

Healthy church 7: Sound doctrine

Introduction...

We're currently considering the Bible's vision for a healthy local church: what it is that the Lord wants Immanuel to be and to become. Thus far we've seen that:

1. The church is the "gathering" together of God's people.
2. The local church reveals the glory of the Gospel in its relationships, as diverse people are made one in Christ Jesus.
3. Each local church has a responsibility to partner with other churches – locally, regionally, and globally. And denominations are a wise way of pursuing accountability and encouragement.
4. Every member of the local church is to be committed to the spiritual growth of the church and other members.
5. Biblical manhood and womanhood: God has made men and women equal but different. Embracing who God has made us – either as men or as women – will be critical to the church's ability to reveal the supernatural power of God in our relationships.
6. The normal "means of grace" – God-chosen tools through which He likes to work – are expository preaching of the Bible (and sacraments) and corporate prayer.

Today, we're building on what we learned about Bible teaching. We're going to consider the importance of sound doctrine in the life of the church. Why does TRUTH IN COMMUNITY matter so very much?

1. Sound doctrine introduced...

The Bible teaches that there is such a thing as "sound doctrine." For example, speaking of the church elder in Titus 1:9 the apostle Paul says...

"He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it."

There is Biblical teaching which is "sound" – which literally means "healthy." And there is teaching which is un-sound, harmful or poisonous; it will damage churches, and individual souls.

A healthy church cares about doctrine. Both positives and negatives will be taught from the Bible ("this is true... this is untrue"). Elders are called sometimes to rebuke and to refute false teaching, and to do so publicly. Church members are to care about sound doctrine – in their own hearts and minds, and in conversations and relationships within the church.

But consider this question:

(a) How do we encounter the truth of God through the Bible?

You might think that a terribly simple question to ask! But actually we receive God's Biblical truth in a variety of ways. Each must *be* sound and healthy. And each helps us to *stay* sound and healthy.

Firstly, we receive God's truth through the sequential expository preaching of Bible passages. That's what we thought about last week. It imparts to us God's truth. And it needs to be expounded faithfully. And it helps us to stay healthy.

Secondly, we receive God's truth as we focus constantly upon the Gospel. What's the Gospel? It's the good news of Christ's loving and powerful death and resurrection, whereby chosen hell-bound sinners are saved and adopted together into God's family. We need to teach the Gospel faithfully, and teach the Gospel constantly. The Gospel is the centre of all the Scriptures. The Gospel is how you start the Christian life – as

God takes the fruit of Christ's work and applies it by His Spirit in our souls. The Gospel is how we daily live the Christian life – we never go beyond it. So, in all our teaching and singing and praying and conversations we'll constantly want to be rehearsing and applying the Gospel. We never go beyond the basics. An addiction to the Biblical Gospel will keep us a healthy church. It is itself a key component to "sound doctrine."

Thirdly, we receive God's truth as we learn the big picture story of the whole Bible. There is one over-arching plot or story to the whole Bible, with the Gospel of Jesus at the centre, into which every single Bible book and chapter takes its place. Learning that Bible overview is sometimes called "Biblical theology." A sound "Biblical theology" is a really important part of sound doctrine in the life of a local church. It helps us understand each part of Scripture accurately, and to hear God's voice with clarity and truthfulness as the Bible story unfolds.

Fourthly, we receive God's truth as we practice systematic theology. Systematic theology – sometimes called "dogmatics" or simply "doctrine" – summarises and groups together the teaching of the whole Bible.

There are different ways of getting to know a person (e.g. you could read a biography about them, or you could read a job application form they've filled in). In the same way Bible exposition, Biblical theology and systematics are different ways of receiving truth from God. We need them all.

Systematics groups Bible texts together under certain headings or themes. If you look at the contents page of a good systematic theology it'll tell you about these things:

The Bible and how we know God

The doctrine of God: the Trinity and attributes of God

Human beings: as created – and as fallen and needing salvation

God's plan of salvation, culminating in sending Christ – his life, death, resurrection, ascension and outpouring of his Holy Spirit.

The application of Christ's work through the Holy Spirit, such that we benefit from all Christ has done for us

The Church – what is her job, how is she governed

The end of all things – Christ's return, heaven and hell

The Bible is not arranged like that. But systematics is unavoidable and it is desirable. None of us go through life with the whole Bible story and all its individual parts in our head. We instinctively hold doctrinal conclusions in our minds and hearts. What matters is that our doctrine is *sound*.

