

# **Why the Doctrine and Practice of a Church is Important**

**By Elder David Pyles**

Only a few decades ago, the title of this paper would have seemed very mundane. A title like “Why You Should Believe Dirt is Dirty” would have hardly been more boring. Nearly all Christians understood that the doctrine and practice of a church were of utmost importance. Those who selected a church on the basis of other criteria would be loathe to admit it, knowing they were apt to be dismissed as simplistic, and possibly also judged as insincere.

Things are very different in our present society. It is now considered downright unsociable to challenge almost anyone concerning their religious beliefs. This is thought to be an infringement on their personal rights. Also, doctrinal assertions beyond mere basic Christian principles are considered to be speculative, nitpicking and divisive. Because of these attitudes, the best way to build a large congregation today is by avoiding strong doctrinal commitments. The emergence of so-called “nondenominational” churches demonstrates this fact, and even where one sees rapid growth in churches of traditional denominations, it will generally be found that such churches tend to distance themselves from strong doctrine.

Present attitudes are partly an overreaction to hyper-sectarianism of former times. Some people then were so adamant about their doctrinal delusions that they judged all dissenters as being unregenerate and hell-bound. This is both unreasonable and uncharitable, but the present indifference or disdain for doctrine is almost as extreme in the opposite direction. Obviously, our American society has had difficulty finding reasonable balance on this issue. Some Christians in other countries seem to have done much better. I have seen them passionately debate their doctrinal differences, but then leave the argument with a clear understanding that they were both brothers in Christ, and might one day be burning at the same stake.

## **Why Doctrine is Important**

There are multiple reasons why doctrine should be important to us. Most of these are sufficient of themselves to settle the matter. These reasons include:

1) The claim that doctrine is unimportant is absurd on the very face of it. Most of what we call “doctrine” seeks to explain how we are saved from hell to heaven. Who in their right mind could be dismissive about this? Who in their right mind could think a church to be superior because it swam only at the shallow end of the pool on this subject? Such an attitude would never be taken in any field of science, nor was it commonly taken concerning doctrine until recent times.

2) The claim that doctrine is unimportant is hypocritical. This is because the claim is itself a strong doctrinal assertion. It says that God is content for us to know only Bible basics, or else it says that the Bible is so poorly written that nothing beyond basics is knowable. A Primitive Baptist creed surely makes no claims any bolder than these! Besides, any competent theologian

will affirm that the vast majority of so-called non-denominational churches are in fact decidedly Arminian in doctrine. They are also as committed on issues of practice as any denominational church. This is because it is impossible for them to be otherwise.

Churches claiming to be doctrinally neutral are more apt to be doctrinally democratic. They present a doctrinal mix that best comports with ongoing opinion. This is why such churches have grown at faster rates than others. Such is exactly what they were designed to do. If anyone thinks this to be right, then they should find the following prophecy to be very unnerving:

*Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. – 2Tim 4:2-4*

Fault on this point is not limited to non-denominational churches. Since I am a Baptist, and claim nearer kinship to them than all other denominations, I will be bolder in my criticisms of them on this point. It is verifiable fact that the number of Baptist confessions and books advocating the doctrine of unconditional election is more than one can shake a stick at. This includes confessions upon which a great number of Baptist churches were founded and continue to officially operate. Notwithstanding, the vast majority of Baptists are naive concerning this, and are even hostile to the doctrine, either because it has been neglected or contradicted from the pulpit, and the common Baptist people have been led down “Arminian road” because this was the easiest direction in which to herd them.

3) According to my own estimates, about two out of every three pages of the New Testament will require commitment on some major doctrinal issue to understand what is written on the page. By “major doctrinal issue” I am referring to doctrines that distinguish leading denominations of Christianity. I do not mean doctrines that are commonly accepted by all reasonable believers in Christ. So, for example, if a page presented no doctrine apart from the virgin birth of Jesus, then I am not including this page in my count because nearly all Christians believe in it. Had I included doctrines such as these, then I would need a figure larger than two-thirds. Now to say that doctrine is unimportant is the same as saying that proper interpretation of God’s word is unimportant. Either this, or else it says that the Holy Spirit is such a poor communicator that we cannot certainly understand what He meant in a majority of the pages of His book. Stated differently, on approximately two-thirds of the pages in the New Testament, a preacher claiming doctrinal neutrality is going find himself in an uncomfortable situation wherein he must contrive some clever way to avoid offending his hearers. Given this, is it any wonder that a typical sermon today is based on very few scriptures, and is typically designed more to uplift and encourage than to teach?

