wrote.

For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light (Psalm 36:9).

Summary

The word tradition has the idea of “handing something over.” The New Testament speaks approvingly of certain traditions about Jesus. However Jesus Himself warned of traditions that were contrary to the Word of God. In the history of the church a number of traditions have risen that are at odds with the Bible. These must be rejected.

Consequently traditions can be either good or bad. The key question about any tradition is, “Does it match up with Scripture?”

QUESTION 5

What Is The Difference Between Theology And Religion?

It is possible to make the distinction between religion and theology. Theology concerns what people believe while a person's religion refers to one's conduct – how they behave.

The Derivation Of The Word Religion Is Uncertain

The exact derivation of the word religion is uncertain. There are two basic views.

1. It comes from a Latin word *religare* meaning “to bind.” In the best sense of the term, religion should be that which binds people to God in a living relationship. It is how one lives in light of their belief in God.
2. A second possibility is that religion comes from the Latin word *religere*. This term means, “to go over again,” or “to ponder carefully.” Religion therefore would consist of a careful consideration of one's responsibilities toward God.

Whatever the exact derivation of the word, religion has the idea of the living out of one's beliefs.

Theology Is What A Person Believes

Theology consists of what a person believes about God. Thus theology is more like a science while religion is more like the practical application of the belief. Theology analyzes the truth while religion attempts to live it. Therefore religion is practice while theology is knowledge.

There Should Be A Balance Between Theology And Religion

There should be a balance between what one knows about God and how a person conducts their life. Unhappily this is not often the case. Many theologians, who have much knowledge about God, do not live a spiritual or religious life. On the other hand, there are those who live a godly life who do not have much knowledge of biblical truth. Consequently one can be a theologian without being spiritual, and one can be spiritual without being much of a theologian. However, each of us should strive to know as much as we can about God and then live consistently with what we know.

We Are To Study The Truth

The message to those who are spiritual would be what Paul wrote to Timothy – study.

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

All believers should study the Scripture.

We Are Also To Do These Things

The message to the theologian is found in the words of Jesus – do them. He said.

Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them (John 13:17).

It is not enough to know the truth we must also do the truth. James wrote

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it - he will be blessed in what he does (James 1:22-25).

Christianity Is Devotion To A Person

We must emphasize that the essence of the Christian faith is not a set of teachings, or even a lifestyle. It is the devotion to a Person – Jesus Christ. Jesus said.

Eternal life is to know you, the only true God, and to know Jesus Christ, the one you sent (John 17:3).

The message of Scripture is that an individual can have a personal relationship with the living God through His Son Jesus Christ. This is the heart of Christianity!

Summary

Simply stated, we can define theology as the “study of God’s truth” and religion as “the practice of God’s truth.” There should be a proper balance between the two in the life of a Christian. It is important to know what the Christian faith stands for and it is also important to live consistently with ones beliefs. The Bible encourages both. We must know the truth of God’s Word and we must put the truths into practice. It is not enough to simply know the truth; the Bible also commands us to do the truth.

Above all, Christianity is devotion to the Person of Jesus Christ. It is a love relationship between the Creator and His creation. This truly is what Christianity is all about.

QUESTION 6

Why Is The Study Of Christian Doctrine Necessary?

It is important for everyone to make a serious study of Christian doctrine. This is necessary for a number of reasons. They include the following.

1. WE ALL ASK THE SAME QUESTIONS

All of us believe in something. A person will live their life according to what they believe. Life is a journey from time to eternity. Consequently it makes a big difference whether one believes life is an aimless and meaningless experience or that they believe there is a personal God who has a destiny for each of us beyond this life.

As long as humans think about the questions about God's existence and the meaning of life there will be a need to have the biblical answers to these questions. Doctrine will always be necessary as long as people want to know who they are, what life is all about, and what will happen to them when they die. A study of God's Word will clearly answer these questions.

2. WE ALL HAVE INTELLECTUAL NEEDS

Since human beings are rational as well as emotional creatures, there is a need for a rational understanding of the things of God. To meet these intellectual needs one must understand Christian doctrine. Jesus recognized this when He said.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment (Matthew 22:37,38).

Heart, soul, and mind mean ones total being.

3. WE NEED A CORRECT DEFINITION OF THE FAITH

A study of doctrine is necessary in order to provide a correct definition of the Christian faith. Since God has revealed truths to humankind that we would not otherwise know, it is important that these truths are properly defined. This can only come from a serious study of God's Word.

The Difference Between Faith And The Faith

There is a difference between "faith" and "the faith." Faith is trust. It is our response to God's grace. Faith is the instrument by which God's divine revelation and blessings are grasped. The Bible says without faith it is impossible to please God.

It is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that there is a God and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

"The" faith refers to the sum of Christian teaching, the body of truth that has been once and for all revealed to the saints. Jude wrote.

Dearly loved friends, I had been eagerly planning to write to you about the salvation we all share. But now I find that I must write about something else, urging you to defend the truth of the faith. God gave this unchanging truth once for all time to his holy people (Jude 3).

To the Galatians Paul wrote.

But they were hearing only, “He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy” (Galatians 1:23).

Paul wrote about “one faith.”

One Lord, one faith, one baptism (Ephesians 4:5).

It is important to understand “the faith” before one can exercise personal faith toward God.

4. WE ARE TO DEFEND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Christian views have been challenged. It is important to study Christian doctrine in order to defend the faith against attack. One must know exactly what faith they are defending. Peter wrote.

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15).

Consequently we find believers are commanded to know both what they believe about God and why they believe it.

5. BELIEVERS ARE TO PROMOTE THE FAITH

Christianity is a missionary religion. Before He ascended into heaven Jesus commanded His disciples to do the following.

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you. I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:19,20).

In order to properly promote the faith, it is essential that we understand what the faith is all about. Paul wrote to Titus about the qualifications of a Christian leader.

He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it (Titus 1:9).

6. CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE MUST BE BASED UPON DOCTRINE

Christian experience must be build upon a solid foundation. Experience does not produce truth; truth produces the Christian experience. Paul emphasized.

If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions (1 Timothy 6:3,4).

