

§ I. INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

Lecture 1

INTRODUCTION TO DEFENDERS

Our class verse is 1 Peter 3:15, which says “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who asks you to give a reason for the hope that is in you, yet do this with gentleness and respect.” So according to Peter we are all, as Christian believers, to be prepared to make a defense to any unbeliever who asks us why we believe what we believe, and we are to share that defense in gentleness and respect. That verse motivates what we do in Defenders class.

The Purposes of Defenders Class

There are three purposes to Defenders class:

1. *To train Christians to understand, articulate, and defend basic Christian truths.* Now those three verbs are not just repetitive lawyer-speak. Rather these each indicates an important element of what we want to achieve in our training here. We want to *understand* basic Christian truths. We want you as Christians to have a solid grasp of what fundamental Christian teaching or doctrine is. We want you to be able to *articulate* it. We want you to be able to say what we believe in a proper and accurate way so that you are not at a loss for words when asked what you believe. You’ll learn to articulate it clearly and accurately. And we want you to *defend* it – to say not only *what* you believe, but *why* you believe it. So in the course of these lessons, although our focus is on Christian doctrine, we’ll occasionally take a detour, and we’ll look at how to defend these claims. We’ll look at some of the issues involved in the defense of the truths that we’re studying. This first purpose is our primary goal.
2. *To reach out with the Gospel to those who have not yet come to know Christ, always being ready to give a defense to anyone who should ask for a reason for our hope.* We want to be a place that is welcoming and open to seekers and unbelievers, agnostics who

have questions about the Christian faith and want to explore it. So this class welcomes you if you are in that category. You can find a home here and express your doubts, your questions, and your objections freely and openly in an atmosphere of acceptance.

3. To be an incendiary fellowship of mutual encouragement and care. In a large mega-church like Johnson Ferry, it is important to have a local group, a sort of church within the church, of people who know your first name and who care about you and are ready to pray for you and assist you if you are going through hard times. We want to build a fellowship here of mutual encouragement that is incendiary. It's like a fire which is burning brightly. If you take the logs in a fireplace and you pull them apart from one another, they soon grow cold and burn out. But if you gather those logs together and keep them in a bunch, then they mutually keep the fire going and keep the warmth going. We want to have that kind of fellowship in this class.

INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE?

The first question that we need to ask is, "What is Christian doctrine?" I appreciate that for many of you, you don't even know what doctrine is, and yet we are going to study it. So what is Christian doctrine? Well, the great church historian Jaroslav Pelikan defined Christian doctrine in this way: "Christian doctrine is what the church believes and teaches." I think that is as good a definition as any. So we are concerned here with what are the basic truth claims of Christianity.

Why Study Christian Doctrine?

Now why study Christian doctrine? Let me give you four reasons that are biblically based as to why every Christian ought to be

engaged in the study of Christian doctrine.

Every Christian is a Theologian

1. *Every Christian is a theologian* – not just those who are academically trained or are seminary professors, but every Christian is a theologian. Look at Ephesians 4:13-15. Here Paul speaks about equipping the saints for the work of the ministry and building up the body of Christ:

until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles.

Notice Paul's goal here is to train Christians to grow into full Christian maturity and that part of Christian maturity is doctrinal sophistication. The goal is to have an understanding of Christian doctrine, so that we are not like children, not like the waves of the sea that are tossed about to and fro by every wind of doctrine that comes along. So it is part of Christian maturity to have a clear grasp of Christian doctrine.

Look also at Galatians 1:6-9 for a similar emphasis on doctrine:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.

Here Paul speaks in the most graphic and powerful terms about the importance of having right doctrine. If someone is preaching a

different Gospel, a different account or message of Christ, Paul says let that person go to hell because that is contrary to the true Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is what Paul preached to the Galatians when he visited them. So, again, Paul's emphasis is on correct doctrine and understanding the truth of the Gospel.

