

Loving Doctrine More than People?

by Rachel Ramer

Recently, a friend expressed the anxiety she experienced visiting her parents, since she no longer shares their religious beliefs. They would insert religious comments into conversations and insist she respond when she was hesitant to reveal her views. Attempts at dialogue were futile; they could not simply disagree. Eventually, she despaired and felt compelled to find an alternative family through like-minded friends.

This scenario is multiplied by the many millennials and members of Gen Z currently adopting beliefs and choosing lifestyles not approved of by family. It's not uncommon for Christian parents, pastors, and friends to bear a sense of duty to make their beliefs and their disapproval clear. They may even see this as a form of love.

Unfortunately, conflicts over beliefs often shatter relationships, leaving both parties in pain. Underneath it all is a religious fervor to be *right*.

Why Prioritize Doctrine Over People?

Why have so many Christians hit overdrive in search of correct doctrine? When did this become a priority over relationships?

Growing up within modern Christianity, I often heard the admonition to avoid "being deceived." This was a task I internalized. It also created a

festering doubt: *How do we know we're not the ones deceived?*

Common clarifications pointed to the "plain reading" of the Bible, plus a scaffolding of support including language translation, word dissection, literary analysis, and cultural exploration. We (Christians collectively) had it down to a fine science.

Not being deceived was a bigger task than I realized, because with all the dissecting, we still hotly disagreed about monumental topics like who was headed to heaven and who was not. It never crossed my mind that obsessing about not being deceived could, in fact, foster unintended deception. I simply knew I must be vigilant because this (the truth about God and the universe) was an incredibly important undertaking. Achieving *certainty* was paramount.

Our obsession with certainty found momentum during the Enlightenment. Switching to a foundation of reason added a quest for certainty to both science and religion. While science made significant advancements in medicine and astronomy, leading Enlightenment thinkers (René Descartes, the "father of modern philosophy," included) saw the opportunity to prove the existence of God and defend Christianity. This was an improvement over simply accepting the edicts of church leadership. The outbreak of

denominations expanded this fine-tuning.

Russell Shorto in *Descartes' Bones: A Skeletal History of the Conflict Between Faith and Reason* states, "There seems nowadays to be an ingrained notion that people of that era set reason firmly against faith and the two have ever since been locked in a death struggle."

More accurately, there existed a three-way split: those who incorporated reason to support church teachings, the moderates who believed, "reason would function alongside faith to increase human happiness..." and the radical branch to "bring about the end of traditional religion." (pp. 79-80)

This shift during the Enlightenment to make reason the foundation of knowledge birthed modern atheism, while at the same time exploded into a plethora of Christian apologetics and doctrinal dissection. Of course, reason has an important function and supporting doctrine through reason is not wrong-headed, but it began to warp. Defending doctrine could soon pass as being spiritual; reasoning about God, we discovered, could actually replace God in preeminence.

Simultaneously, the need for doctrinal certainty belied a weakened understanding of faith in a post-Enlightenment world. Faith became the emaciated, crippled companion to reason, equated with superstition for those who rejected

Christianity and touted as the fallback position for Christians when reason didn't quite finish the job.

The problem, as Shorto points out, is that Descartes was caught in a "quest for certainty," which both scientists at that time and Christians adopted, but "things that seem to be...clear and certain are in fact floating on a sea of probability." (pp. 223-224)

The Enlightenment's advancements in science and reason are truly remarkable. God, however, does not fit in a test tube. ***Still, this shift in history produced a love for doctrinal correctness and doctrinal identity.***

Identity Doctrine

Within modern Christianity, doctrine is used as a gateway to church membership and is displayed on church websites for brand identification.

"Disciples are known by our love" became "Disciples are known by our doctrine." The admonition to "go into all the world and preach the gospel" became "go and share correct doctrine."

Helping our neighbor became a means to invite them to the right church to help correct their thinking. Yet, doctrine was never meant to be for identity, for an "us vs. them" undertaking where we divide others into those who agree with us about God and those who don't. ***The irony is, by trying hard to be exact about the path, we've lost our way.***

The Purpose of Doctrine

Primarily, doctrine puts into words our attempts to describe, to clarify, to foster understanding. Words are symbols of thought, and new ideas routinely replace faulty ideas as we gain understanding. We cannot fully comprehend God, but we can make adequate attempts to capture meaning about God. Jesus provided a clearer picture of God, yet even the disciples, who knew Jesus face to face, often misunderstood him. Doctrine gives us grounding as we continue to learn, to adapt, to seek.

