

## ARE DOCTRINES REALLY NECESSARY?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on January 12, 1964 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

A prominent preacher in the city of New York recently declared, "The great thing about this church is that you do not have to believe anything to come into it." By this statement he simply meant that those who become members of his particular church do not have to believe in the virgin birth, or the inspiration of the scriptures, or heaven and hell, or the necessity of baptism, or any other point of doctrine. This church is broadminded enough to accept anyone who wishes to be a member, regardless of his belief or lack of belief.

During the years that I lived in Southern California I often heard one of the area's most prominent preachers in his regular Saturday afternoon radio broadcast. He was the senior minister of a large, four-thousand member church which met in a magnificent Gothic structure on one of the main thoroughfares of the city of Los Angeles. Quite often he spoke of his church as a "large, modern church" and specifically mentioned that it was a fellowship of those who held many divergent beliefs. For example, if a man upon entering this particular church wished to be baptized, they would be happy to accommodate him and administer baptism. They would be equally happy, however, to accept a man without baptism. This, too, was a church in which doctrinal requirements were ignored.

These two examples suggest a religious trend that has grown more and more prominent in recent years. I think I understand why. Most religious people fervently desire unity. They are troubled by the division of the religious world. The fact that Christendom is divided into 258 officially recognized religious bodies is indeed a disturbing fact. Since these divisions of the religious world result from the different doctrines, it seems logical to many as a solution to a major problem to do away with religious doctrines altogether--or else to minimize them into insignificance. To any student of the Bible the evil of religious division is apparent. In John 17 we read the poignant prayer of our Lord on the night in which he was betrayed that his disciples might be one. After praying for the apostles specifically, he added, "Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word; that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us: that the world may believe that thou didst send me." (John 17:20-21).

At another time the Holy Spirit guided the apostle Paul to write, "Now I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been signified unto me concerning you, my brethren; by them that are of the household of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I mean, that each one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized into the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you, save Crispus and Gaius; lest any man should say that ye were baptized into my name." (I Cor. 1:10-15).

### Doctrines Are Imperative

This background of material suggests why I have chosen to speak today on the theme, "Are Doctrines Really Necessary?" The word doctrine is not very popular in our day. As a reaction against the religious division of our time many are asking "Why not get rid of these doctrines which divide us?" The problem is very real, but this solution is not the answer.

There is no possibility of getting along without doctrine. In the economic realm, I believe in the free enterprise system. This is a doctrine that I hold to be true and right. In the political realm, I believe that the democratic system as practiced in the United States is the finest form of government yet devised. This, too, is a doctrine. In the realm of ethics, I believe that honesty, integrity, truthfulness, and fair play are fundamental principles which all men should accept and practice. These examples will suffice to suggest that whatever men believe becomes their doctrine. Similarly, in the religious world, there is no possibility of carrying on the Christian religion without doctrines. It is just a question of which doctrines. In the examples cited above of churches that advertise the fact that they have no doctrinal requirements, it is obvious upon reflection that these churches themselves have a doctrine. Their doctrine is that doctrines are not important. They believe this, and they fervently and aggressively teach it. The opposite doctrine is that doctrines are important. Both are doctrines. Since it is not possible to live one's individual life without certain beliefs or doctrines on which decisions are made and actions taken, and since it is not possible for a church to exist without certain basic beliefs or convictions, it is obvious that it is not a question of doing away with all doctrines (or beliefs) but rather a question of which doctrine we shall accept. Or to put it another way, since it is not reasonable, nor possible, to do away with all beliefs, it becomes vitally important to have the right beliefs and doctrines.

### The Early Church

This problem did not originate in our generation. The problem of determining the right doctrines has been a major concern of the church since its beginning more than 1900 years ago. Within a few short years after the church began, there came a crucial issue as to whether or not certain requirements of the Old Testament law of Moses should be bound upon Christians. The apostle Paul and others had taught that the old law had been done away, having been nailed to the cross. (Col. 2:14). Judaizing teachers, as they were called,

held that certain aspects of Moses' law were binding upon Christians. Church history speaks of this particular faction as Ebionites. At the height of the controversy, Paul and Barnabas and several others journeyed to Jerusalem to discuss the matter with the apostles and the elders of the Jerusalem church. Acts chapter 15, indicates that the apostles agreed with Paul that circumcision should not be bound upon Gentile converts. The book of Galatians and Hebrews of the New Testament were written largely to defeat this movement back toward Jerusalem. This was one of the first heretical doctrines to be dealt with by the early church.