(b) The benefits of a sound systematic theology

When doctrine is healthy it has great benefits. Let me mention a few:

- it answers our questions. Most questions asked by Christians and by non-believers are systematic. A good systematic theology helps us find God's answers.
- it brings clarity. It makes connections and draws distinctions. It aims as much as possible for precision. Such things matter in the things of God.
- it exposes error in mind and life. My old doctrine lecturer used to describe systematics as our "Defence against the dark arts"! It is critical in helping expose error.
- it creates unity in the church. Sometimes Christians think that doctrine actually *leads* to ungodly divisions. That's incorrect. Unity in the church of Christ can only ever be founded upon truth. Sometimes, division is necessary in order to protect true unity. Sound doctrine – driven by the text of Scripture – helps identify which differences can be lived with and which cannot be tolerated within a faithful church.
- it provokes humility and worship. It should leave us on our faces before our great God, singing His praises for His goodness to us in the Lord Jesus.

We're going to spend the rest of our time thinking about "Reformed" doctrine.

2. Defining "Reformed" doctrine

(a) “Reformation” or “Reformed”?

Firstly, we need to draw a distinction between “Reformation” and “Reformed.” The word “Reformation” describes the whole Protestant project that emerged in the 16th century in response to the errors of Roman Catholicism. “Reformation” churches and theologies included Radicals, Lutherans, and the followers of John Calvin. Sometimes the word “Reformed” is used in this same very *broad* way to describe something which is to common to what we might call the Reformation project.

However, the word “Reformed” is also used (in church history and in historical theology) to denote something much narrower and tighter: namely, the theology and worldview that flowed specifically from John Calvin and his successors (though it was certainly *not* the creation of John Calvin!). So, for our purposes it will be helpful for us to see that the words “Reformed” and “Calvinist” mean *largely* the same thing.

But what does it mean to be “Reformed” or “Calvinist”? We still haven’t answered that question. It *isn’t* primarily an obsession with predestination and election. It *isn’t* primarily about the so-called Five Points of Calvinism (though they do come into it).

(b) A definition:

Here is Benjamin Warfield’s great definition. It is: “*that sight of the majesty of God that pervades all of life and all of experience.*”

It is a deeply God-centred understanding of the world, the Bible, sin, salvation, everything. Its chief concern is to get God and us in our right places: he must be exalted, we must be humbled.

In other words, it’s just the truths of the Bible taught with a proper Biblical emphasis on the centrality of God and on the Gospel of Jesus. Here’s how the great 19th century Baptist minister C.H. Spurgeon put it: “I love to proclaim those strong old doctrines that are nicknamed *Calvinism*, but which are surely and verily the revealed truth of God as it is in Christ Jesus.”

We’re going to turn to some essentials of Reformed theology. We’ll look at a few points very briefly before turning to look at the Doctrines of Grace. If you want to see a great exposition of Reformed doctrine you’d do well to look at the *Westminster Confession of Faith* of 1646.

3. Some (brief) distinctives of Reformed / Calvinist doctrine

(a) Scripture

It is the inerrant, authoritative and sufficient word of God. We’ve no time to say more than that. In addition we note...

(b) The threefold use of God’s law

God’s law – as, for example, summarised in the 10 commandments – has three functions. It teaches us God’s character; it shows us our sin and points us to Christ; *and* shows us how to live as Christians. That third use of the Law is distinctively Reformed. It’s not a Lutheran distinctive, for example.

(c) Covenant theology

This is the Biblical idea that God saves people by making a covenant with them – that is, he binds Himself to them by means of covenant promises. At the heart of the covenant of grace – that one plan of salvation first articulated to Abraham – is this: that Christ is the covenant head of his people, and thus we receive the blessings of the gospel by virtue of our union with Him. Covenant theology helps us remember that there is ONE plan of salvation from beginning to end.

(d) Regulative principle of worship

This is the idea that everything done in corporate worship and in the government of the church must be explicitly commanded in Scripture. You only do what the Bible positively commands.

This contrasts with the so-called Normative Principle which holds that you may do whatever Scripture does not forbid. This has been in operation in Lutheranism and in the Church of England. (So here is a point where, from the earliest times, Anglican deviated from the Reformed tradition – much to the grief of the Puritans).

(e) Liberty of Conscience

Where Scripture is silent on a matter of faith or worship the Reformed said your conscience is free and should not be bound by the traditions of men. Here's another key difference with the Anglican tradition which held that church authorities could rule on such matters.

(f) The Sacraments

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are effective means of God's grace: God uses them to give us Christ, and to strengthen our faith in Him. The Lord's Supper is not merely a memorial of the Cross (contra Zwingli). But nor is it the case that the substance of Christ's body is present together with the substance of the bread (contra Luther's idea of "consubstantiation"). Rather, in eating physically we also feed on Christ spiritually. (This was reflected clearly in the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer*).

