

Why Should We Study Doctrine?

Stephen Griffith

As we get ready to study the *Heidelberg Catechism* which “is a remarkably warm-hearted and personalized confession of faith.” And before we even talk about the who, what, where, and why of this important document, I wanted to discuss the common dislike many believers have of studying doctrine. One writer remarked, doctrine “is not a cold pursuit of facts, but a red-hot pursuit of the living God.” But sadly, whenever “theology” or “doctrine” comes up, eyes glaze over. And words like “Heidelberg” and “Westminster” could even cause a deep coma.

I struggle with the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, and the *Heidelberg Catechism* in the classes I teach. It’s not easy. The language seems dense and occasionally archaic. I’ve often felt: 1.) Some of it seems boring. 2.) It is way above my head. 3.) There are times I’d rather be having coffee and talking with friends. And 4.) The teacher, me, doesn’t always know what he’s talking about.

But without a doubt, digging into Scripture and the doctrines attested to in the creeds (and verified by the Bible) have made me a better man, husband, father, and teacher.

Don’t let these words scare you: doctrine, dogma, dogmatic, tenet, and creed. They may sound boring, but look at the antonyms (opposites):

Doctrine—unbelief, ambiguity
Dogma—doubt, indecision
Dogmatic—yielding, vague, indefinite
Tenet—disbelief, doubt
Creed—unbelief, atheism.

Seeing what the contrasting definitions offer, maybe having a creed to live by is not so bad. Doubt and unbelief may still plague us (“*I believe; Help my unbelief!*” Mark 9:24) but trying to discover what a Christian believes is a rewarding endeavor.

I’m sure many would agree, the church would suffer if did not have some system of belief. But many churches, including the one in which I was raised, have the stance, “No creed but the Bible” or “No Creed but Christ.” I understand the sentiment. The Bible is God’s word and we envision the catechisms as the thoughts and words of bearded old men in ivory towers. Yet, if we take this stance, we’re doing a disservice to ourselves, and others.

Maps and Why We Need Them

My daughter Tian and I have taken up hiking in Western North Carolina. I couldn’t imagine being dropped into the forest to hike without any preparations. It would be a

recipe for disaster. Thankfully, we use the work of those who've studied the forest and have written and prepared the way for us to enjoy and learn about the richness of God's creation. Hundreds of people prepare trails, do upkeep, prepare maps, make sure prospective hikers know about special sites as well as warn us about the many dangers.

It is easy to compare studying the Bible with being dropped into an unknown forest. How many of us have gotten hopelessly lost in Leviticus or Daniel? The catechism and creeds of our church are the tested maps we need.

The definitions of dogma, dogmatic, tenant, creed, or doctrine, are not the problem. It is our perception of the words. For instance: dogma is defined as "a teaching, or set of teachings, laid down by a religious group, usually as part of the essential beliefs of the group."

Today's Perception: Acceptance Without Proof

Unfortunately, the wider perception today is defined by the *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*: "The term dogma is often applied to statements put forward by someone who thinks, inappropriately, that they should be accepted without proof." I like the original meaning from Latin, by way of Greek, that better reflects how we as Christians should define the term, "that which one thinks is true." After all, we don't like to think of ourselves as dogmatic or want others to think of us as dogmatic! (Which does have the negative meaning "asserting opinions in an arrogant manner.")

As I read varying opinions of what the Bible says, I am reminded of a stanza from Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem *In Memoriam*:

". . .Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be:
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they. . . ."

Nonetheless, we can't be vague in our convictions, because these tenets of the faith are the difference between life and death. Dorothy Sayers nails down this thesis when she writes:

"It is absolutely impossible to teach Christianity without teaching Christian dogmaIf the average man is going to be interested in Christ at all, it is the dogma that will provide the interestIt is the dogma that is the drama—not beautiful phrases, nor comforting sentiments, nor vague aspirations to loving-kindness and uplift, nor the promise of something nice after death—but the terrifying assertion that the same God who made the world, lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death." (*The Diminished Church*)

Come join in the study of the *Heidelberg Catechism* and the scripture it reflects. It is proof, as one writer suggests, “everything we need to learn is what we’ve already forgotten.”

Sunday January 22nd 10:00 am
The Heidelberg Catechism: Who Wrote It and Why