7. WRONG IDEAS WILL APPEAR IF DOCTRINE IS NOT STUDIED

For those who reject the study of Christian doctrine, unhealthy and unbiblical ideas will appear. The only corrective to this is a proper understanding of what Christianity stands for. Paul wrote.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming (Ephesians 4:14)

8. THERE NO DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE SPIRITUAL AND THE INTELLECTUAL

Some would like to make a distinction between intellectual knowledge and spiritual knowledge. They contend the Bible is only interested in spiritual knowledge. However the Bible makes no such distinction between the intellectual and the spiritual. To the contrary, Scripture says that after His resurrection Jesus opened the mind of His disciples so that they would understand.

Then he opened their minds to understand the Scripture (Luke 23:45).

Scripture does not present faith and knowledge as things that are opposed to each other. The believer grows in faith in the Jesus by gaining an understanding the Christian doctrine and then applying the truths in daily living.

The Example Of The Apostle Paul

The Apostle Paul is the primary example of one who can have great Bible knowledge and spiritual passion at the same time. His credentials were impeccable as he himself acknowledged.

For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death (Philippians 3:3-10)

This man with great intellectual credentials had a heart for the things of Christ like no other person. It illustrates the fact that one can have both the heart and the mind. It does not have to be either/or.

9. THE STUDY OF SCRIPTURE IS COMMANDED

There are passages in Scriptures that directly and indirectly command the believer to know God's truth. Jesus said to the religious leaders of his day.

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about me (John 5:39).

In a number of places, the apostle Paul wrote about the importance of teaching the Word of God.

To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ (Colossians 1:27,28).

Paul encouraged Timothy to study the Scripture.

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

10. THE LEADERS MUST BE ABLE TO TEACH

Those who lead others are to have the ability to teach God's truth. One cannot teach others – either adults or children – until they understand the truth for themselves.

Paul wrote that an overseer must be able to teach God's Word.

Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach (1 Timothy 3:2).

To the church at Ephesus he wrote.

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be up (Ephesians 4:11,12).

11. THERE IS SOME KNOWLEDGE NEEDED TO CONVERT TO CHRIST

People must have some knowledge to be converted to Christ. They must have knowledge of sin as well as knowledge of the Savior who died for them. This can be seen in the story of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch.

Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is desert. So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go near and overtake this chariot." So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him (Acts 8:26-31).

This man needed the Scriptures explained to him before he was converted to Jesus Christ.

12. THERE MUST BE SAFEGUARD AGAINST ERROR

A correct knowledge of what the Bible teaches on a subject will safeguard against error. Jesus chided the religious leaders of His day of their ignorance of the Scripture and the power of God.

Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God" (Matthew 22:29).

Paul warned the Galatians about another gospel.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel- which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:6-9).

Paul also warned Timothy about the time when people would not accept true doctrine.

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths (2 Timothy 4:2-4)

Doctrinal error can lead to all types of problems. A correct view of what the Bible teaches exposes false views about God and His dealings with humanity.

13. IT PROVIDES A BASIS FOR EXAMINING NEW TEACHINGS

There will always be new teachings that arise. Knowing what the Bible says about a particular topic will allow the student to respond effectively to new teachings. If the new teaching does not conform to that which has been previously revealed, then it should be rejected. However one must first know what the Scripture says and this only comes through studying the Bible.

14. IT AIDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

Studying biblical teachings can help develop Christian character. When a person strongly believes something, they will attempt to live what they believe. As people develop convictions as to what the Bible teaches on a subject, their character will begin to conform to those beliefs. While it is more important to live the Christian life than to merely know what the Bible teaches, there would be no basis for Christian experience without the teaching of the Bible.

Sound doctrine is connected to Christian maturity while ignorance of God's Word is connected to sin. Paul wrote.

Anyone who teaches something different disagrees with the correct and godly teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. Those people who disagree are proud of themselves, but they don't really know a thing. Their minds are sick, and they like to argue over words. They cause jealousy, disagreements, unkind words, evil suspicions, and nasty quarrels. They have wicked minds and have missed out on the truth (1 Timothy 6:3-5).

The Apostle Paul wanted to see an increase of the knowledge of the truth in believers. This increase would help them live godly lives. He wrote to Titus.

This letter is from Paul, a slave of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ. I have been sent to bring faith to those God has chosen and to teach them to know the truth that shows them how to live godly lives (Titus 1:1).

Paul also wrote to Titus.

But as for you, promote the kind of living that reflects right teaching (Titus 2:1).

There Is An Increase Of Knowledge

Healthy beliefs should result in healthy living. Paul prayed that the churches would increase in their knowledge.

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God (Philippians 1:9-11).

Paul wrote to the Colossians

For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy (Colossians 1:9,10).

Paul Spoke Of The Obedience Of Faith

Paul spoke of doctrine bringing about the obedience of faith.

God is able to make you strong, just as the Good News says. It is the message about Jesus Christ and his plan for you Gentiles, a plan kept secret from the beginning of time. But now as the prophets foretold and as the eternal God has commanded, this message is made known to all Gentiles everywhere, so that they might believe and obey Christ (Romans 16:25,26)

15. DOCTRINE IS NOT UNINTERESTING OR IRRELEVANT

The study of Christian doctrine should not be uninteresting or irrelevant. Nowhere does Scripture encourage ignorance. Some feel it is a matter of pride that they are ignorant of Christian doctrine. They believe the study of Christian beliefs consists of things that are remote from real life experiences. However, Christian doctrine is important. Scripture emphasizes the necessity of understanding of Christian belief.

Studying Christian Doctrine Is A Lifelong Task

The study of Christian doctrine is a lifelong task. No one will ever come to the place where his or her study is complete. There are always new things to learn, new truths to discover.

All Believers Should Make Serious A Effort To Study Doctrine

Therefore the student should make a serious effort to learn what the Christian faith stands for. There is much to be gained from such a study. In doing so the student should not merely rely on what others have said but do their own study of Scripture. The benefits are unending.

Summary

The study of Christian doctrine is necessary for a number of reasons. First, every human being asks the same questions about their origin, purpose, and destiny. Answers are needed for these ultimate questions.

Human beings also have intellectual needs that must be met. A study of the Scripture can meet these intellectual needs. Jesus commanded to love the Lord with our mind.

A correct definition of the Christian faith is also necessary. This can only come about from a study of Bible doctrine. The Christian faith also needs to be defended. Consequently it is important to know what should be defended and what should not. This can only come about from an understanding of what the Bible teaches.

