



DEFINING & DEFENDING A NEW CHURCH'S THEOLOGICAL STANCE

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INTRODUCTION

If you had to enter a new mission field, how would you set up the theological grid for your ministry? Check whatever element(s) you think today would be the wise approach...

- Vote among new believers about whether or not to have a doctrinal statement;
- Impose the doctrinal statement of your mission board, no questions asked;
- Teach your own convictions to key leaders and entrust them with the task of making the decision about whether or not to follow your preferred doctrinal grid;
- Avoid going beyond the Nicene creed (AD 325) in your doctrinal position;
- Adopt the national evangelical groups' doctrinal framework so as not to be narrower than the majority of believers in the country;
- Other _____

The response you give to these questions says a lot about how you think about truth, authority and discipleship!

DEFINING A NEW CHURCH'S THEOLOGICAL STANCE

Before we flesh out an approach to defining a new church's doctrinal stance we need to establish some biblical parameters to answer three fundamental questions: (1) is the discipline of systematic theology legitimate? (2) why are doctrinal statements useful? and (3) are some doctrines more important than others?

1. Is systematic theology valid?

In recent decades postmodern scepticism about metanarratives and systemizing processes in general has challenged the validity of systematic theology. Systematics, it has been said, is only the application of Scottish common sense realism and the scientific method to scriptural rubrics. Since both realism and the Baconian method are philosophical constructs, their use inevitably foists the presuppositions of the interpreter upon Scripture. Therefore, it is held, theologians should avoid systematics and stick to biblical theology. Consequently, doctrinal statements have also tended to be scaled down or under-emphasized in church planting, especially the detailed statements of many Fundamentalist churches and para-church organizations.¹

But systematic theology is a valid discipline. We can find at least two reasons from the witness of Scripture itself:

- ***The New Testament writers themselves give the example of simple (or complex) doctrinal summaries.***
 - (1) Luke 24.27: Jesus began with Moses and the prophets to explain all things concerning Himself to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus
 - (2) Acts 2-3: Peter's sermons at Pentecost and before the Sanhedrin illustrate a selection of OT passages and an ordering of them in a systematic presentation of the gospel;
 - (3) Acts 8.35: beginning with Isaiah Philip preached Jesus to the Ethiopian Eunuch;
 - (4) The Book of Romans is a systematic doctrinal treatise using logic, citations and inferences from the OT and deduction;
 - (5) 1 Corinthians 2.1-2; the "testimony of God" is summarized as "Christ and Him crucified;"
 - (6) 1 Corinthians 15.1-5: Paul refers to OT support for the death and resurrection of Christ in a summary fashion. The modern approach to "according to the Scriptures" would be to footnote the references;

¹ D. A. Carson takes a better approach in his section on contextualization in *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 537-553.

- (7) Philippians 2.6-11: Paul summarizes the kenosis, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Christ;
- (8) 1 Timothy 3.15-17: the church is the pillar and support of the truth, summarized in six statements about Christ;
- (9) Hebrews 5.11-6.2: the writer summarizes the “elementary principles” which must be left to move toward maturity;
- (10) 1 John 2.7, 24: John’s readers should abide in the word which they had heard from him from the beginning of their Christian walk—another shorthand way of referring to the body of apostolic teaching;
- (11) 1 John 4.2: every spirit that confesses that Jesus is come in the flesh is from God. This statement is a one-sentence distillation of complementary truths about Jesus—his deity and humanity.

• **The apostles referred to a *Body of Truth that could be identified, believed, retained and defended.***

- (1) Matthew 28.19-20: Jesus commanded disciples be taught to obey all He had taught the apostles;
- (2) Romans 6.17: believers in Rome were committed to a “form of teaching;”
- (3) 2 Thessalonians 2.15: the apostolic traditions were taught orally or by letter;
- (4) 2 Timothy 1.13-14: Through the power of the Holy Spirit Timothy must retain the standard of sound words entrusted to him by Paul as a sacred deposit;
- (5) 2 Timothy 2.2: Timothy must teach all the truth heard from Paul to trustworthy men who would be able to teach others also.