Finally, look at Titus 1:9. The context here is the qualifications to become an elder in the church. Paul gives several qualifications to be an elder, and then in verse 9 he says, "He must hold firm to the sure Word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it." So the elders of the church, those who are models of Christian maturity among us, are to be able to give instruction in sound doctrine, and they are to be able to refute those who preach false doctrine. Now I don't know about you, but I don't see any reason to think that Christian maturity is to be the exclusive property of the elders of the church. I think every one of us ought to aspire to have the kind of character that is described here, so that even if we are not elders, we are qualified to be one. We want to have this kind of character that Paul describes here. And we've seen that part of Christian maturity which an elder exemplifies is a firm grasp of Christian doctrine – to be able to teach doctrine and be able to refute those that contradict it.

So I think that every Christian ultimately is a theologian. Just in virtue of being a Christian, you are committed to a certain worldview. You are committed to things like the existence of God, the objectivity of moral values, the objectivity of truth, the deity of Christ, his resurrection from the dead, his substitutionary atonement for our sins, the existence of eternal life, the hope of resurrection and of the personal return of Christ. As a Christian, you are committed to these things. So why wouldn't you want to understand them? The question is not whether or not you are going to be a theologian. As a Christian you are already committed to be one. The only question is: are you going to be a good one or a poor one? Are you going to have a good grasp of Christian doctrine and

theology or an immature and childish one?

Right Living Presupposes Right Thinking about God

2. *Right living presupposes right thinking about God.* If you read Paul's epistles, you will notice in them a very consistent pattern. In the first part of Paul's letters, he will lay out the doctrinal foundations of what he's trying to teach, and then in the second half of his letters, he will turn to matters of practical application. Paul always waits until he has the doctrinal foundation laid before he turns to the practical instructions about Christian living. To see this pattern, look, for example, at the book of Ephesians. Chapters 1 to 3 talk about Christian doctrine, about the unity of the church, the gathering of the Gentiles into God's elect body, and finally concluding with verse 20 of chapter 3. Then there is a sort of hinge verse as he transitions to the practical application to Christian living. In chapter 4, verse 1 he says, "I, therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." And he goes into the practical application.

Similarly, turn to Philippians for the same pattern. In Philippians you have again the first three chapters devoted to Christian doctrine. Then with chapter 4 Paul turns to his practical application about how to get along and live with one another in Christian fellowship. So right thinking about God serves as a foundation for right living. If you really understand what God is like, what he wants from us, what it means to follow Christ, then this is going to affect the way you live.

The Study of Doctrine is an Expression of Loving God

3. *The study of doctrine is an expression of loving God with all our minds.* Matthew 22:37-38 is the story of a pharisee who comes to Jesus and asks him "What is the greatest commandment in the law?" And in verse 37 Jesus replies, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment." As Christians we are to love God not simply with our soul, not simply with our

strength, but we are to love him with our minds. And the study of his truth is one of the best ways in which you can express your love of the Lord—by wanting to know what he is like and what his truth is. So the study of Christian doctrine is a way of showing your love for God by disciplining your mind to love and to know his truth. Study of doctrine is an expression of loving God with all of our minds.

Christ Cannot Be Separated From Truths About Christ

4. *Christ cannot be separated from truths about Christ.* Look at 2 John 9-10. Here John is warning about false teachers, and he says,

Anyone who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting.

So John here makes the doctrine of Christ the plumbline by which you measure persons coming to you claiming to be Christians or to speak in the name of Christ. If someone doesn't have the right doctrine, he doesn't have Christ. So don't be misled by persons who have perhaps a warm and fuzzy feeling about Christ and say, "Oh, I love Jesus!" but who have false doctrine. It is the doctrine which cannot be separated from the person of Christ. To have Christ involves having the correct understanding of who Christ is. Otherwise you don't really have Christ; you just have an emotional experience. Therefore doctrine is vitally important to the Christian life. Doctrine without the Holy Spirit leads to legalism. The Holy Spirit without doctrine leads to fanaticism. But doctrine with the Holy Spirit leads to true power in the Christian life. And this should be our goal – to have both the correct doctrine, the correct understanding of Christian truth, conjoined with a Spirit-filled Christian life. So we have both Word and the Spirit.

So for those four reasons I think it is vitally important that we as Christians study Christian doctrine – what the church believes and

teaches.