



Teaching sound doctrine as redeemed servants

The following is a true story. Back on December 29, 2008, our family moved into the Burlington-Waterdown manse for a few months because I had been asked to teach at our seminary. However, there was one problem. Library cards. For our children. Because they are avid readers.

So, off we went to the Brant Hills Public Library. We took along a letter, officially signed by Catharine, our administrative assistant. That letter stated that yes, indeed, I was employed by the seminary as a “Temporary Instructor in Dogmatics.” You see, we needed proof of local employment in order to obtain some library cards. With her precise, professional eye, the librarian looked, first down at the letter and then up at me. “So, I see that you are an instructor in *dogmatics*?” she said. “Does that mean you teach students how to be narrow-minded?”

Somewhat shocked, I glanced back at the librarian. No, she was not joking; she was genuinely curious. To her mind, dogmatic people are the kind of folk who only see two colours: black and white. And if it isn’t white, then it’s most certainly black! Well, to cut the story short, I gave the librarian a quick description of what I really did as an instructor in dogmatics. And our family returned to the Burlington manse with shiny, new library cards and a few bags of good books.

Dogmatics. For the librarian at Brant Hills, that word had a decidedly negative ring to it. But what about us? Words like “dogmatics” or “theology” or even “creeds”: do those words have a positive ... or negative ring in your ears? Once there was a Scottish professor who quipped, “*Let prideful priests do battle about creeds/The church is mine that does most Christ-like deeds.*”¹ Do you agree with him? Only substituting in “pastors” for “priests”? Or what about a leading Christian philosopher who wrote, “*Theology, once acclaimed ‘the Queen of the Sciences,’ today hardly rises to the rank of a scullery maid; it is often held in contempt, regarded with suspicion, or ... just ignored.*”² Doesn’t sound very promising, does it?

Well, if those who teach theology are nothing more than kitchen servants, they can at least console themselves with the following facts found in Scripture. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are called *servants* of God (Deuteronomy 9:27). So were Moses (Numbers 12:7), Joshua (Judges 2:8), Samuel (1 Samuel 3:10), and David (2 Samuel 7:25). This pattern continues in the New Testament. Paul and Timothy, as well as James and Peter, all called themselves servants, literally slaves, of the Lord (Philippians 1:1, James 1:1, 2 Peter 1:1). And last, but definitely not least, God’s only-begotten Son, “*Made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a **servant***” (Philippians 2:6-7). Considering that long list of names, maybe being a servant is more honourable than it seems at first glance.

The definition

But before we go any further, we should define what dogmatics is. Dogmatics comes from a Greek word, *dogma*, which can refer to an official, public decision or decree. For example, shortly after our Lord ascended into heaven, the church really wrestled with questions such as, “Do new converts have to be circumcised? Do they have to follow all the clean and unclean food laws?” Eventually, the apostles and the elders gathered in Jerusalem. Guided by the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28), they weighed these matters carefully and they made some official decisions, or dogmas. Then, men like Paul and Timothy went travelling around from town to town, teaching new converts about these dogmas which had been agreed upon in Jerusalem (Acts 16:4). And please note: in Acts 16:5 this same Holy Spirit informs us that teaching these dogmas certainly did not narrow the minds of the recent converts; on the contrary, it strengthened them in their faith.

Now, to be sure, that special, apostolic era is over. Still, when clarity is required on a certain question, the bride of Christ actively searches the Scriptures and, if needed, the church officially summarizes her findings in writing, so that it can be used for teaching.

Teaching. That's another important word. Our Saviour walked throughout Galilee and Judea teaching in the synagogues and temple courts (Matthew 4:23, 26:55). Actually, and originally, that is what the word *doctrine* means. It simply means *teaching* or *instruction*. Therefore, just before he returned to his Father in heaven, our Lord charged his disciples to concentrate on doctrine when he said,

"Therefore go and make disciples (that is, students) of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

(Matthew 28:19-20)

This great commission from Christ has nothing to do with making people narrow-minded. Rather, it has a manifestly broad, yes even global, perspective in view.

So, in short, what is dogmatics? It is *the study of the doctrines of the holy gospel, as summarized by the Bride of Christ, which need to be taught to all nations and all generations.*

The source

This leads us to our next question: where do we go to find our teaching material? Well, instinctively we answer: go to the Word of God! Yes! But will Scripture be the only, the sole source of our doctrine, or will there be other sources in *addition to Scripture*? You see, there's the rub.