Christianity is a missionary religion. It is crucial to understand the faith being promoted. In addition, Christian behavior must be based upon sound teaching. Wrong ideas will appear if sound teaching is rejected. It is also important to understand there is no distinction between intellectual and spiritual knowledge. All knowledge about God is important.

Furthermore the study of Scripture is commanded by God – it is not an option for believers. For Christian leaders it is absolutely necessary that they be able to teach.

For a person to be converted they must have a basic understanding of the gospel. The story of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch illustrates this point.

Correct understanding of biblical truth will also safeguard the believer against doctrinal errors.

Sound doctrine provides a basis to evaluate new teaching that will arise. Finally, sound doctrine is the basis for the development of Christian character. It is a lifelong study.

For these reasons a study of Christian doctrine is absolutely necessary. All believers should make a serious effort to know Christian doctrine.

QUESTION 7

Is There The Need For A System Of Christian Doctrine?

Placing Bible doctrines into various categories is known as systematic theology. There are a number of points that need to be made about why the need for a system of doctrine.

1. Doctrines Are Not Classified In Scripture

The reason systematic theology is helpful is because the Bible presents God's revelation in a variety of forms. The great teachings of the Bible are not presented in any systematic way. For example, Scripture records the voice of the prophets as well as the experiences of the believer. We also find God's providence in history revealed in the pages of Scripture. This includes interaction with both individuals and nations.

Although we find various forms of God's dealings in the Bible, they are not classified for us in any systematic form. Systematic theology classifies all these different forms of revelation into an intelligible system and into logical categories. The aim is to have a clear classification of the major beliefs of the faith. Systematic theology also takes into account the understanding of doctrine throughout the history of the church.

2. There Is A Need To Systematize Christian Truth

Many people come to believe in Jesus Christ through some religious experience rather than through a study of the Bible. The person then reflects upon their decision and attempts to rationally understand it. As one begins to reason out what they have believed a theological system is then formed. Thus there is the need to put these truths into a system.

3. There Are Special Terms Used In Systematic Theology

Systematic theology often uses concepts and terms that are not explicitly found in Scripture. These include words like Trinity, theology, ordinance, substance, and inerrancy. Although these are not Scriptural terms, they do explain biblical concepts. It is important that we understand the precise definition of each of these terms and how they are used to explain biblical truth.

4. We Should Attempt To Be Accurate In Our Terminology

It is necessary that we are accurate in our terminology. We should attempt to properly use terminology that has been used in Scripture and the history of the church. Those who study the Christian faith should be as accurate as possible in describing the important doctrines. It is important to use careful definitions and to use special terms with their exact meaning.

5. We Are Not Adding To Or Improving Upon What God Has Revealed

Systematic theology is not adding to, or improving upon, what God has revealed to humanity. It is merely taking what has already been revealed and placing these truths into understandable categories for further study and reflection. It is doing what the Bible commands us to do – study God's truths. Paul wrote.

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

6. No Doctrine Is In Isolation To The Others

Furthermore there is no such thing as one doctrine in isolation to others. All of the teachings of the Bible are interrelated. This is another reason a system of study is necessary. It helps us understanding how the individual truths of Scripture are related to the totality of God's truth. Consequently one should not become a specialist in the one particular area of systematic theology for all parts are interrelated and important.

7. There Is No Perfect System Of Doctrine

While we need a system we must be careful not to take our classifications to extremes. In attempting to have a completely, perfect system of interpretation, many have forced the Bible to say things that it does not. Every system of interpretation has unavoidable gaps where our knowledge is imperfect. We must accept that fact rather than attempt to force verses and passages into some already-made system.

8. We Should Not Speculate Concerning Things That Not Have Been Revealed

Furthermore, we should avoid speculation where the Bible is silent. If the Bible is silent on a matter, we should likewise be silent. It is better to reverently admit our ignorance rather than attempt some unprovable speculation. We should not attempt to answer questions that the Bible does not answer. It is better not to try and do something that the Bible does not do.

Summary

Systematic theology is necessary for a number of reasons. First, the teachings of Scripture have been given to humanity in a variety of forms. There is no real classification of these truths in systematic form. Since our minds look for a system to help classify things systematic theology is a necessity for a better understanding of Scripture. Special terms are used to explain the truths taught in the Bible. While these terms are not found in Scripture they portray spiritual truth. There is also the need for accuracy in terminology when explaining the truths of God's Word.

In doing so we are not attempting to make the message of the Bible more clear or understandable. We are merely taking its truths and putting them into an organized form. In addition, the truths of Scripture are all interrelated. They need to be brought together into some unified system.

When a doctrine does not fit into our system we should change our system – not the doctrine. Finally, we should not speculate or go beyond what the Bible has revealed to us. Our system should reflect what God has revealed to humankind – nothing more and nothing less.

QUESTION 8

In What Ways Should Christian Doctrine Be Studied?

There are a number of ways that Christian doctrine needs to be studied. They include the following.

1. We Should Study Doctrine With Intelligence

Christian doctrine should be studied intelligently. Jesus said.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment (Matthew 22:37,38).

We should use the minds that God has given us to study and evaluate Christian truth. The Apostle Paul used reason and logic when presenting the truths of Christ.

As was Paul's custom, he went to the synagogue service, and for three Sabbaths in a row he interpreted the Scriptures to the people. He was explaining and proving the prophecies about the sufferings of the Messiah and his rising from the dead. He said, "This Jesus I'm telling you about is the Messiah" (Acts 17:2,3).

2. We Should Use All Resources Available

All resources should be used to study God's Word. This includes the work of other teachers. The Bible says that God has raised up teachers in the church.

And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:28).

We should take advantage of the teaching gifts that God has given to certain people. This includes the writings of past and present Bible teachers.

3. We Should Study With Humility

There should be a humble attitude when approaching the truths of Scripture. Jesus spoke of the need for humility.

For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted (Matthew 23:12).

Peter wrote

Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (1 Peter 5:5).

When we learn something new from Scripture we should not be boast about our new-found knowledge. Such pride is condemned in Scripture. James wrote.