4) Jesus told Pilate, *“To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice,”* (Jn 18:37). To dismiss truth as unimportant is to dismiss the very mission of Jesus as unimportant. Further, in His famous Great Commission (Mt 28:19-20), Jesus commanded to teach *“all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”* Hence, it is not for us to decide what is important and what is not in the teachings of Jesus; rather, we are commanded to teach *all* of it.

5) Jesus made proper understanding of doctrine to be the reward of obedience. He said, *“If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself,”* (Jn 7:17-18). To dismiss doctrine as unimportant is to dismiss obedience as unimportant. Jesus also said, *“If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free,”* (Jn 8:31-33). If knowledge of the truth is unimportant, then we must say the same of discipleship and freedom. Again, He said, *“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you,”* (Mt 7:7). Experience shows this text cannot refer to Corvettes, bass boats and beach-front properties. Above all else, it promises that those who seek for understanding will not be denied (Js 1:5).

6) The force with which scriptures condemn false doctrine implies the absolute necessity of true doctrine. The same Bible that commands we forgive seven times seventy in a day also commands that a heretic be rejected after the first or second admonition (Tit 3:10). It says we are not to bid them God speed or receive them into our houses (2Jn 10). It also says, *“Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them,”* (Rom 16:17). Anyone knows that Jesus had great compassion for sinners, but He vehemently denounced corrupters of doctrine (Mt 16:6-12, Mt 23:15, Mk 7:6-8).

Given the severity with which we are commanded to treat heresy, we must of course be very cautious before charging it, but the same severity logically disallows any other charge against a man who claims that doctrine is unimportant.

7) Accordingly, indifference toward doctrine is presented in scripture as an act of rebellion. When God was disposed to destroy Jerusalem in the days of Jeremiah (Jer 5:1), He told the prophet that He would nonetheless spare the city if a single truth-seeker could be found in it! This shows the high value God places on a genuine hunger to learn of Him and His truth. But Jeremiah complained that the Jews of his times dismissed his plain preaching as being parabolic or unknowable (20:49). Similarly, when Jesus claimed that His mission was to teach the truth (Jn 18:37), Pontius Pilate dismissed Him, saying *“What is truth?”* Those who say doctrine is unimportant or unknowable have sided with the likes of Pilate and against the Lord.

### **“Doctrine” Cannot be Limited to Basic, Generally-Accepted Truths**

Where scriptures expect us to be knowledgeable in doctrine, they cannot merely mean the basic, generally-accepted principles of Christianity. This can be seen from:

1) The importance of scriptural detail was expressly declared by Christ when He said:

*For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. – Mt 5:18-19*

While this statement of course pertains to the Law, Paul's teachings in Heb 2:1-3 imply that the New Testament should be heeded with even greater attentiveness.

2) The manner in which Christ and His Apostles analyzed scripture clearly demonstrates the importance they attached to detail. In Mt 22:32, Christ centered His argument upon the tense of a verb. In the 43rd verse of the same chapter, He staked his case on a single word. The same is true in Jn 10:34. We find Him in other cases emphasizing aspects and implications of texts that had escaped the attention of others (e.g. Mt 21:16 & 42, Mk 2:25). The same may be said of His Apostles, as may first be seen in Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, where the very foundation of his logic was taken from seldom-noticed details of the 16th and 110th Psalms. This tendency is also observed in Paul, whose emphasis upon scriptural detail was such that He would base one crucial argument on a single letter of the Old Testament text (Gal 3:16).

3) Paul admonished the Hebrews for being knowledgeable only in the principles of the doctrine of Christ at a time when they should have known enough to be teachers (Heb 5:12-6:3). It follows that a competent teacher of the Bible must know more than basic principles.

4) Timothy was commanded to study so as to show himself approved unto God (2Tim 2:15), yet was elsewhere commended for knowing the scriptures even from childhood (2Tim 3:15). Hence, he was already knowledgeable in the general principles of Christianity when commanded to study. He was expected to learn doctrine thoroughly, and this was necessary for him to be approved unto God.

