

The Truth A La Carte

By: Keith Keyser

Buffet restaurants have their merits. There is something to be said for being able to choose from a wide variety of dishes according to personal preference. Choice in other mercantile matters is also attractive. While I personally miss browsing bookshelves in second-hand bookshops, it is satisfying to shop for precisely what one is looking for on-line. Choosing what one likes, and leaving the rest - it's the way of modern society; such thinking sometimes intrudes on Christian thinking. People often say things like "The Gospel is the most important thing" or "Church government is the most important thing." Conversely, it is sometimes said that eschatology, church truth, or matters of Christian living are secondary doctrines. When it comes to biblical truth, however, the Lord does not allow for this piecemeal approach to His teaching. Christians are to unite around the person of Christ and not every difference in understanding and practice is necessarily biblical grounds for cutting one off (e.g. the seven churches of Rev. 2-3.) We are to love our fellow saints for His Name's sake even if they have an incorrect understanding of prophecy, usage of spiritual gifts, and matters relating to God's sovereignty and human responsibility (Phil. 3:14-16.) Nonetheless, the truth is a unified body of teachings that suffers when the whole counsel of God is neglected. As believers, we are to strive to believe, obey, and practice the truth in its entirety for the glory of God.

The Danger Of Segmenting The Truth

Ardent believers sometimes get so excited about a particular truth that they neglect other aspects of the faith. Some affirm that reaching the lost is the main goal of Christianity; therefore, every activity of the local church ought to be conducted with the lost in mind. This philosophy greatly influences the church growth movement, and produces "seeker-friendly churches." In actuality, it creates an entertainment culture within the meetings of the local church. People now come to the meeting expecting to be coddled and stimulated by music and preaching that appeals to them. The original intention of the church to be a temple of God where we bring something for God in worship has been lost in mainstream Christianity.

At other times, a false dichotomy between doctrine and practice is created. For example, some argue that doctrinal matters are unimportant; love and care for one another are the essential things. Recently, social justice is making a comeback in evangelical circles. Several big name preachers are getting behind initiatives to combat poverty, AIDS, malaria, and even global warming. In their efforts to affect society positively, they are minimizing distinctively Christian doctrines for "the greater good" of improving this world. To accomplish their goals some of them make common cause with secular organizations as well as other religious groups who teach false gospels. Others merely minimize and marginalize the teaching of the Scriptures.

The Importance Of The Whole Counsel Of God

The truth cannot be embraced "a la carte." God's truth is a unified whole; repeatedly, the New Testament describes it as "the faith" (e.g. Acts 6:7; 13:8; 14:22; Rom. 1:5; 1 Cor. 16:13; Gal. 1:23, etc.) The language scholar, W.E. Vine defines this phrase as: "...what is believed, the contents of belief, the 'faith,'"¹ Another writer summarizes it this way: "So fundamental is faith

that the term may be used to categorize the whole Christian way, and the expression 'the faith' comes into being, not simply as a way of referring to the trust in Christ that is so basic, but as a means of drawing attention to **the whole body of teaching and practice that characterizes the Christian group**. It all springs from faith and is an expression of faith, yet it articulates and expresses what Christians believe, their doctrine or 'deposit'²

The early church was committed to the fundamentals of the faith: "...they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42.) An examination of the first thirteen chapters of Acts shows that they were also devoted to helping those with physical needs; moreover, they loved one another deeply. They held to sound doctrine and sound Christian practice. They followed the apostles' teaching regarding the local church and Christian living for individuals. They were also passionate about witnessing and carrying out foreign missions. In short, the early church was balanced - they were devoted to the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Like the other apostles, Paul preached the faith in its entirety. In his valedictory speech to the elders from Ephesus, he described his labors among them in these way: "...Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, Serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears, and temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews: *And* how **I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you**, but have shewed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house, Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:18-21, emphasis mine.) He goes on to say:

Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I *am* pure from the blood of all *men*. **For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God**. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears. And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified. (vv. 26-32; emphasis mine.)

Paul was clearly interested in instructing the Ephesians in the complete body of truth. He took this as a sacred trust from the Lord, for which he would one day give account (vv. 26-27; 2 Tim. 4:7-8.) Furthermore, upon leaving them he commended them to God's care and Word, showing the vital importance of adhering to the Scriptures as the spiritual food of the flock (v. 32.) The Word of God is the only divinely-ordained manual for the faith and practice of the saints.

Christianity Is Well-Rounded

If one neglects any aspect of the truth as taught in the Scriptures, one risks getting spiritually out of balance, thereby diminishing the Lord's glory and His work in one's life. In discussing the

gifts given to the Church, 1 Corinthians 12 makes the point that "...there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all" (1 Cor. 12:4-6.) The different gifts are intended to build up the body of believers. Accordingly, there are different strengths among different Christians. The evangelist has special ability in preaching the gospel and equipping the saints to witness. The teacher excels at expounding the Word in a clear fashion. The one with the gift of helps is able to aid in difficult situations. There are different spiritual abilities given to each believer in order to achieve the common goal of bringing all of the saints to maturity (Eph. 4:13.) The gifts balance each other, and so do the doctrines of the faith. In light of these facts, may Christians study the Scriptures and obey all of their teachings.

The bottom line is this: one does not have to choose between doctrines of Scripture. One Bible teacher expresses it this way: "We do not have to sacrifice the truth on the altar of the Gospel, nor on any other spiritual altar." God's Word must be obeyed regarding salvation, church order, ethics, morality, and eschatology. Like the early church one should be doctrinally sound **and** loving, holy, evangelistic, mission-minded, and conscious of others' physical and emotional needs. Following the teachings of the Bible produces a sanctified, loving, fulfilled life. If one's life is not marked by a difference from the world, then there is a disconnect between one's behavior and "...the faith which was once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3.) The Bible rightly understood produces balanced, Christ-like lives. To neglect some aspects of the truth is to stymie spiritual growth.

¹Vine, W., Unger, M. F., & White, W. (1997, c1996). Vine's complete expository dictionary of Old and New Testament words (electronic ed.) (2:222). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

²Hawthorne, G. F., Martin, R. P., & Reid, D. G. (1993). Dictionary of Paul and his letters (290). Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press. (Emphasis mine.)