

Joy in the Truth

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Part 1: The Role of Doctrine in Worship

We begin with a quiz. I can't help it. I've been in classroom settings for so long that quizzes are second nature for me. Rank the following factors in order of their importance, insofar as they contribute to someone being a good worship leader (1 is most important and 5 is least):

- __ Godliness
- __ Musical talent and/or training
- __ Eloquence
- __ Knowledge of doctrine
- __ Sincerity

If you gave this quiz to a broad cross-section of Christians, I suspect that a large percentage of them would rank "knowledge of doctrine" near the bottom of the list. After all, to lead worship, you need someone who is godly, sincere and talented, right? Someone who is relevant. Maybe even cool. Not some theology egghead. We want bold hearts of fire, not dusty minds crammed with irrelevant detail!

At the risk of sounding like one of those dreaded eggheads, I must disagree with that view. There is no conflict in Scripture between doctrinal understanding and heartfelt worship of God—just the opposite! Indeed, true worship of God requires knowing and loving God's truth.

Here's how it works. Accurate knowledge of doctrine fuels worshipful passion for God, which in turn causes one to love and explore more deeply the glorious truths of Scripture in order to learn more about God. You've heard of a vicious circle, where two harmful things feed off each other so everything just gets worse? Well, this is the opposite: a glorious circle! And it doesn't just apply to worship leaders, but to every Christian, for we are all called to declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light.

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So, let's start thinking about how worship and doctrine interact.

When most of us think “worship,” we probably have in mind the singing portion of a Sunday meeting. However, the New Testament gives us a different picture; it takes the words that are bound up with the religious observances and temple worship of the Old Testament—words like sacrifice, prayer and offering—and applies them to *all of life*.

Consider this familiar passage: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (Ro 12:1). Upon reading this, Paul’s contemporaries would instantly think of a temple setting. They would imagine the cries of thousands of animals as their necks were slit and their blood drained in sacrifice to God. To those readers, the sacrifice that was “holy and pleasing to God” was a prolonged, crowded, noisy, gory ritual that reeked of slaughter. Yet for the Christian this passage completely redefines that “holy and pleasing sacrifice.” It’s no longer about animal sacrifices, but transformed lives fully given to God.

The idea is expanded in Hebrews 13:15–16. “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” Under the New Covenant, sacrifice is not found in the blood of animals, but in our songs of praise *and* in our service to one another.

Here we see two aspects of New Testament worship: a narrow aspect (our singing—“a sacrifice of praise”), and a broad aspect (our daily lives—“doing good and sharing”). This extension of the idea of worship to all of life does not mean that our corporate gatherings are not “true” worship. It does mean, however, that we must view the narrow aspect in light of the broad. In other words, worship most certainly involves adoration, but it is an adoration that flows from a life fully engaged with God. And a life fully engaged with God requires an understanding of and love for God’s truth.

“Truth” is a word all Christians love. I suspect that’s because it serves as a kind of shorthand for much of what is precious about our faith. Jesus is Truth, the Bible is Truth, and salvation and heaven are real, true things. But what does it really mean to love this thing we call “truth”? And what does our love for truth have to do with our life of worship?

Part 2

“Truth” is a word all Christians love. I suspect that’s because it serves as a kind of shorthand for much of what is precious about our faith. Jesus is Truth, the Bible is Truth, and salvation and heaven are real, true things. Yet even as we embrace Truth, many of us tend to hold at arm’s length two other words: “doctrine” and “theology.” Why is that? I believe it’s largely a case of mistaken identity. We don’t know what these words really mean.

Doctrine simply means “what is taught.” When Paul tells Timothy to watch his doctrine closely (1Ti 4:16), he is literally saying “watch your teaching closely.” To study the doctrine of salvation (or any other subject) is simply to study all the Bible teaches about that subject. The study of doctrine is not opposed to the study of the Bible; it *is* the study of the Bible.