That's a very brief mention of some key distinctives. We're going to take a little more time on what are sometimes called "the doctrines of grace."

4. At the heart of Reformed theology: the doctrines of grace (a.k.a. The Five Points of Calvinism)

Here's the story of a theological war – one that continues to this day, not just in books and sermons, but within the hearts of Christian people...

(a) Calvin (d.1564), Arminius (d.1609), and TULIP (b.1619)

After Calvin died, a man called Arminius became influential in the church in Europe. He did not like Calvin's teachings one little bit. Studying Romans 7, he came to the conclusion that the struggle with sin described there was *not* the struggle of a Christian. He came to believe that we have a greater ability to fight sin than we see in that chapter. Calvin, on the other hand, had a deep and dark and thoroughly biblical account of sin in the life of a believer.

Arminius' followers taught these 5 points:

- Man is sinful. But we are not helpless in our sin. We are able to choose Christ.
- God predestines people. But those he chooses are those who choose him.
- Jesus died intending to save all people – potentially. His death meant that God *could* pardon sinners, but only on the condition that they believed.
- The Spirit's work in regeneration can be resisted.
- Real Christians can fall away and be lost eternally.

Arminian teaching has NEVER gone away. NEVER. It's found throughout evangelical denominations all over the world. Which is a big, big shame. It spread all over Europe. Some Dutch Christians tested and rejected its teachings. They put together what later became known as the Five Points of Calvinism. These godly men wrote in Latin. But their teaching – once translated – formed a memorable acronym: TULIP. It summarises the Bible's teaching about sin and salvation.

Let's summarise each point briefly. For each we'll give a *definition*, a *Bible text*, an *explanation*, and an *implication*.

(b) Total depravity

This doesn't mean that we are as bad we could be; rather, every part of us is infected by sin. That's what Romans 7:18 means: "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature."

The apostle Paul says that if you search inside the human soul (be it a Christian or a non-believer), you will find nothing wholly good. It means we cannot save ourselves. We are totally depraved, and therefore totally *unable*. (Total depravity entails total inability). Arminianism falsely claimed that we can freely choose Christ. The Reformed faith and the Bible deny that we have that kind of free will.¹ Therefore, when God chooses to save a person it is His act of "unconditional election."

(c) Unconditional election

The words "election" and "predestination" mean "CHOOSING," just like in a general election we choose a government. But on what basis does God choose? "Before the foundation of the world God chose to save a fixed number of individuals. He chose them purely for his own glory, because of his loving mercy, and not because of their foreknown faith, good works, or perseverance."²

This is what Paul means in Ephesians 1:4 when he explains that "he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him." (See also Acts 13:48).

God chooses, and He is praised for choosing (not the human person). Note, too, how God's choice *leads to holiness*, and is NOT based upon our holiness. God's choice is free and sovereign, it is not constrained by anyone or anything. Of course, if we are totally depraved it must follow that God's choice is free and sovereign; apart from God's work we would never choose to follow Christ.

It is humbling to be told that God is like a potter and we are like clay, created to His ends and purposes. But it is also deeply assuring to know that we are in the hands of a good and sovereign God. And it gives wonderful hope to the evangelist: we don't decide who becomes a Christian – we just speak the Gospel.

How, though, will God's chosen people be saved?

(d) Limited atonement

Arminians (and others) have taught that when Christ died on the Cross he won a *potential* salvation for *every single person*, and that his work does not actually save anyone until a man "decides for" Christ and is saved.

The Reformed faith argues that this is significantly un-Biblical. Whilst God loves every person he has made, Jesus' death was intended by God only to save those who he would join in union with Christ – namely, the elect. It does NOT mean that Christ's death is of limited worth or limited effectiveness. It means that Christ's death achieves precisely what it set out to do. Christ's death actually pays for the sins of those *particular* people who will be saved by it. ("Definite", "Effective" or "Particular" redemption would be a more helpful term than "Limited" – though it would then mess up the memorable TULIP acronym!)

Jesus, for example, explained that he would die for "my sheep" – and that his death was not on behalf of those who were outside of "my flock":

John 10:14-15, 26, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me--¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father-- and I lay down my life for the sheep...²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock."

Similarly, the apostle Paul implies that Jesus' death is for "the church" (and by implication *not* for those outside of the people of God):

¹ Whilst we do have liberty of spontaneity, we do not possess liberty of indifference. That is, we always choose to do what we *want*, but the non-believer is only ever able to choose the path of sin.

² This is a slightly modified version of Dr. Garry Williams' definition.

Acts 20:28, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."