### **Questions and Answers on Doctrinal Differences**

In this section I will discuss differences between the historical Baptist view of doctrine and the views commonly held in mainstream Christianity. This is presented in a sequence of questions and answers. The answers are admittedly broad generalizations, but I think they are reasonably accurate, fair and useful:

1) What are the major types of doctrine in Christianity besides that of Primitive Baptists?

Arminianism, Conventional Calvinism and Four-point Calvinism or "Fullerism."

2) What are the primary differences between these doctrines?

Arminians teach various forms of gospel obedience (e.g. faith, repentance, baptism, good works, etc.) to be *causes* of eternal salvation that are fulfilled by the freewill choices of the human. Calvinists interpret these things (in various subsets) as being *means* unto salvation that are fulfilled by the sovereign will and predestination of God. Primitive Baptists agree with Calvinists on many points, but interpret all gospel obedience as being the *effects* and *confirmations* of salvation, and affirm that eternal salvation itself has no cause or means apart from the obedience and death of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. Four-point Calvinism ostensibly differs from Calvinism only in that asserts that Christ died for all men. It agrees on the depravity of man, unconditional election, irresistible grace and preservation.

3) Why is the difference between Primitive Baptist doctrine and Arminianism important?

Arminian doctrine fails to adequately address numerous scriptures asserting the inability and insufficiency of human wit, will and work<sup>1</sup>, and it does not credibly accommodate what multitudinous scriptures state about Divine election<sup>2</sup>, the eternal love of God for the elect<sup>3</sup>, and the absolute certainty of His work in their salvation<sup>4</sup>.

4) Why is the difference between Primitive Baptist doctrine and Calvinism important?

Calvinists agree with Primitive Baptists that faith, repentance and other gospel obedience are motions of spiritual life and therefore serve to confirm it; however, they complicate matters when they say these things are also means unto spiritual life. Their claim is analogous to saying that if one will simulate the motions of life in a corpse (e.g. stand it up and make it walk) then by such means it can be made alive. If these are truly effects that are unique to life, then they cannot also be a means to it. Also, our faith, repentance, etc. are flawed in even the best case. It is a dubious claim that a flawless outcome can be gotten through flawed means and methods. Further, the means system is deficient in that it cannot account for the salvation of Old Testament saints, infants, mentally impaired and un-evangelized without being propped up by humanly-contrived amendments that are nowhere supported by scripture<sup>5</sup>. Gospel obedience is truly the means of bringing salvation *to light* (2Tim 1:10) or to our realization, but this is because the reality of salvation is itself *prerequisite* to all such obedience.

5) Why is the difference between Primitive Baptist doctrine and Fullerism important?

Fullerism errs in that it advocates the same means system as Calvinism; however, its problems go much further in that it understates the intents and accomplishments of Christ's death. Fullerism joins with Arminianism in saying that the death of Christ merely made redemption a possibility. Primitive Baptist doctrine affirms that the death of Christ fulfilled or ensured *all* conditions for eternal salvation.

## Why Church Practice is Important

As in the case of doctrine, this is a question that would have been judged ridiculous in bygone ages. Indeed, sound Christians of the past have likely bled more in defense of their practice than in defense of their doctrine.

It really is not necessary to defend doctrine and practice as though they are two separate things. While modern use of the term “doctrine” tends to confine the word to the abstract or theoretical as opposed to the practical, its meaning in the KJV is broader, encompassing even what we now call “practice” (e.g. 1Tim 1:9-10). So everything I have said proving the importance of doctrine would also apply to practice in either the modern or ancient sense of these terms. So what I will attempt to do in this section is establish the importance of *rules* that distinguish Primitive Baptist thinking on practice from most other denominations. These rules are simple and but two:

1) Primitive Baptists regard the New Testament as being the *sole* rule of faith and practice. Most other denominations are not so committed. They perhaps consider scripture to be the *supreme* rule, but it is not the only rule they follow. They might also be followers of the Old Testament to some degree or another, but their greater error is typically in following human-based tradition (of which PBs can also be guilty) or in capitulating to ongoing human preference.

2) Most denominations approximately follow the so-called “normative principle” of church practice, which claims that a practice is admissible provided scriptures do not forbid it. Stated differently, these denominations consider themselves obligated only to the *precepts* of Bible. Primitive Baptists think they should follow both *precepts* and *precedents* of the New Testament, believing that since the Bible was written under the infallible wisdom of God, any departures from it must entail loss of effectiveness in accomplishing objectives that are important to Him.