If you are wise and understand God's ways, live a life of steady goodness so that only good deeds will pour forth. And if you don't brag about the good you do, then you will be truly wise! But if you

are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your hearts, don't brag about being wise. That is the worst kind of lie. For jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and motivated by the Devil. For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and every kind of evil. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and good deeds. It shows no partiality and is always sincere (James 3:13-17).

Paul compared knowledge to love.

Now concerning food that has been sacrificed to idols. You think that everyone should agree with your perfect knowledge. While knowledge may make us feel important, it is love that really builds up the church (1 Corinthians 8:1).

4. Doctrine Should Be Studied With Prayer

Study of God's Word should be done with prayer. We should pray that God would help us with an understanding of what the Word says. Jesus said.

Keep on asking, and you will be given what you ask for. Keep on looking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And the door is opened to everyone who knocks (Matthew 7:7,8).

If we ask God to help us understand His Word He has promised to answer that prayer.

5. Doctrine Should Be Studied With The Help Of The Holy Spirit

While the truths of Scripture can be understood intellectually they are also spiritually discerned. Paul wrote.

These things we also speak, not in words which human wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But the one who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:13-16).

It is imperative that the truths of God's Word be understood as they intended to be. The only one who can accomplish that is the one who is the ultimate author of Scripture – God the Holy Spirit.

Summary

There are a number of ways that people should go about studying the truths of Scripture. First, it should be done in an intelligent manner. We should use our minds to weigh and evaluate the truths that have been revealed. Second, we should take advantage of all sources available for understanding the truths of God's Word. This includes the works of teachers. In addition, the Bible should be approached with all humility. God has promised to honor those who come to Him with a humble attitude. Moreover, a serious study of Scripture should be always done with prayer. Finally, a study of the Word of God must be done through the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit.

These are the various ways in which we should approach the subject of the study of Scripture.

QUESTION 9

Why Don't All Christians Agree On Doctrinal Matters?

If the same Holy Spirit controls each Christian, then why doesn't everyone agree on all matters of belief? Why are there so many differing opinions?

The Problem Is Not With God

First, the problem of Christians disagreeing among themselves has nothing to do with any thing lacking with God or His Word. God is a God of order. Thus we expect to find be a consistent system of teachings that come from Him. Furthermore, since God is true all fact that He reveals will be consistent. Since there is only one author behind the Bible – God – any problems of understanding the Scripture are the problems of those interpreting – not of the Bible itself.

Why then the differences? There are a number of reasons. They include the silence of written revelation, our lack of knowledge, and the possibility that we have not checked out all the information available.

1. THERE IS SILENCE OF WRITTEN REVELATION

The silence of God's Word on a number of topics must be recognized. Scripture tells us nothing about many topics in which we would be interested. The Bible acknowledges.

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 29:29).

Jesus said to His disciples.

You don't understand now why I am doing it; someday you will (John 13:7).

While this statement refers to things that would be revealed later, there are many things that we will not know this side of heaven.

2. OUR LACK OF KNOWLEDGE CONTRIBUTES TO DIFFERENCES OF OPINION

A second problem is our lack of knowledge. The Scripture itself recognizes our lack of knowledge on spiritual subjects. The psalmist wrote.

The secret of the LORD is with those who fear him, and he will show them his covenant (Psalm 25:14).

The psalmist also asked.

Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from your law (Psalm 119:18).

The two disciples that Jesus met on the Emmaus Road testified to the power of the Scriptures.

And they said to one another, "Did not our heart burn within us while he talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32).

Later on that same day the Bible says.

And he [Jesus] opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures (Luke 24:45).

Paul wrote.

But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Paul Says That We Only Know In Part

The Bible says that we know in part.

For we know in part and we prophesy in part (1 Corinthians 13:9).

Even the most learned of us will only have partial knowledge. Human beings will never be able to fully comprehend God. Consequently we must come to the study of this subject with a certain amount of humility. We must appreciate the fact that we are limited in our knowledge.

3. WE MAY ONLY HAVE PARTIAL INFORMATION ON A SUBJECT

We should be careful to make our doctrinal judgments based upon the totality of Scripture. Often judgments are made by appealing to two or three randomly selected passages, or some weak translation of a particular passage, rather than to all of Scripture. This will not lead us to firm conclusions.

We Are To Test All Things

Scripture also command us to test all things.

Test everything. Hold on to the good (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

The Scripture Commends Those Who Study The Scriptures

The Bible commends those who check out the truth.

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true (Acts 17:11)

Although we have done our best to be objective and thorough in putting together these courses, we realize our own limitations. Therefore every thing that we, or anyone else, may teach should be checked out and verified from the Scripture. It is the only infallible source!

Summary

There are a number of matters in which Bible believing Christians disagree with each other. However, any problems are not due to God or His Word. He and His Word are perfect. It is our system of interpretation that is fallible.

The reason why believers differ among themselves can be attributed to a number of reasons. For one thing, God has not revealed everything that we would like to know about Him – only the things we need

to know. In addition, Scripture recognizes the lack of knowledge that all of us have on spiritual subjects. Even the wisest of us has only partial knowledge about any subject. Because we only know partially we should test all things that claim to be spiritually true.

Finally, there is the possibility that we have not considered everything that the Bible says about a particular subject. Our view may be based upon insufficient information.

It is because of these reasons that well-meaning Bible-believers disagree with one another.

QUESTION 10

What Do We Do When Doctrine Seemingly Contradict Each Other? (Paradoxes, Antinomies)

As we study the Bible we will find that there are doctrines that seem to conflict with one another. The technical term for something that is a seeming contradiction, but actually is not, is “paradox.” There are also a few Christian writers use the word “antinomy” to describe statements that appear contradictory.

God Cannot Contradict Himself

When we meet a statement in Scripture that is seemingly contradictory we must recognize the problem is with us and not with the Scripture. The God of the Bible cannot contradict Himself. Paul wrote to Titus.

From Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ. I encourage God’s own people to have more faith and to understand the truth about religion. Then they will have the hope of eternal life that God promised long ago. And God never tells a lie! (Titus 1:1,2).

The Human Mind Is Limited

We have these problems because of the limitation of the human mind. Because of the limitations of our minds we find it impossible to completely reconcile these seemingly opposing teachings on the same subject. Consequently when we come across one of these paradoxes we must admit our ignorance and not attempt to make some type of forced reconciliation. Instead we must reverently accept the truths taught and go on.