The Roman Catholic Church promotes two sources: written Scripture *plus* oral tradition. Back in 1546 the Council of Trent even made an official declaration, a dogma, that Rome accepts both Scripture and oral tradition with "*equal affection of piety and reverence.*"⁸ In 1965 Vatican II reaffirmed that dogma.

Then, there are also those who build their theology on the twin pillars of Scripture *plus* philosophy. Thomas Aquinas tried this in the thirteenth century and others are still trying it in the twenty-first century.

However, there are many more who, perhaps unwittingly, adopt a two-source approach which could be called: Scripture *plus* itchosophy. You will not find that word, *itchosophy*, in the dictionary. But it captures what the Apostle Paul is warning against in 2 Timothy 4:3, namely, itchy ears. Some of us have emotional itches, others have intellectual itches. Some have conservative itches, others have progressive itches. And still others have hey-that's-cool itches.

Every abiding itch craves an alleviating scratch. And, without a doubt, there are a "*great number of teachers*" (2 Timothy 4:3) out there who are sufficiently skilled at wooing the masses and scratching the itches. And when an ear is all a-tingling, a soothing scratch from one of those teachers, well, it's like the balm of Gilead on an irritated earlobe.

But the Apostle Paul warns, "*Watch out!*" Why are people flocking to these teachers? Is it merely because their dialogue is a cozy match for our desires? Or is it because these teachers are carefully dispensing the sound doctrine which comes purely from the God-breathed Scriptures which are useful, in the first place, for teaching (2 Timothy 3:16)? That is the critical question! If we start embracing certain teachings simply because they do such a marvellous job of alleviating our itches, then we are well on our way to adopting a two-source theology. Then, it will be what God reveals *plus* what we desire. Or, in other words, Scripture *plus* itchosophy.

However, it cannot be, and it must not be, Scripture *plus* anything else. Why? Simply put, because neither oral tradition, nor philosophy, nor itchosophy ever redeemed anyone from slavery to sin. The Lord, and the Lord *alone*, is our Redeemer (Isaiah 44:6). Therefore, he, and he *alone*, is the one who reveals the way of salvation. And Scripture, and Scripture *alone*, is his inspired Word (2 Timothy 3:16). And therefore, it is *the* source for our doctrinal teaching.

Yet, you may ask, “Why, then, do the confessions play such an important role in our teaching, also at the seminary?” Good question. And the answer is this: the confessions do not add anything new or extra to Scripture. They only summarize what our Redeemer has already revealed. And whenever you are busy teaching, a summary is a most helpful pedagogical tool. That is why we make ample use of the confessions.

The motivation

Still, even if we go to the correct source for sound doctrine, there is still the matter of motivation. Is sound doctrine something that stirs up our passion? Today, when people hear the phrase “sound doctrine,” more often than not it generates a glaze on their eyes rather than fire in their bones (Jeremiah 20:9).

However, one servant of our Lord, the Apostle Paul, saw it differently. When the church at Galatia was beginning to embrace unsound doctrine, he quickly became all fired up. Full of vigour, he exclaimed,

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all.”

(Galatians 1:6-7)

To which he later added, “*You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?*” (3:1). That is hardly a dispassionate discourse!

Why is the Apostle Paul so passionate about doctrine? In the first place, as he writes in 1 Timothy 6:3, sound doctrine is “*the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” In other words, sound doctrine belongs to, and it focuses upon, Christ. And if we, the servants, are not passionate about protecting and proclaiming the pure teachings of our beloved Master Jesus Christ, well, then we are nothing more than wicked and lazy servants (Matthew 25:26).

Still, there is another aspect of sound doctrine which should prevent us from ever becoming blasé about it. In his first letter to Timothy, the Apostle Paul reminds him that “sound doctrine” is something that “*conforms to the glorious gospel*” (1 Timothy 1:10-11). This glorious gospel is the “*power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes*” (Romans 1:16). This glorious gospel announces, “*In Christ you are freed! Freed from slavery to sin! Freed from slavery to Satan!*” And therefore, “*do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery*” (Galatians 5:1).