Similarly, “theology” means “the study of God.” It is essentially the activity of thinking and speaking about God. Do you like to think about God? to talk about God? Then you’re a theologian. And how do we best and most accurately learn about God? In the Bible. So, just as with doctrine, to study theology is really to grapple with the teaching of Scripture: to learn its various parts, to discover how these fit together, and to gain a clear view of God, ourselves, and all of reality as God defines it.

To say “I love truth,” and at the same time to not love doctrine, or not love theology, is to live in a world of distinctions that have no meaningful difference.

Still, I know that many sincere, godly, holy, well-meaning Christians can have trouble with the idea of loving doctrine, or loving theology. So let me discuss three common objections pertaining to this area.

One objection to the study of doctrine goes something like this. “Don’t confuse me with all your doctrine, I just want to love and worship Jesus. Isn’t that enough?” On the surface that sounds pretty spiritual, but a little quick reflection reveals its error.

To genuinely love a person or thing, you must begin with some accurate understanding of who that person or thing is. And if your love is anything more than superficial and self-serving, you will regularly put time and effort into learning more about that which you love. This obviously applies to the love between couples, but even extends to a love for hobbies and other interests (any sports fans out there?). Simply put, you cannot love what you do not know.

How can you love and worship Jesus if you don’t know who he is? And how can you know who he is without studying the Bible? Jesus himself said, “If anyone loves me, he

will obey my teaching” (Jn 14:23). You cannot love *in truth* something that you do not know *in truth*. By all means, let us experience God through his indwelling Holy Spirit, but the only infallible and perfectly reliable way to learn “true truth” about God is through the Bible. God speaks to us, first and foremost, through his Word. All our experiences in God must be stacked up against the truth of the Word, or we risk being led astray by our oh-so-fallible emotions. That’s why loving Jesus requires knowing and grasping his teaching and commands. And what you love with passion, you will study with passion.

Part 3

Is it vital that Christians study doctrine? Is that really necessary for a life of God-glorifying worship? These are the questions we’ve been asking in this series. Previously, we examined one common objection to the idea that doctrine is important. Let’s look now at two more.

Christians sometimes claim that doctrine can be a negative influence on one’s walk with God because doctrine “only complicates the Christian life.” Is that true? Or is it doctrinal *ignorance* that can quickly turn a believer’s walk of faith into aimless, presumptuous wandering?

Take Jim, for example—a fictional character I’ll use to illustrate the basic failing of this objection. Jim wants to simplify his life, so he decides to become a doer of the Word and not a studier of it. If it’s there in Scripture, he’ll just do it. How could you ever go wrong that way?

In his devotions, Jim comes to Luke 18, where the rich young ruler asks Jesus how to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him, “Go sell all your goods, give it to the poor and come and follow me.” So Jim stops reading, and does exactly that.

The next day, in his devotions, he’s sitting (on the floor) in his (empty) apartment reading Scripture, and comes to the very next chapter. There, in Luke 19, Jesus celebrates the fact that Zacchaeus gave away half his possessions to the poor, stating, “Today salvation has come to [Zacchaeus’] house.” What’s going on here? Jim is confused—not to mention broke and on the verge of eviction. “You mean I could have kept half my stuff and still gone to heaven?!”

Needless to say, our poor friend Jim is clueless about a great many things. Most importantly, he seems to believe that salvation can be earned. He has missed the point of these passages completely. Why? Ignorance of doctrine.

Ignorance of doctrine *complicates* the Christian life. When we don't understand doctrine, we use "proof texts" to justify our choices, or we fixate on secondary truths at the expense of primary ones. But the understanding of doctrine clarifies life and makes it intelligible. It helps you to navigate through this world that God created and reigns over. Ignorance is no virtue—it complicates. But knowledge clarifies.

Here's one more objection to the study of doctrine: A great many people in our day claim that doctrine is bad because it "divides Christians." But this view has the weight of the historical evidence exactly backwards.

