

# KNOWING IS FOR LIVING

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MATTHEW WILLIAMS

An older gentleman visiting our church once said to me, “You know, pastor, I’m not really into all that doctrine stuff. It just divides people. What really counts is whether we’re following Jesus.” If a friend shared that opinion with you, how would you respond? Is doctrine important? Do the details of what you believe about God really matter? Or are most of us better off leaving things like our recently adopted *Statement of Faith* to the professionals?

On one level, I sympathize with the impulse of the man I spoke with that day. When God’s people part ways over minor issues where Scripture stops short of mandating a particular position, our unity in Christ is denigrated, and the integrity of our gospel witness suffers.

However, the solution to needless division and the key to Christian unity is never to minimize the importance of doctrine but rather to elevate the priority of sound doctrine. Theology matters because nothing is more influential in determining the course of our life, both corporately and individually, than what we choose to believe about God.

Consider some of what Scripture teaches about the priority of doctrine and our response to it.

## **We All Have a Functional Theology**

Every human being navigates life according to some set of ruling convic-

tions or principles. It's part of our nature as image-bearers of God. What we do on the outside is invariably determined by what we believe is true on the inside. Solomon affirms as much in Proverbs 4:23, "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." Even when our core convictions remain unconscious or unarticulated, we cannot separate what we believe from how we live.

Think about a typical toddler tantrum. What kind of heart-level beliefs do they reveal? (A) I am in charge, (B) life is found in getting what I want, and (C) other people exist to satisfy my wants or suffer the consequences. Notice every one of those beliefs is theological in the sense that it makes a corresponding assertion about God. (A) God is not in charge, (B) I cannot trust God to give me life, and (C) God created other people to serve me.

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The Apostle Paul makes the same connection between behavior and belief in 1 Timothy 1:10, where he concludes a lengthy list of sinful actions with the expansive summary, "and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine." He makes the same point in Romans 1:25. Every disobedient act results from a prior decision to exchange "the truth about God for a lie."

Whether you are a protesting toddler or a professing atheist, the way you live always reveals what you really think is true about God. In that sense, there is no such thing as an irreligious person. We all hold fast to some sort of doctrine in every moment of our life, even if our doctrine says God does not exist. The critical question is not whether we have a functional theology but whether our functional theology is true or false.

### **Following Jesus Requires Knowing Jesus**

The tendency to minimize the importance of Bible doctrine reveals a failure to understand the connection between knowing Jesus and following Jesus. How can we follow someone we don't know? How can we love someone we don't understand? How can we claim to obey God in every area of life unless we carefully weigh his every word? The reason we must give careful attention to sound doctrine, to what God himself has revealed about his

character and his ways, is not to have a tidy box of “correct” beliefs that sits on a shelf, but to know God for who he is so we might love and obey him for who he is.

In Matthew 7:24-27, Jesus explains what sets apart the wise man from the fool. The wise man “hears these words of mine and does them,” building the house of his life on the rock of Christ. If our concept of following Jesus is not grounded in hearing his words (paying attention to sound doctrine) and doing his words (applying sound doctrine), then we are not following Jesus. Instead, we are following a savior of our own making. We are building our house on sand.

Becoming a Christian and growing as a Christian both require a willful choice to embrace the sound doctrine of the gospel with a heart of repentance and faith toward God. As Paul exhorted his apostolic protégé, Timothy, “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 1:13).

### **Knowledge Without Obedience will Destroy You**

In the churches of Sovereign Grace, we value and seek to practice biblical preaching. It is a strength that we value sound doctrine. But with that strength comes a tremendous spiritual danger. I see it in my own heart. I see it in the men and women to whom I endeavor to preach God’s Word week after week. The danger is that we readily think we are obeying God simply because we know what His Word says.

We must not be deceived. Merely hearing the Word saves no one. In fact, it has the exact opposite effect over time. Absent obedience, our hearts become spiritually dull. The repetitive act of listening to sound doctrine without applying the truth numbs our souls to its true force. When we fail to put it into practice, when we refuse to humbly respond to the claim it makes on our lives, we are no different than the demons. “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder” (James 2:19).

J.C. Ryle’s observation of Liverpool, England in the 19th century remains just as true in our day:

Nothing is more common than to hear people saying of doctrine or duty - ‘We know it, we know it;’ while they sit still in unbelief or

disobedience. They actually seem to flatter themselves that there is something creditable and redeeming in knowledge, even when it bears no fruit in heart, character, or life. Yet, the truth is precisely the other way. To know what we ought to be, believe, and do, and yet to be unaffected by our knowledge, only adds to our guilt in the sight of God.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of sound doctrine is not mental information but spiritual transformation. So do not content yourself with checking all the right theological boxes. Do not say, “I know the truth; I’m good.” Push further. Probe deeper. Ask a Christian friend, “Am I living any differently this month because of the word I heard preached last month?” The pathway to joy and blessing determines that the sound doctrine in our heads will produce the obedience of faith in our lives. “If you know these things, blessed are you *if you do them*” (John 13:17).

### **A Holy Responsibility**

With the ratification of our new *Statement of Faith*, the churches of Sovereign Grace have made the bold pronouncement, “Doctrine matters!” But it matters, not as an intellectual exercise or obligatory affirmation, but as a means for us to know, love, and glorify God.

In an age that mistakes orthodoxy for intolerance, the church has a holy responsibility to commend the beauty of sound doctrine by living “in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God” (1 Tim. 1:11). May the Spirit help us regularly evaluate our functional theology, relentlessly pursue a deeper knowledge of Jesus, and diligently practice our profession as “a doer who acts” (James 1:25).

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1. J.C. RYLE, *EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS VOL 4: JOHN* (SHAWNEE, KS: GIDEON HOUSE BOOKS, 2016), 206.

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