Also, in this early period of the church's existence, there arose the problem of Gnosticism. This particular heretical doctrine came from Greek and other pagan philosophies. Some of the early converts to Christianity tried to fuse Gnosticism and Christianity. The Gnostic believed that God is good, and that the world is evil, therefore he concluded that the world was not created by God but by some demonic influence, some demi-urge. The Gnostic further believed that man's body was evil, hence salvation consisted in escaping from the fleshly body and from the material world. The Gnostic believed that salvation came to man through some special, secret knowledge, hence the name, Gnostic, or knower.

As one reads the gospel of John, he recognizes the fact that some of its key teaching is designed to brand Gnosticism as heresy. For example, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him; and without him was not anything made that hath been made ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father) full of grace and truth." (John 1:1-3, 14).

Still another of the troublesome controversies of the early church came from the Docetics. Doceticism holds that Christ did not exist in fleshly form while on earth. He only seemed to. It was not God in the flesh, but simply a manifestation that man mistakenly thought to be real. A different facet of this particular theory holds that God's spirit entered the body of Jesus of Nazareth at the time of his baptism, continued with him for several years, and left his body just before he died on the cross. The divine Spirit simply invaded a human form for a few short years. The verse mentioned above, John 1:14, would show the fallacy of this position. "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father) full of grace and truth." Still clearer, however, is the apostle John's statement in I John 1:1-3, as follows, "That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we beheld, and our hands handled, concerning the Word of life (and the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare unto you the life, the eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us); that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you also, that ye also may have fellowship with us: yea, and our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ."

#### How Can We Know?

Obviously, the problem of determining whether a particular doctrine was true, or whether it was heretical, was a major one. By what means could the early Christians know whether a doctrine was from God or not? In order that man might have a concrete, dependable, authoritative means of determining the true doctrines, the Holy Spirit guided certain chosen disciples to write the New Testament scriptures. The church had existed for approximately twenty years before the beginning scriptures were set down in writing. About A.D. 50, in round numbers, the writing began and all twenty-seven of the New Testament books were complete by the end of the first century. A study of the canon of the New Testament, with its evidence for the inclusion of the twenty-seven books which make up this portion of the Bible, is an interesting and rewarding study, however, it must be reserved for another time. Suffice it to say, that such a study leaves one with deep faith in the inspiration of the scriptures and with strong confidence that they are from God.

Imbedded in these scriptures are statements such as that from the apostle John in II John 9, "Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son." A similar declaration is made in the opening chapter of the Galatian letter from the pen of the apostle Paul, "But though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema. As we have said before, so say I now again, If any man preached unto you any gospel other than that which ye received, let him be anathema." (Gal. 1:8-9). In Jude 3 we also find the expression, "The faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints." All of these statements are indicative of the fact that this written, inspired New Testament is the final all-authoritative word of God.

With the inspired New Testament as a tool man has the means of measuring every religious doctrine to see whether it be of God or not. Among all of the thousands of doctrines, theories, speculations, hobbies, and theses, there is this inspired statement of the only doctrines which are of God. A conscientious study of this book, with consequent application to all religious ideas, will enable man to know that which is from God and that which is heresy. This inspired Bible declares what man must do in order to be saved, how man must worship in order to please God, how the Lord's church should be organized, how it should conduct its affairs, and all other matters that pertain to faith and practice. By the providence of God, this book has been given that man might have the means of measuring all doctrines in order that he may cleave to that which is true.

#### Other Steps

While the inspired word of God was all that was necessary for determining true doctrines in distinction to those that were heretical, there were other steps taken by believers in Christ during the early centuries. Early, for example, there developed the practice of making creedal statements. These rules of faith were used to determine whether persons were heretical or orthodox. One of the earliest

of these was known as the Roman Symbol and was as follows: "God, all sovereign Father, Jesus Christ his son, the one born of Mary the virgin, crucified under Pontius Pilate, and buried, the third day risen from the dead, ascended into the heavens, and seated at the right hand of the Father, when he shall come to judge the living and the dead, and in the Holy Spirit and the resurrection of the flesh." One more widely known perhaps is that designated as the Apostles' Creed, though church historians are unanimous in saying that it had no connection whatever with the apostles. It is of second century origin and its designation as the Apostles' Creed dates back no further than the fourth century. It holds, in its earliest form, "I believe in God, Father Almighty, and in Christ Jesus, his Son our Lord, and in holy spirit, holy church, and resurrection of the flesh."