Yes, there are many doctrinal differences among true Christians. Most of these are on issues of secondary or even lesser importance. Given the limitations and sins with which we all struggle, some element of disagreement is inevitable! Yet look at the huge body of core doctrinal areas on which virtually all believers agree. Across the face of the earth and throughout history, there has been and continues to be overwhelming agreement on the central elements of the faith.

The Trinity, the person of Christ, the atonement... How did this complex, highly nuanced and phenomenally uniform body of doctrine come into being? Through the careful, prolonged and purposeful study and teaching of theology! Without these, there is no true unity in the church. Sound doctrine, flowing from a faithful allegiance to Scripture, unites us all.

Conclusion

In parts two and three of this series, we examined common objections to the idea that, in order for a Christian to live a life of God-glorifying worship, he must grow in the knowledge of God's Word. In other words, he must study doctrine.

Let's look now at three reasons why sound doctrine is essential to true worship.

Doctrine provides a right understanding of God's person and character. At its core, worship involves our response to God's self-disclosure. However, we can only respond rightly to God if our perception of him is true. Sound doctrine shapes in us a true vision of God and curbs our sinful tendency to reshape our view of God to suit our self-interests.

Imagine that a man living in conscious, willful, unrepentant immorality walks into a church service. He gets caught up in the beautiful sounds of the voices and instruments, he sings and raises his hands, and thinks, "I'm really all right with God. God loves me, and I love him, too." Then he leaves and continues to pursue his immorality, completely unaffected by his "worship experience."

Has that man worshiped? Perhaps. Has he worshiped the true and living God? Absolutely not. He has worshiped a god of his own making, a god who winks at sin, a god who is not holy. This man came to church, and sang worship songs, and felt good, but he worshiped a false god that looks suspiciously like himself.

To grow in our *worship* of God, we must first grow in our *knowledge* of God. Far from intruding into worship, sound doctrine makes true worship possible!

Doctrine enables us to respond appropriately to God. Do you ever find your mind drifting during corporate worship? You begin to think God won't accept your worship if you can't stay focused, so you struggle to corral your thoughts, hoping to purify your worship. Or maybe you are burdened by your sin, and feel unworthy to come before God. You hope that maybe this week you'll sin less. Then next Sunday, you can really worship!

The point is that wrong thinking *about* God produces wrong responses *to* God. In these examples, your ideas about *why* God accepts you influence your responses to him. A grasp of sound doctrine, however, adjusts our responses.

Let's apply the doctrine of justification to these examples. Justification tells us that our standing before God depends wholly—completely! entirely!—on Christ's substitutionary death on the cross on our behalf. This frees us to come boldly before the throne of grace. Then, we can rejoice in our Savior rather than "working our way into his presence" or continually striving to maintain his favor. That's just one way in which sound doctrine transforms legalism into true worship.

Doctrine produces true and vigorous affections for God. To experience true worship, sound doctrine alone is not enough; one must also have a passionate heart for God (see Mt 15:7–9). Both must be present: head *and* heart.

We must not see the study of God's Word as merely some sort of intellectual exercise. Scripture is not given simply for the sake of our intellects. It holds out the promise of producing *passion* for God (see Jer 15:16; Ps 1:2; 19:8; 119:16; Jn 4:23; 15:11). You don't have to choose one or the other—God meant for them to go together! Truth and spirit. Knowledge and passion. Thinking and feeling. Doctrine and life. The Word of God, ignited by the Spirit of God, becomes kindling for a passionate heart for God.

So, for the Christian who desires to worship God in spirit and truth, where does this discussion leave us?

Right here: As worshipers, as Christians, we must not be content with mere doctrine or mere emotion. True worship is not only doctrinal precision, nor is it merely raw emotional power. Rather, true worship is wholehearted adoration and obedience that flow from a life transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, and shaped by the Word of God.