An Example Of A Paradox

An example of a paradox is the Scriptural teaching of the sovereignty of God and the responsibility and choice of human beings. Each are clearly taught in Scripture but each seems to contradict the other. An example of this can be found in 2 Thessalonians.

But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:13,14).

This passage teaches both the sovereign choice of God as well as the human responsibility to believe. Only God knows how these seemingly conflicting principles can be fully harmonized. Consequently we must accept both sides as correct. God chose us and we also chose Him.

The Doctrine Of The Trinity

Another example of a paradox would be the doctrine of the Trinity. The Bible says that only one God exists. Yet while there is only one God, this one God consists of three distinct Persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is a paradox. God is both three and one at the same time.

The Doctrine That Are Paradoxes Have Practical Implications

While there are doctrines in Scripture that are paradoxical these doctrines have practical implications. Therefore it is important that they should be studied and not ignored.

Summary

The study of God's Word will bring us to statements that seemingly contradict each other. However Scripture comes from the God of truth who cannot contradict Himself. These statements, known as paradoxes, are true even though we cannot totally reconcile them. Paradoxes occur because of the limitations of the human mind. Examples of biblical paradoxes are the teaching on the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of humans as well as the doctrine of the Trinity.

While these doctrines cannot be completely understood they are important for us to study. All of them have a number of practical implications.

QUESTION 11

What Is A Major Doctrine? What Is A Minor Doctrine?

Often Christians talk about the major doctrines and the minor doctrines of the faith. What do these terms mean?

The Important And The Less Important

Usually when people speak about the major and minor doctrines of Scripture they are referring to those beliefs that are the most important (major) and those which have less importance (minor). Some believers categorize major doctrines as the essentials of the faith while minor doctrines would be considered non-essentials.

For example, the Deity of Jesus Christ would constitute a major doctrine, as would the authority of the Bible. An example of a minor doctrine would be the way in which a person is baptized in water after they believe in Jesus Christ. The Person of Christ and the authority of Scripture are of utmost importance while the particular way in which a person receives water baptism is not that crucial.

It Is A Matter Of Emphasis

As one studies the Bible it becomes apparent that some topics receive more emphasis than others. The relative importance of each teaching of Scripture can be discovered by the amount of emphasis the Bible gives it.

IMPORTANT OBSERVATIONS CONCERNING MAJOR AND MINOR DOCTRINES

There are a few observations that should be made when we speak of major doctrines and minor doctrines. They include the following.

1. THE DISTINCTION IS NOT SCRIPTURAL

First, the Bible makes no distinction between major doctrines and minor doctrines. Any division that is made is not found in Scripture. While Scripture may emphasize some doctrines more than others it nowhere places them into categories of major and minor or essential and non-essential.

2. THERE ARE DIFFERENCES OF OPINION AS TO WHAT FITS INTO EACH CATEGORY

Second, it is not possible to fit all doctrines into two neat categories. There are some doctrines that certain people would place in the major doctrine category while others would put it in the minor doctrine category. An example would be the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Some would consider this as an essential belief while others would consider it to be relatively minor when compared to other teachings.

Admittedly there are some doctrines that are essential to the Christian faith while others are not as crucial. However there are a number of doctrines that can be placed in either category and thus should not be labeled either major or minor.

3. WE SHOULD STUDY EVERYTHING IN SCRIPTURE

The Scripture makes it clear that we should study the entire counsel of God. The Apostle Paul said.

For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27).

Everything that God has revealed is important and should be faithfully studied and taught. Jesus told us to teach all nations.

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you. I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:19,20).

We Are To Pass On The Teachings Of Christ To Others

Believers are to pass on the teachings of Jesus Christ. The Book of Acts speaks of the things Jesus began to do.

The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which he was taken up, after he through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom he had chosen (Acts 1:1,2).

Jesus' ministry was not finished when He ascended to heaven. Therefore the teachings of Christ are not limited to the four gospels. They would include the entire New Testament.

The Entire Bible Should Be Studied

Peter spoke about the teachings of the prophets (Old Testament) as well as the teachings of Jesus (the four gospels) and those of the apostles (the Book of Acts and the New Testament letters).

Beloved, I now write to you this second letter (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder), that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior (2 Peter 3:1,2).

John records that Jesus Christ gave the teachings in the Book of Revelation to him. The Book of Revelation begins by saying.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants—things which must shortly take place. And he sent and signified it by His angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near (Revelation 1:1-3).

Consequently everything recorded in Scripture should be studied and taught. The degree of importance of each doctrine will be discovered by the emphasis that the Bible gives it.

Summary

People often make the distinction between the major and minor doctrines of Scripture. Yet the Bible does not do this. It does not make any such distinction.

In addition, there is no consensus of opinion about what constitutes a major doctrine and what constitutes a minor doctrine. There are a number of beliefs that some believers would hold crucial to the faith while others would not consider these beliefs to be that vital.

While there are some doctrines that are more important than others the Bible instructs us to teach all that Jesus taught and commanded. This would include the entire New Testament. Peter emphasized the teachings of the prophets (Old Testament), Jesus (the four gospels), and the apostles (the remainder of the New Testament). These divisions make up the entire Bible. All of Scripture should be diligently studied.

It is not wrong to emphasize certain essential beliefs but one must be careful not to neglect other teachings. The key is to place the same amount of emphasis on a particular teaching that the Scripture itself places.

QUESTION 12

What Are Creeds?

There have been times in the history of the church where leaders have assembled to state the Christian position on particular matters. This was done in light of false doctrine that arose. The statement the leaders agreed upon is called a “creed.” The word creed comes from the Latin *credo* meaning, “I believe.”

Creeds Are Found In The New Testament

The earliest forms of the creeds are found in the New Testament. When we read the New Testament we find a number of statements that would represent early Christian creeds or belief statements. First Timothy 3:16 would be an example.

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: He who was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory (1 Timothy 3:16).

Philippians 2:6-11 seems to be an early creedal statement about Jesus.

Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal’s death on a cross. Because of this, God raised him up to the heights of heaven and gave him a name that is above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:6-11).

