

Doctrines and Deeds

Those who dismiss doctrine as unimportant and divisive are overlooking the unavoidable connection between what we believe and how we behave.

“But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate” (Rev. 2:6).

“Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate” (Rev. 2:15).



The casual reader may read these two verses and fail to notice a significant distinction. In addressing the church in Ephesus, Jesus applauded their rejection of the *deeds* of the Nicolaitans. A few verses later, writing to the church in Pergamum, Jesus condemned those who hold the *doctrine* of the Nicolaitans. Did you catch that? The *doctrine* and the *deeds* of the Nicolaitans. History has left us no record of the Nicolaitans beyond these two cryptic references, so we don't know the details. But the fact that Jesus denounced both their *doctrine* and their *deeds* sets up a useful study of the relationship between *what we are taught* and *how we behave*.

It is fashionable in our postmodern age to belittle doctrine as unimportant and divisive. All that really matters, we are told, is that we “live for Jesus.” But this simplification ignores the hard link between our beliefs and our actions. What does it mean to “live for Jesus”? How can we even define that if we dismiss doctrine (teaching) as irrelevant?

How we choose to live our lives is a function of what we believe, and what we believe is deeply influenced by the teaching, or doctrine, to which we are exposed. Throughout the Bible, God has emphasized teaching as the antidote to sin. Moses told the Israelites as they stood on Canaan's border, “I have *taught* you statutes and judgments . . . that you should *act* according to them in the land which you go to possess” (Deut. 4:5). The Israelites, in turn, were to “teach them to your children and your children . . . that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth” (v. 9-10). Their success or failure as a nation would be determined by how they responded to the teaching they were given.

When people are not taught, their ignorance will cost them dearly. The nation in which Hosea lived was a moral cesspool marked by “swearing and lying, killing and stealing and committing adultery . . . break[ing] all restraint, with bloodshed upon bloodshed” (Hos. 4:2). This social breakdown had a simple explanation: “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (v. 6). The people were not taught, and their lives reflected that lack of a moral compass.

But ignorance is not the only culprit. We can be taught truth that is twisted, and the results can be just as deadly as no teaching at all. Peter warned of false teachers “who will secretly bring in destructive heresies,” adding that “many will follow their destructive ways” (2 Pet. 2:1-2). When people are taught wrong, they will live wrong, and the outcome is almost always a disaster.

It follows that those who are tasked with teaching others have a solemn responsibility to do it right. Paul wrote to a young preacher to “take heed to yourself and to the doctrine [teaching]. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you” (1 Tim. 4:16). He urged another young preacher to “speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine” (Tit. 2:1). Healthy teaching nurtures spiritually healthy people.

Some topics are more important than others (Matt. 23:23; Prov. 21:3; 1 Cor. 15:3), so we must take care to maintain a proper balance in our teaching. But what we cannot do is dismiss all doctrine as unimportant and irrelevant. Once we do that, we lay ourselves open to a host of evil influences that will corrupt our thinking. Sooner or later, we will pay dearly for that dereliction.

— David King