These creedal statements drawn up by uninspired human beings, led naturally into the great ecumenical councils. Because of the heated controversies over basic points of doctrine, in 325 A.D. representatives from across the ancient Christian world came to Nicea for a thorough discussion of doctrine. The result was the Nicene Creed, drawn up by delegates of various churches of the ancient world. Hardly was the ink dry on the paper, however, before other discussions were being held that led to revision after revision of this creedal statement. One of the chief councils of later years was that of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. Often, these councils were bitter fights between the opposing sides, with one side eventually mustering enough votes to have its way. In all of the centuries since, there have been these regular councils with their endless discussions, bitter controversies, and temporary verdicts, which in turn were revised by succeeding generations.

The hard fact is that such councils have no place in God's plan. It is not within the jurisdiction of man (or a group of men) to determine the doctrines of God. The final, authoritative statement of God's truths has already been given in the inspired New Testament. No group of men has the right to revise God's doctrines in the light of their wishes or their experiences. This step toward the solution of doctrinal differences should never have been taken and, ironically, has multiplied the divisions rather than reduced them.

Still another effort, and again a mistaken effort, to settle the problem of divergent doctrines is to be found in the development of centralized church organization. The New Testament speaks of bishops, presbyters, elders, and overseers as synonymous terms. In the early church there was always a plurality of bishops, or elders, in each congregation. This is in sharp distinction to one-man rule. This is borne out in such passages as Acts 20:17, 28, where all of these terms are used synonymously. Throughout the New Testament this is the organization of the early church. Clement of Rome, who wrote in 97 or 98 A.D. also supported the idea of a plurality of bishops when he addressed the Corinthian Christians, and urged them to support the bishops or presbyters.

By 120 A.D., however, when the Didache was written, there was evidence of a trend toward a firmer organization of the church. In this early document there is indication that the drift had already begun toward one bishop--a monarchical bishop--in each local church. Ignatius, who died between 110 and 117 A.D., also believed in and argued for the monarchical bishop in each church. By the middle of the third century Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, held complete power in his diocese. It was he who determined who was to be received into the church, who was in good standing, and who should be cast out. From a group of elders or bishops with equal authority in each local church, the drift had been toward one man with the final authority in all matters. The next step, which followed several centuries later, was the papacy with a single bishop over all of the churches of the Roman area of influence.

Again, we would have to say that this development of a human organizational system which resulted in a single voice to determine matters of doctrine was neither needed nor approved of God. The inspired scriptures were adequate, and the substitution of a monolithic church organization for the horizontal organization introduced in the holy scriptures was a digression rather than a step toward God's way.

### Conclusion

Just as a skeleton is necessary for a human body to function properly, doctrines are essential for a church to function properly. Of course, it goes without saying, that just as the skeleton should be clothed with cartilages, muscles, and skin, so the structure of the church needs to be accompanied by the spirit of Christ, and all of the Christian graces. However, it is also obvious, that the underlying structure is absolutely essential both in the physical body and in the spiritual body of the Lord's church. Without definite convictions it would be more like jellyfish than the animals of a higher order that do the world's work.

It is in this connection that we exalt the inspired word of God. It is God's statement of his will for men. We must return to the Bible, speaking where the scriptures speak and being silent where they are silent. The Bible alone is God's authoritative statement of his will, and it will guide us into the right beliefs and doctrines.

The great doctrines of the Bible include such subjects as the doctrine of God, the doctrine of Christ, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the doctrine of the church, the doctrine of salvation, the doctrine of worship, the doctrine of eternity and many others. When the teachings of God's inspired word are brought together in a systematic way, presenting God's will on any subject, it becomes the doctrine of God upon that subject. It shall be our purpose in succeeding weeks to study some of these great doctrines of God, as revealed in his will.