CREEDS WERE WRITTEN IN RESPONSE TO HERESIES

Creeds usually came about as a response to some heretical belief that had gained a certain amount of acceptance. A heresy can be defined, as the conscious willful rejection of any doctrine or belief that is taught in Scripture. The creedal statements that were written answered these heresies.

THE IMPORTANT CREEDS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

There have been a number of important creeds that were composed after the New Testament was written. Three of the outstanding ones are the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.

1. The Apostles’ Creed

The Apostles’ Creed is an elaboration of the confession of faith that people would make at their baptism. It did not originate with the Apostles, but came later in the history of the church (around A.D. 600). The Apostles’ Creed, however, is similar to other statements of belief that were in use in the second century. It was called the Apostles’ Creed because the early Christians believed that it summarized the basic teachings of the Apostles.

2. The Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed is the response of the church to doctrinal challenges that arose in the fourth century. In particular, the Nicene Creed responded to the false teachings of Arius, a bishop from Alexandria, Egypt.

Arius and his followers taught that Jesus was not the eternal Son of God. According to Arius, God the Father created Jesus before He created the universe. A council met in Nicea (modern day Turkey) in A.D. 325 to refute this false belief. The Nicene Creed developed as a result of the Arian controversy - the final form of the Creed was written at the end of the fourth century. This creed is important in that it restates in a clear manner the biblical teaching that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully human. It also makes important statements about the Person of the Holy Spirit.

To this day, these two creeds are accepted and recited by Christians worldwide.

3. The Athanasian Creed

A third important Creed is the Athanasian Creed. It is a detailed definition of the Trinity. Although the theologian Athanasius strongly defended the doctrine of the Trinity, the Athanasian Creed has nothing to do with him.

Summary

The creeds are statements of belief that have been drawn up by believers. They were usually written as a response to false doctrine that was circulating at the time. The first creedal statements were found in the New Testament. The most important creeds after the ones found in the New Testament are the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.

QUESTION 13

What Is The Importance Of Creeds?

Creeds are important for a number of reasons. They include the following.

1. Creeds Summarize Beliefs

First, they provide a summary of the basic beliefs of all the Christians churches at that time. From the creedal statements we can know what was the consensus of belief on a number of important doctrinal topics.

2. The Creeds Restate Beliefs

The creeds restate the central beliefs of the faith that, for some reason, were challenged by some at that particular time in history. These beliefs that the creeds restate are still being challenged today. Therefore their relevance is as important today as when they were first composed.

3. They Are A Reminder Of What We Believe

The creeds are a reminder that Christian beliefs are more than a mere intellectual exercise. The foundations of the faith were attacked and a response in a clear and precise manner was needed. The creeds accomplish this. They also remind the believer that certain truths about the faith are not up for discussion. They have been once and for all given.

4. Creeds Unite Believers Behind Common Truths

In the church today there are a variety of beliefs and practices. We find different forms of government as well as different forms of worship. However we all have certain things in common. This can be seen by the creeds. When they are recited it unites believers to the central truths of the Christian faith.

5. They Give A Basis To Live A Christian Life

Finally the creeds are a way of stating the basis upon which a person will live their life. By reciting a creed, a person is stating their convictions as to what they believe and how they will behave. In addition, they are identifying with other Christians around the world and those who have lived throughout history.

Summary

The creeds are important for a number of reasons. First, they give a summary of the beliefs of Christians. Second, they restate essential beliefs that were challenged. Third, they remind believers of what the faith is all about. Fourth, they unite all believers past and present. Finally, they also provide a basis upon which one can live their life.

QUESTION 14

What Are The Various Ways In Which Christian Theology Can Be Classified?

Christian theology, the study of God, can be classified into various categories. They include the following.

OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

Old Testament theology concentrates on what the Old Testament says on a particular topic. For example one could study what the Old Testament says about the subject of sacrifice. The topic would be considered only within the bounds of the Old Testament and any conclusions drawn would be from that source alone.

NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

In the same manner, New Testament theology considers a topic exclusively from what the New Testament says about it. Topics would be examined and summarized solely from a study of the New Testament.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Biblical theology is also limited in its scope. It concentrates upon what a particular writer says about a subject or what the belief was in a particular era (such as the time of Moses). For example, biblical theology might look at John's view of Jesus' nature, Paul's view of Christ's death, or what the letter to the Hebrews says about faith. Biblical theology would also investigate the theology at the time of Abraham or Moses. The concern of Biblical theology is the circumstances that led the writers to compose their work. For example, "Why did Mark write his gospel? What was the background for Paul writing to the Galatians?" These are the concerns of Biblical theology.

Biblical theology, therefore, looks at a particular portion of Scripture, or a historical era, and notes how the writer understands a particular topic. Consequently a person could discover what the individual authors' of Scripture taught about God, salvation, the afterlife, etc.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Systematic theology is broader in scope than Old Testament theology, New Testament theology, or Biblical theology. It arranges what the entire Bible teaches about its various topics in a scientific and orderly manner. The results are placed into a theological system. The totality of Scripture is considered when setting forth these conclusions. The concern in systematic theology is with the final result of God's revelation – the written Word, the Bible.

Systematic theology attempts to discover what the Bible teaches on any particular topic. It examines all passages that relate to a particular topic. The topic is thoroughly examined and conclusions are drawn.

There are differences of opinion between Christian writers as to the source or sources, of information one should use in forming a systematic theology. Some writers contend that knowledge from every source should be considered. However, they believe the primary source is the Bible. Others believe that the facts should only come from the Bible. They do not believe secondary sources should be considered.

The Bible is certainly the only infallible source to build a systematic theology. Secondary sources such as the testimony of nature, church creeds, confessions of faith, tradition, and reason guided by the Holy Spirit, have their place in evaluating what the Bible says. However any conclusion will have to be based upon what the Scriptures, and they alone, teach on a particular subject.

Differences Between Biblical And Systematic Theology

The differences between Biblical theology and systematic theology can be summarized as follows.

1. Biblical theology limits its study to portions of Scripture while systematic theology is concerned with the entirety of Scripture.
2. Biblical theology gathers information about teachings from specific writers, such as Moses or Peter, or from a particular historical era such as the time of Abraham. Systematic theology gathers its information from the whole of the Bible.
3. Biblical theology attempts to discover why a particular belief developed. The concern of systematic theology is on the final product of the writing – the Bible.
4. Biblical theology is interested in how doctrine progressed throughout time while systematic theology is concerned with what was ultimately written.