Obviously, some churches today have dismissed even the normative principle inasmuch as they allow what scriptures expressly forbid (e.g. women preachers, homosexuals, etc.). I assume it is unnecessary to prove the extreme error of this.

The significance of the second point can be seen in the case of baptism. The Bible commands that we baptize, but does not explicitly command the mode. Many Christians conclude they are freed by this fact to use various modes (i.e. immersion, pouring or sprinkling), but Baptists have a different way of thinking. They note that everyone who was actually baptized in the Bible was immersed, and they think this to be a precedent we are obliged to follow. Unfortunately, many modern Baptists are not consistent in their application of this principle. If any modern Baptist wishes to understand a Primitive Baptist, they merely need to take their own reasoning with respect to baptism and consistently apply it to all else (e.g. music, communion, etc.).

The first point above is adequately proven by:

*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. – 2Tim 3:16-4:1*

All reasonable Christians acknowledge what this text implies about the *infallibility* of scripture, but the text asserts even more, saying that scripture also has *sufficiency* for all spiritual needs and obligations of man. This is why Primitive Baptists make scripture their *sole* rule.

As for the policy of imitating only the New Testament for purposes of church practice, this follows from numerous scriptural declarations that Christians are no longer under Old Testament law but are under the law of Christ. This does not mean that Old Testament law can now be broken, because the law of Christ is an even higher standard that more than meets Old Testament demands (Mt 22:38-40, Gal 5:22-23). The reasoning leading to the conclusion that we should be followers of the New Testament can be lengthy, so I will not belabor the point here. However, the point should be adequately made by the fact that misguided Christians in Bible times attempted to introduce several modifications to church practice on the defense that the proposed measures were part of Old Testament service. Such modifications included works-based salvation (deriving from an errant interpretation of the Law), circumcision, dietary restrictions, racial distinctions and observance of holy days, Sabbath days and new moons. In every instance, Christ and His Apostles rejected these attempted modifications.

This speaks volumes concerning church practice in general, because if modifications were rejected notwithstanding their admissibility under the Law, then much less would Christ and His apostles accept modernizations having no basis in either Old Testament or New. The stance of the Bible is that the New Testament church is the culmination and perfection of the plan of God for worship (Heb 7:19), and that any modification to it could only serve to degrade it.

As to the second point, our obligation to follow scriptural precedent is expressly stated in numerous place, including:

*Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ. Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you. – 1Cor 11:1-2*

*Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us. For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you. – 2Thess 3:6-7*

*Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle. – 2Thess 2:15*

But the very nature of the Christian religion alone compels us to the conclusion that the Bible is to be followed in both precedent and precept. This is because it teaches that God was not content to simply *tell* us what to do, but He also lived among us and *showed* us what to do. Hence, some of the most commonly occurring words of the Savior were “*follow me.*” See: Mt 4:19, Mt 8:22, Mt 9:9, Mt 16:24, Mt 19:21, Mk 2:14, Mk 8:34, Mk 10:21, Lk 5:27, Lk 9:23, Lk 9:59, Lk 18:22, Jn 1:43, Jn 10:27, Jn 12:26, Jn 13:36, Jn 21:19.

The importance of scriptural precedent also follows from a simple rule we commonly, naturally and intuitively apply in all areas of life. It is that: Precedent is the final authority by which precept is interpreted. If we are confused about the meaning of a precept because there are multiple ways to construe it, then of the various rules of interpretation whereby we might resolve the conflict, all are superseded by any existing precedent.

I will demonstrate this with a simple example: Suppose your employer were to give you a commandment to build a fence in a particular place, but he then abruptly departed, leaving you with a head full of questions as to the particulars of his meaning. You would be in a great state of perplexity at the sight of his departure. Did he mean a wood fence, picket fence, rock fence, brick fence, barbed-wire fence, or what? Then you are further perplexed by the fact that there are various ways in which each of these particular kinds of fences could be built. You are therefore overcome with a sense of uncertainty as to what you should do. However, as you approach the place where you were commanded to build, you are overcome with great relief upon seeing that the boss has already started the fence. You see where steel posts have been driven into the ground at exactly 15-foot intervals; where exactly five strands of barbed wire have been attached to each post, with the wires being spaced exactly ten inches apart. You now know that a barbed wire fence was intended, and also know all the needful detail.

