

# **The Importance of Biblical Doctrine: A Covenantal Testimony Against New Evangelicalism**

**By Michael Wagner**

Within a few hundred years after the time of Christ, the forces of Antichrist were wreaking havoc in the church. All kinds of man-made innovations were introduced in the government and worship of the church, and the message of salvation by faith alone faded from sight. Indeed, the "man of sin" and "son of perdition" set himself up "in the temple of God" (see 2 Thes. 2:3-4) -- i.e., the Papacy was established. Those were dark days.

At times during that period, God would raise people up to declare a faithful testimony, people such as the Waldenses, John Huss, and John Wycliffe. But then God wrought a much greater work, and beginning with Martin Luther, the world was shaken by the mighty Protestant Reformation. The Reformers were basically starting from scratch; they went to the Bible alone to figure out what God would have us believe and what He would have us practice. Although affirming the sole authority of Scripture was the overriding concern of the Reformers, the two most significant issues derived from that concern were salvation and worship. Note, for example, the words of John Calvin:

If it be inquired, then, by what things chiefly the Christian religion has a standing existence amongst us, and maintains its truth, it will be found that the following two not only occupy the principal place, but comprehend under them all the other parts, and consequently the whole substance of Christianity: that is, a knowledge, first, of the mode in which God is duly worshipped; and, secondly, of the source from which salvation is to be obtained. When these are kept out of view, though we may glory in the name of Christians, our profession is empty and vain (1995, 15).

The Reformers were clear in demonstrating that we are justified by faith alone, and that God will only be worshipped in ways that he has prescribed. The Biblical teaching on salvation has come to be known as "Calvinism," after the greatest of sixteenth century Reformers, John Calvin. And the Biblical teaching on worship came to be known as the "regulative principle of worship," referring to the fact that Scripture regulates worship by forbidding whatever God has not commanded.

In bringing to light these precious truths of Scripture, the Reformers were following the voice of their Shepherd, Jesus Christ. As Jesus said in John 10:27, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." But modern New Evangelicals have despised these truths -- they reject the Biblical teaching of salvation by God's sovereign power, and instead say that men are saved by their free-will decisions (Arminianism). And instead of allowing Scripture to regulate their worship practices, they use all sorts of man-made innovations including uninspired songs, musical instruments, altar calls, etc. The effect has been to bring New Evangelical doctrine and practice increasingly back in line with the Romish Whore, from which the Reformers had broken free. Unlike Jesus'

sheep who "know not the voice of strangers" (John 10:5), in doing such things the New Evangelicals have shown themselves to be following "a stranger." Certainly God did not lead them into such unscriptural doctrine and practice.

In sum, the Reformation was a time where God (using men such as John Calvin, John Knox, etc.) worked mightily to bring His Truth to the attention of men in a very big way. God's way of salvation and His method of worship were made plain. But these have been abandoned by New Evangelicals; they think they have a better way, when in truth they have almost become apostate. Their only hope is to return to the truth of the Reformation. As Kevin Reed so aptly puts it,

if there is to be a new reformation, we need to come clean on the depth of the problem among evangelicals, and summon them to repent, believe the true gospel, and depart from their idols in worship. (Anything less is simply beating around the bush.) And until evangelicals bring forth such fruits meet for repentance, historic Protestants will have no choice but to regard the bulk of evangelical churches as no more legitimate than Rome (1995, 63).

### **The Importance of Doctrine**

In the eyes of so many New Evangelicals, doctrine just isn't that important. What is important is that a Christian has a warm faith and a close relationship with God. As long as someone reads the Bible, prays, and attempts to "win souls," that's all that really matters. In fact, numerous New Evangelicals believe that people who emphasize doctrine are simply being contentious and are therefore condemned by Paul in 1 Cor. 1:10-13.

The Scripture itself, however, teaches that Christians should place a strong emphasis on doctrine. Even a very small sampling of Scripture makes this too plain to miss:

Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to *doctrine* (1 Tim. 4:13).

Take heed unto thyself, and unto the *doctrine*; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee (1 Tim. 4:16).

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for *doctrine*, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16).

Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and *doctrine* (2 Tim. 4:2).

But speak thou the things which become sound *doctrine* (Titus 2:1).

This list could go on and on, but note that "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God" (2 John 9a).

The importance of knowing true doctrine cannot be overemphasized. Look at it this way:

what if when you stand before God at the end of time He asks why you taught your children error rather than truth. You cannot plead ignorance. Certainly there are innumerable groups teaching a variety of beliefs and all claiming to be true. But if you are a serious Christian, you must take the time to search the Scriptures to find out what is true. If you say you don't have time to do that, all you are really saying is that you don't care enough to do it. Yet the well-being of your family is at stake. Everyone finds the time to do what they think is really important. Just because you believe you are a good Christian living a reasonably good Christian life doesn't mean that you are exempt from the Biblical commands to hold to and understand true doctrine. Holding to false doctrine, even if you don't know it's false, could be disastrous to you and your family.

Let no man think that opinions are free more than practices, or that a man runs no hazard of his salvation by erroneous and heretical opinions. Error of judgement, as well as wickedness of practice, may bring death and destruction upon the soul, James v. 19,20; 2 Pet. ii. 1; iii. 16; Gal. ii. 21. Heretics, as well as murderers and drunkards, are there excluded from the kingdom of heaven (Gillespie [1846] 1991, 66).

As Gillespie also points out, "a holy heretic is a chimera" ([1846] 1991, 63). What this means is that your relationship with God is an illusion if you neglect true doctrine. So many New Evangelicals seem to think that doctrine is of secondary importance (at best); what is really important is your relationship with God -- as if the two could be separated. But they cannot.

Dangerous and damnable errors can no otherwise consist with true grace than dangerous and damnable sins. And this I will hold as a good rule in practical divinity, that as the want of true piety makes a person (if tempted) apt to be infected with error, so error of judgement, if continued in, doth not only hinder growing, but makes a dangerous decreasing and falling short in true piety; or thus, the stability of the mind and judgement in the faith of the gospel, and in the true reformed religion, and the stability of the heart in grace and true piety, stand or fall together, flourish or fade away together, lodge or flit together, live or die together (Gillespie [1846] 1991, 60).

"Licentiousness of judgement in doctrines will certainly introduce licentiousness of heart and life in practicals" (Gillespie [1846] 1991, 62). If you are serious about being a Christian, you will take the time to ensure that you hold to correct Biblical doctrine. The New Evangelical attitude that doctrine is not important is itself heretical and must be repudiated.

## **Conclusion**

Again, the Scriptural theological attainments of the Reformation have been abandoned by modern New Evangelicalism; and to make matters worse, an unscriptural disdain for doctrine has immunized many evangelicals from a recovery of Reformation truth. But make no mistake: the Reformers recovered Biblical truth (by the grace of God) and set it

forth so that future generations of Christians would have correct belief and correct practice. The turning away from this truth that has occurred is not so much a turning away from the Reformers as it is a turning away from the sole authority of the Bible and from God Himself. The true sheep hear His voice and follow Him, accepting His doctrine and practice. Those who reject this doctrine and practice are following strangers. The Scripture says "Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil" (Ex. 23:2), and so we must repudiate this multitude, New Evangelicalism, in spite of all its (false) pretensions to be following God. Instead, we must follow the Saviour in the path of true doctrine -- the doctrine set forth in the Reformation.

## **References**

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