DOGOMATIC THEOLOGY

Although dogmatic theology and systematic theology are sometimes used interchangeably there is a difference between them. Dogmatic theology looks at the basic beliefs of the faith as they have been set forth in the various creeds in which the church has set forth. The word “dogma” is used of doctrine that has official church endorsement. Roman Catholics and Lutherans, for example, use the term dogma and dogmatic theology. Systematic theology is concerned with what the Scriptures actually say about a particular topic without any reference to creeds or official church sanction.

EXEGETICAL THEOLOGY

The term exegetical come from a Greek word meaning ‘to draw out or explain.’ Exegetical theology seeks to understand the true meaning of the text of Scripture by explaining what the text says. A thorough knowledge of the original languages of Scripture is usually involved in this task.

HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

Historical theology traces the history of doctrine. It looks at how the interpretation of Christian doctrines developed in the history of the church. This is an important field of study. One should not ignore two thousand years of debates, creeds, church councils, and confessions of faith when attempting to understand Bible doctrine. History of doctrine, or historical theology, traces how different doctrines have developed throughout the history of the church. It is not the same as studying systematic theology. We will cover the development of doctrine, along with the highlights of church history, in our next series of courses, “A Look At God’s Plan Of The Ages.”

APOLOGETIC THEOLOGY – THE DEFENSE OF THE FAITH

The defense of the faith is called apologetics. It is mainly concerning with giving reasons why the Christian faith is true and answering the objections that critics may have. This is not the same as systematic theology although there may be some overlap between these two approaches of study. Apologetic theology will be the focus of our third series of courses – Why Christians Believe.

CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

This is the study of the beliefs of Christian groups that have developed within the last century. It concerns itself with the latest trends in theology. Consequently, it is a subject that is constantly changing.

Summary

The study of Christian theology can be divided into a number of categories. These include the following. Old Testament theology deals with specific teachings that are limited to the Old Testament. New Testament theology limits its understanding of specific doctrines to the New Testament. Biblical theology looks at what a particular author says about a topic or what was taught in a particular era about a topic. Systematic theology considers what the entire Scripture has to say about a particular topic. Dogmatic theology consists of beliefs that have had official church endorsement. Exegetical theology is concerned with finding the true meaning of the text of Scripture. Historical theology traces the history of the development of doctrine. Apologetic theology concerns the defense of the faith. Finally, contemporary theology deals with modern theological developments. All of these are valid disciplines.

Summary To Introduction To Series 1 What Christians Believe

After looking at some introductory issues regarding concerning what Christians believe, we can make the following observations.

Question 1. Theology means the study of God. Everyone is a theologian in the sense that we all have beliefs about God and we all live our lives in accordance with those beliefs.

Christian theology is a study of the God of the Bible. Christian theology can be defined in the narrow sense – it is the study of the doctrine of the God of the Bible. It can also be used in a wider sense to refer to the sum total of Christian teaching. This is the usual way in which the term is used.

The job of those who study Christian theology is to discover the facts as they are – it is not to create facts. The subject matter of the study of Christian theology is something that God alone determines. Therefore we can only understand as much about God as He has chosen to reveal.

The Bible is the only infallible source of Christian theology. Though certain truths about God can be derived from a study of things outside the Bible these truths must confirm to that which is recorded in Scripture.

Question 2. Doctrine means teaching or instruction. While some use this term interchangeably with the word theology there is a difference between the two.

Christian doctrine is basically the teachings of Christ. The New Testament has a number of references about the importance of Christian doctrine. We find the people amazed at the doctrine of Jesus. Jesus Himself told the religious leaders that His doctrine came from God the Father. The early church continued teaching the doctrines of Jesus. The doctrines were causing many people to believe in Jesus. This led the religious leader to command the apostles not to teach about Jesus.

When the apostle Paul came to Athens the people wanted to hear his doctrine. When the opportunity arose, he preached Christ to them.

Paul wrote to the believers in Rome about the importance of following the teaching that had been given them. In the same manner, the writer to the Hebrews listed some of the basic doctrines of the Christian faith. We find from both the writings of John and Paul an emphasis on correct doctrine. Finally, Jesus told the religious leaders that the source of all error was their lack of understanding the doctrines, or teachings, that God had revealed. Consequently the study of doctrine is crucial if one wishes to understand the Christian faith.

Question 3. When it comes to final authority concerning spiritual matters there is a difference of opinion among those who profess to be Christians. While Protestantism believes final authority is derived from the Bible, and the Bible alone, Roman Catholicism teaches the final authority resides in the Roman Catholic Church. This is a crucial issue. Because of the wide differences between the two groups they both cannot be correct at the same time. Either Protestantism or Roman Catholicism is wrong as to where ultimate authority comes from. There is no meaningful middle ground.

The Roman Catholic position of authority cannot be sustained biblically. There is no evidence that when Christ left the earth He gave His followers the same infallible authority that He had. The Bible alone, the written Word of God, is the ultimate authority for all matters of faith and practice.

Question 4. The word tradition has the idea of “handing something over.” The New Testament speaks approvingly of certain traditions about Jesus. However Jesus Himself warned of traditions that were contrary to the Word of God. In the history of the church a number of traditions have risen that are at odds with the Bible. These must be rejected.

Consequently traditions can be either good or bad. The key question about any tradition is, “Does it match up with Scripture?”

Question 5. Simply stated, we can define theology as the “study of God’s truth” and religion as “the practice of God’s truth.” There should be a proper balance between the two in the life of a Christian. It is important to know what the Christian faith stands for and it is also important to live consistently with ones beliefs. The Bible encourages both. We must know the truth of God’s Word and we must put the truths into practice. It is not enough to simply know the truth; the Bible also commands us to do the truth.

Above all, Christianity is devotion to the Person of Jesus Christ. It is a love relationship between the Creator and His creation. This truly is what Christianity is all about. Simply stated we can define theology as the “study of God’s truth” and religion as “the practice. Of God’s truth.” There should be a proper balance between the two in the life of a Christian. It is important to know what the Christian faith stands for and it is also important to live it. The Bible encourages both. We must know the truth of God’s Word and we must put the truths into practice.