You should readily understand at this point that the pattern set before you supersedes any other rule of interpretation you might apply to your employer’s commandment. This would be true regardless of how reasonable that rule might seem to you. For example, you might reason to yourself that a rock fence would be more durable, or that a wood fence would be in greater conformity with the neighborhood and therefore more appealing to the neighbors. But it would be presumptuous for you to undertake either given that a contrary precedent has been set.

Now suppose you are overcome with a deluded sense of confidence that your idea about the wood fence is the better way to go, and you then proceed to build it, committing many resources and many days of labor in the endeavor, and being so consumed with your work that you give no further thought to the potential consequences of the decision you have made. Then one day upon seeing the approach of the employer’s vehicle, your mind has an abrupt encounter with a few realities it had not seriously considered before: The departure you have chosen from the precedent he set will surely require an explanation, and the very nature of the case is that it will require an explanation that he himself has never offered. Further, any acceptable explanation must have its basis in the premise that you know more about how to build this fence than he



does. You nervously realize that the challenge before you is formidable, because the boss happens to be a master fence builder who has never built anything but a flawless fence that was perfectly adapted to the ends it was intended to serve.

In your rendezvous with reality, you further consider that even were the boss to find a wood fence admissible, you have no idea he will be pleased with the particular wood fence you have built, because he gave you neither precept nor precedent regarding a wood fence. You reasonably conclude that your job might very well be at risk. The worst part for you will be the realization that all this apprehension and fear could have been replaced with confidence and good conscience had you simply built the fence according to the precedent that was set. Indeed, no other methodology could have assured the commendation rather than the condemnation of your employer. The hard lesson you have learned is that precedent is the final authority by which precept is to be interpreted.

Various Christian denominations have developed some ingenious schemes to justify their departures from the precedents set in the New Testament. This is particularly true with respect to baptism, but also applies to other points. Regardless of how clever or complex these schemes may be, they mostly serve to fill the mind with fog. They obscure the otherwise simple and undeniable principle here given – a principle none would dispute were it not for prior theories they were bent upon supporting. While their complex arguments can be refuted, to even address them would only serve as a distraction from this single, crucial point, and give opportunity for obfuscation. Precedent is the final authority by which precept is to be interpreted, and any contrary claim has been corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ (2Cor 11:3).

In completing this thought and paper, allow me to build yet further upon this example to convey another important point: Suppose there were numerous other employees responsible for this fence. If these were left to their own reasoning and preference, some would choose a rock fence; others a wood fence, and yet others a chain-link fence. To this diversity we could add their varied opinions as to the particulars of how each of these different types of fences should be built. Clearly, the situation is a near-perfect scenario for disagreement and strife, and one would be naïve to expect anything else. There is in fact only one kind of fence that can be built under a reasonable expectation of harmony among the laborers. It is a barbed-wire fence with steel posts situated exactly 15 feet apart, having five wires, being spaced at ten inch intervals. Surely, this is no trivial consideration, particularly if the boss left the employees with a strict commandment to be at peace and agreement.

## Footnotes

1) Ps 51:5, 58:3, Job 14:4, Job 15:14-16, Mt 11:27, 12:33-37, 19:16-26, Jn 3:3, 6:44-45, 6:64-65, 8:43-47, 10:26, 1Cor 1:18, 1Cor 2:14, Rom 8:5-10, Eph 2:1-3

2) Ps 65:4, Mt 20:16, 22:14, 24:24, 24:31, Mk 13:20, Lk 18:7, Rom 8:33, 9:11, 11:5-7, Eph 1:4, Col 3:12, 1Thes 1:4, 2Thes 2:13, Tit 1:1, 1Pet 1:2, 2:9, 2Pet 1:10, Rev 17:14

3) Jer 31:3, Mal 3:6, Rom 8:35-39, 2Tim 2:19, Heb 13:8

4) Pr 16:1, Ps 65:4, 110:3, Mt 1:21, Jn 3:8, 6:36-39, 10:16, 10:25-30, 17:1-2, 18:37, Acts 13:48, Rom 8:28-30, 1Cor 1:8, Eph 1:3-12, Php 1:6, 2Thes 13, 2Tim 1:9, Tit 1:2-3, 1Pet 1:5, Heb 10:10-14

5) Ps 22:9, Mt 11:25, Mt 21:16, Lk 1:15 & 44

6) Rom 5:10, Eph 1:3-4, Col 1:19, 2:10-11, Heb 12:2

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