We should strive for correct doctrine, we should reach for illumination, but ***beliefs should not be held so tightly that we worship our beliefs about God instead of the mystery of God.*** God is much more forgiving or accepting of faulty doctrine than we are because God and doctrine are not the same.

Peter Enns states, in *The Sin of Certainty*, "The deeper problem...is the *unspoken need* for our thinking about God to be right *in order* to have a joyful, freeing, healing, and meaningful faith [italics in original]." Or meaningful relationships.

He continues:

"The problem is trusting our

beliefs rather than trusting God. The preoccupation with holding on to correct thinking with a tightly closed fist is not a sign of strong faith. It hinders the life of faith, because we are simply acting on a deep unnamed human fear of losing the sense of familiarity and predictability that our thoughts about God give us...

We are not actually trusting God at that moment. We are trusting ourselves and disguising it as trust in God" (p. 21).

What About Those Verses?

A well-known theologian, when recently asked about distancing from a friend over doctrinal differences, suggested the person be ostracized according to Romans 16:17: "Watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them." And 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15: "If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother."

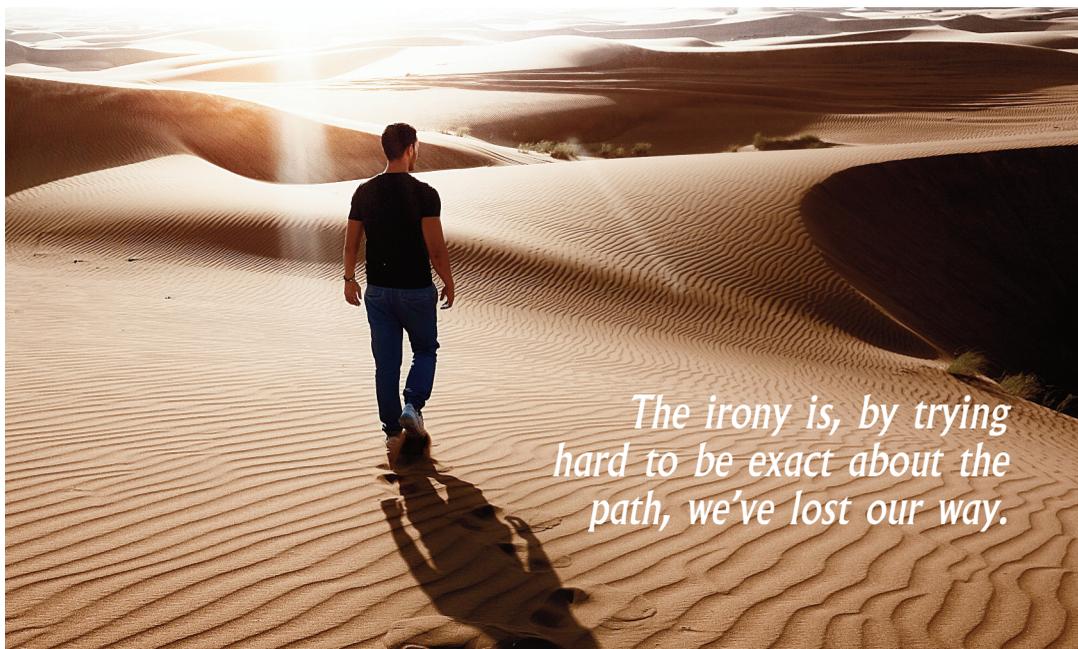
The issue with using these and similar verses to prioritize doctrine over people is not recognizing the shame culture in which they were written. Shame was the tool most available to them. In cultures such as ours, this destroys relationships and does not function as an intended safety net. When applied to family and friends, it's a lose-lose situation.

Loving People More than Doctrine

A more significant price to pay than being wrong is losing a relationship. ***Obsession with doctrinal correctness sacrifices people and has become a nexus of pain for many.*** Loving God does not mean rejecting those who disagree. It means respecting friends and family members. It avoids distorting Christianity where love and grace are expressions of Christ.

God looks at the heart, not a tally of doctrines. In the words of Mike Williams—"When your heart is more gracious than your doctrine, check your doctrine." □

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