Question 6. The study of Christian doctrine is necessary for a number of reasons. First, every human being asks the same questions about their origin, purpose, and destiny. Answers are needed for these ultimate questions.

Human beings also have intellectual needs that must be met. A study of the Scripture can meet these intellectual needs. Jesus commanded to love the Lord with our mind.

A correct definition of the Christian faith is also necessary. This can only come about from a study of Bible doctrine. The Christian faith also needs to be defended. Consequently it is important to know what should be defended and what should not. This can only come about from an understanding of what the Bible teaches.

Christianity is a missionary religion. It is crucial to understand the faith being promoted. In addition, Christian behavior must be based upon sound teaching. Wrong ideas will appear if sound teaching is rejected. It is also important to understand there is no distinction between intellectual and spiritual knowledge. All knowledge about God is important.

Furthermore the study of Scripture is commanded by God – it is not an option for believers. For Christian leaders it is absolutely necessary that they be able to teach.

For a person to be converted they must have a basic understanding of the gospel. The story of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch illustrates this point.

Correct understanding of biblical truth will also safeguard the believer against doctrinal errors.

Sound doctrine provides a basis to evaluate new teaching that will arise. Finally, sound doctrine is the basis for the development of Christian character. It is a lifelong study.

For these reasons a study of Christian doctrine is absolutely necessary. All believers should make a serious effort to know Christian doctrine.

Question 7. Systematic theology is necessary for a number of reasons. First, the teachings of Scripture have been given to humanity in a variety of forms. There is no real classification of these truths in systematic form. Since our minds look for a system to help classify things systematic theology is a necessity for a better understanding of Scripture. Special terms are used to explain the truths taught in the Bible. While these terms are not found in Scripture they portray spiritual truth. There is also the need for accuracy in terminology when explaining the truths of God's Word.

In doing so we are not attempting to make the message of the Bible more clear or understandable. We are merely taking its truths and putting them into an organized form. In addition, the truths of Scripture are all interrelated. They need to be brought together into some unified system.

When a doctrine does not fit into our system we should change our system – not the doctrine. Finally, we should not speculate or go beyond what the Bible has revealed to us. Our system should reflect what God has revealed to humankind – nothing more and nothing less.

Question 8. There are a number of ways that people should go about studying the truths of Scripture. First, it should be done in an intelligent manner. We should use our minds to weigh and evaluate the truths that have been revealed. Second, we should take advantage of all sources available for understanding the truths of God's Word. This includes the works of teachers. In addition, the Bible should be approached with all humility. God has promised to honor those who come to Him with a humble attitude. Moreover, a serious study of Scripture should be always done with prayer. Finally, a study of the Word of God must be done through the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit.

These are the various ways in which we should approach the subject of the study of Scripture.

Question 9. There are a number of matters in which Bible believing Christians disagree with each other. However, any problems are not due to God or His Word. He and His Word are perfect. It is our system of interpretation that is fallible.

The reason why believers differ among themselves can be attributed to a number of reasons. For one thing, God has not revealed everything that we would like to know about Him – only the things we need to know. In addition, Scripture recognizes the lack of knowledge that all of us have on spiritual subjects. Even the wisest of us has only partial knowledge about any subject. Because we only know partially we should test all things that claim to be spiritually true.

Finally, there is the possibility that we have not considered everything that the Bible says about a particular subject. Our view may be based upon insufficient information.

It is because of these reasons that well-meaning Bible-believers disagree with one another.

Question 10. The study of God's Word will bring us to statements that seemingly contradict each other. However Scripture comes from the God of truth who cannot contradict Himself. These statements, known as paradoxes, are true even though we cannot totally reconcile them. Paradoxes occur because of the limitations of the human mind. Examples of biblical paradoxes are the teaching on the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of humans as well as the doctrine of the Trinity.

While these doctrines cannot be completely understood they are important for us to study. All of them have a number of practical implications.

Question 11. People often make the distinction between the major and minor doctrines of Scripture. Yet the Bible does not do this. It does not make any such distinction.

In addition, there is no consensus of opinion about what constitutes a major doctrine and what constitutes a minor doctrine. There are a number of beliefs that some believers would hold crucial to the faith while others would not consider these beliefs to be that vital.

While there are some doctrines that are more important than others the Bible instructs us to teach all that Jesus taught and commanded. This would include the entire New Testament. Peter emphasized the teachings of the prophets (Old Testament), Jesus (the four gospels), and the apostles (the remainder of the New Testament). These divisions make up the entire Bible. All of Scripture should be diligently studied.

It is not wrong to emphasize certain essential beliefs but one must be careful not to neglect other teachings. The key is to place the same amount of emphasis on a particular teaching that the Scripture itself places.

Question 12. The creeds are statements of belief that have been drawn up by believers. They were usually written as a response to false doctrine that was circulating at the time. The first creedal statements were found in the New Testament. The most important creeds after the ones found in the New Testament are the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.

Question 13. The creeds are important for a number of reasons. First, they give a summary of the beliefs of Christians. Second, they restate essential beliefs that were challenged. Third, they remind believers of what the faith is all about. Fourth, they unite all believers past and present. Finally, they also provide a basis upon which one can live their life.

Question 14. The study of Christian theology can be divided into a number of categories. These include the following. Old Testament theology deals with specific teachings that are limited to the Old Testament. New Testament theology limits its understanding of specific doctrines to the New Testament. Biblical theology looks at what a particular author says about a topic or what was taught in a particular era about a topic. Systematic theology considers what the entire Scripture has to say about a particular topic. Dogmatic theology consists of beliefs that have had official church endorsement. Exegetical theology is concerned with finding the true meaning of the text of Scripture. Historical theology traces the history of the development of doctrine. Apologetic theology concerns the defense of the faith. Finally, contemporary theology deals with modern theological developments. All of these are valid disciplines.

Our First Course: The Bible

Now that we have an understanding of some of the basics of Christian doctrine we can now move on to our first course in our series “What Christians Believe” – The Bible

In this course we will consider some introductory questions about the Bible, the issue of God revealing Himself to humanity, questions about which books belong in Scripture, and the historical accuracy of the things written in the Bible. We will also look at the authority of Scripture as well as its inerrancy.

This course sets the stage for everything else that follows.