The key point to grasp is that *if* Christ died for you *then* you WILL be saved: the Bible is clear that the Cross does not merely render people *potentially saveable*. If this were the case, then the Cross of Christ was in large measure a failure, since numbers of people for whom Christ died will not be saved. Further, God's justice is called into question since he will end up punishing men's sins twice, once in the person of Christ and in hell in the person of the unrepentant sinner.

(e) Irresistible grace

If men cannot save themselves... if God freely chooses those who he'll save... and if Christ has accomplished the work of salvation for those people... *then* it follows that God must actually apply the benefits of Christ's salvation to them.³ Salvation is the sole work of God. It is monergistic.

"Irresistible grace" means that through the Spirit, God the Father irresistibly summons – ordinarily through the proclamation of the gospel – the elect sinner into fellowship with his Son Jesus. It is an *effectual* call – that is, it actually "works." Christian, you did not first choose Christ! He called you!

We are talking here not of the outward, general and external call which a preacher gives to all people to repent and believe. We mean the special, limited, internal call from death to life that the Lord issues to his elect. It is the powerful "call" of new birth and regeneration by which he makes us new, frees our bound wills, and moves us to repent and believe. This is the "call" that Paul speaks of in the so-called "golden chain" of salvation:

Romans 8:30, "Those he predestined, he also called, those he called, he also justified, those he justified, he also glorified."

(f) Perseverance of the saints

All those whom God has joined to His Son and for whom Christ died will most certainly persevere as Christians. They will keep going, because God will preserve his children. This point is most beautifully expounded in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.⁴ It is the implication of Jesus' deeply assuring words in John 6:39:

John 6:39, "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day."

There is an internal "logic" to the Gospel (and to the Doctrines of Grace) which is deeply humbling, but also deeply encouraging: we cannot save ourselves... the Lord freely chooses to save wretchedly sinful people... Christ powerfully dies for God's chosen ones... at the time of God's choosing the Spirit irresistibly draws a person to Christ... and despite inevitable ups and downs the real Christian will persevere because God preserves them in union with his Son.⁵

³ It is helpful to distinguish between salvation accomplished and salvation applied – between what Christ obtained (through his life, death, resurrection, ascension and heavenly rule) and how the Spirit of God makes that effective in the life of a particular person.

⁴ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, (17.1-2): "They, whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved. This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ, the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them, and the nature of the covenant of grace: from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof."

⁵ The eighteenth century Anglican Calvinist pastor and hymn writer Augustus Toplady expresses the joy of the "perseverance of the saints" in his hymn "A debtor to mercy alone." In one stanza he writes:

Eternity cannot erase my name from the palms of his hands
In marks of indelible grace engraved in his side it remains
Yes, I to the end shall endure, as sure as the promise is given.

5. Encountering Reformed theology in the church

Where should we meet Reformed doctrine – systematic theology of a distinctly Reformed hue – in the life of the local church?

(a) In our doctrinal standards

Local churches should be “confessional” churches – i.e. subscribing to a Reformed declaration of faith. Immanuel is a Reformed Anglican church, subscribing to the 39 Articles of Religion.

I/we also have a great love of other Reformed confessions: like the Heidelberg Catechism, the Westminster Confession of Faith.

These standards aren’t meant to stay hidden on the “What-do-you-believe?” page of the church website. They’re to be read, understood, rejoiced in, and applied within the life of the local church. Very practically, our elders and church council must subscribe annually to a set of doctrinal standards, which currently include the 39 Articles of Religion.

(b) In the church’s preaching and teaching

Sunday School is one place where we, deliberately, give time to teaching doctrine. It matters.

But even expository Bible teaching needs to be *aware* of systematics: those of us who teach need to let the text of the Bible shape our systematics; and we need to let our systematics be like a guide and guard to our interpretation of a text. And, sometimes, as we do exposition we’ll want to stand back and explain how what we’re teaching fits into a particular big Bible doctrine.

(c) In the church’s hymns

One of the best places to learn doctrine is by singing! Which is why it is so VERY, VERY important we sing hymns and songs that are full of truth and clarity.

(d) In our personal study

We all *have* a systematic theology in our brain and heart. We need to make it *better and more biblical*, so that we think true thoughts about God, sin and salvation.

If you’re a leader in any way you MUST be growing your understanding of doctrine.

Let me recommend a few resources – ranging from simple and easy ones that ANY Christian could benefit from... through to big and hard:

- Packer, Concise Theology
- Heidelberg Catechism
- Pretty much anything by R.C. Sproul
- Grudem, Systematic Theology (although some health warnings...)
- Reymond, A New Systematic Theology

So, how can YOU grow your understanding of Bible doctrine?