Redeemed servants of our Deliverer. Or re-shackled slaves of our depravity (2 Peter 2:19). Those are the two options. And those are the only two options. So we still appreciate the liberating redemption we have received in Christ? If so, then we had better be passionate about sound doctrine. Because without sound doctrine we will become re-enslaved to sin and to Satan!

The manner and method

So, practically speaking, how do we do maintain sound doctrine? To begin with, all teachers of doctrine should strive to be filled with humility. It is striking how often the Holy Spirit associates false teachers with conceit, pride, and boastful words (Galatians 6:13, 1 Timothy 6:3-4, 2 Peter 2:18, Jude 16, Revelation 13:5). A servant who knows himself to be precisely that – a servant – has no basis for boasting in himself.

Second, earlier we heard the suggestion that theology is no more than a scullery maid, a kitchen servant. That description may be more accurate than its author realized. In his letters, the Apostle Paul speaks about “sound doctrine” no less than eight times.⁴ And each time he uses a word which has to do with being healthy. Sound doctrine is healthy doctrine. That is to say, it does not contain the virus of works-righteousness or the cancer of antinomianism, or any other kind of doctrinal disease. Rather, as we digest healthy dogma, we ourselves will become spiritually healthy.

Healthy food must also be properly prepared. And here is where those kitchen servants – both preachers and professors – have a duty to fulfil. First, the doctrinal meals must be *balanced*. You cannot always eat bread and never eat vegetables. Likewise, if there is too much emphasis on God the Spirit at the expense of speaking about God the Son, or vice-versa, then the household will be malnourished. If there is too much emphasis on covenant promises and not enough on covenant obligations, or vice-versa, the family of God will not receive the nutrients it needs.

Second, doctrinal meals must also be *well-organized*. Just as surely as strawberry ice cream does not belong on top of mashed potatoes, so certainly sanctification should not be blenderized into justification. As the Apostle Paul urges his “*dear son,*” Timothy, “*Keep the pattern of sound teaching*” (2 Timothy 1:13). A pattern has a clear and obvious arrangement to it. Thus, sound teaching is organized teaching.

Finally, sound doctrine is never detached from daily living. After all, why do we eat? Is it not so that we have energy to live and work? Likewise, we ingest healthy doctrine so that we can live holy lives. Of the eight times that the Apostle Paul speaks about sound doctrine, five of the eight speak about godly lifestyles in the immediate context. That fact alone should convince us that healthy doctrine is not merely a cerebral exercise, but it is an impetus to walk a sanctified life.

The goal

Finally, in any given task, it helps to keep one eye firmly focused on the end goal. Those who do not know where they are going tend to get lost somewhere along the way.

So it is also with dogmatics. The goal of dogmatics is not to build an impressive, imposing, intellectual edifice before which the masses will assemble to admire. No, in the end, it's not about a building; it's about a Bride. Undoubtedly, the debate will continue as to whether theology is the Queen of the Sciences or the maid of the scullery. But one thing is certain: since Christ is King over all creation (Revelation 1:5), his Bride, the church, is Queen over all creation (2 Timothy 2:12). True, her regal majesty is not so evident right now. She is still more “*sore oppressed*” than she is “*with glory crowned*” (Hymn 40). But we are speaking here of the goal, the destination. And one day the church will appear, as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. Teaching sound doctrine is all about preparing this bride for her wedding day. Pastors and professors, ministers and missionaries, indeed all of us, need to keep that in mind and in heart.

Moreover, preparing the Bride for her wedding day is part and parcel of an even grander objective. Since Christ “*has ransomed us, body and soul, from all our sins, not with silver or gold but with his precious blood*” (LD 13), we call him our Lord, our Majestic and Merciful Master. And therefore, we, as his redeemed servants, strive to remain loyal to him in all that we teach. For in this way, the Son who redeemed us, the Spirit who sanctifies us, and the Father who created us, the one true and Triune God receives all the honour and glory. And ultimately, that is what teaching sound doctrine is all about.

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¹ John Stuart Blackie as quoted in Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology* (1987), 20.

² Gordon H. Clark as quoted in Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (1998), xxvii.

³ *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, translated by H. J. Schroeder (1978), 17.

⁴ 1 Timothy 1:10, 6:3; 2 Timothy 1:13, 4:3, Titus 1:9, 1:13, 2:1, 2:8.