2. Why are doctrinal statements useful?

A quick overview of church history reveals that doctrinal statements, confessions of faith and other “symbols” were the result of an inevitable process of clarification as Christian teachers and their disciples positioned themselves publicly in respect to emerging heresies. The first few centuries struggled with the issues of the person of Christ. Later periods debated justification, eschatology, pneumatology and ecclesiology. Doctrinal statements can tend to replace the authority of the Bible alone—this is a danger. But they are also useful—even necessary—to publicly define where a Christian church stands in regard to theological issues debated in the past and present. As such they are an application of the principle of doing all things decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14.40) without an hidden agenda in teaching (Jesus’ example in John 18.20).

3. Are some doctrines more important than others?

This is a trap question! There is clearly a hierarchy of ideas and truths in Scripture. Jesus Himself declared that there were “provisions of the Law weightier” than scrupulous tithing small seeds—such as justice, mercy and faithfulness (Matthew 23.23). By the same token, we must also recognize the inter-relatedness of all doctrine. Error in one area spreads like a virus to contaminate other areas, especially in following generations. Our disciples tend to be more radical than we are in areas we cannot always predict. Finally, we must recognize that Jesus taught the importance of all the details of the Law, which He came to fulfill. All the Word of God is inspired, inerrant and therefore useful in some way. It is a cohesive whole, which explains why Paul did not back away from teaching the “whole counsel of God” in Ephesus (Acts 20.20, 27). Just as all organs in the body have a purpose and should be maintained and retained for maximum health (there are no “vestigial organs!”), so in the same way all revelation in Scripture has a purpose and should be maintained and retained.

Having said this, it is clear that a doctrinal statement will not quibble over the transliteration of names in the genealogies in 1 Chronicles! Every missionary must decide before God what needs to be transmitted to the next generation intact to maintain a healthy body of truth. In many cases the mission agency with which he partners will help define this. In any case he needs to be able to articulate to emerging leadership the rationale for what should be in and what must stay out. Therefore he should find answers to the following questions:

- What issues **must** be addressed to preserve the new church from doctrinal disease?
- What will the doctrinal statement be used for? Will it define who can be a member? An elder? Will it only announce to the public what the church’s teaching position is on a body of truths and debated issues?
- What does the culture struggle with where the missionary is working? What issues are particularly crucial right up front in the church planting process?
- How often should the doctrinal statement be reviewed for clarification and updating?

The missionary who started the work in Luxembourg came with clear convictions which he taught from the pulpit, but it took many years before it was clear that this body of doctrine would determine who would become a member.

It would probably have been better to spell some of these things out earlier in the process of establishing the core group in the church.

DEFENDING A NEW CHURCH'S THEOLOGICAL STANCE BY TEACHING

• **Teach it actively to all.** To defend and implement the doctrinal position you choose to bring into the new church, you will need to teach it patiently and consistently over a long time (2 Timothy 4.2). Show the practical consequences of taking other positions so people grasp the importance of each section. Help them ask the questions, "what difference would it make in practice if we took no position on this issue? If we took another position?"

You need to be teaching it to your key leaders so they can articulate it. Your primary goal as a missionary is to disciple the new leaders in depth so they can shepherd the church in a God-honoring way after you leave. A mark of eldership is ability to teach and defend sound doctrine to promote the spiritual health of the flock committed to him (1 Timothy 3.2; Titus 1.9).

• **Structure the teaching long-term.** Establish a doctrine class that is part of the church's ongoing discipleship program. In Luxembourg we have a constantly rotating class in biblical/systematic theology which lasts five years. It is a Bible college level program that touches all areas of systematics with lots of discussion about application to the local setting.

• **Include it in preaching.** Emphasize the importance of doctrine in expository preaching. Show how systematics arise from exposition of the text.

• **Articulate the need.** Help people understand the implications of abandoning this stance. Use church history—ancient as well as contemporary—as an example.

• **Insist on the problems of creedalism.** While the apostles' methods and examples support the writing of statements of faith as an aid to passing on the deposit of Christian Truth to succeeding generations, the Bible does **not** sanction creedalism. Creedalistic groups establish a church hierarchy to enforce a formalized cluster of beliefs upon the conscience of their members and appeal to confessions of faith—not to the Bible—for their identity. Therefore, we must always . . .

• **Prove the rightness of a teaching from the Bible,** not from the church doctrinal statement.

• **Emphasize Scripture memorization** more than memorizing a statement of faith.

• **Be prepared to improve, clarify or correct** any statement of faith in the light of new controversy and/or further research. This is the spirit of the Berean Christians (Acts 17.11), who nobly "checked things out."

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