
Doctrine in the Church: Its Foundational Importance

1 John 1:1-2:6

Introduction

This begins a series on the doctrine of the church and its leadership. The elders over the next few weeks on Sunday evenings will be highlighting our beliefs on church governance, church leadership, the eldership, church discipline. I encourage you to participate, take notes, ask questions. This is not merely a didactic exercise. This is discipleship. And in flocks on Wednesday nights, there will be ample time for discussion and dialogue over the truths we hold dear.

And I must at the outset not fail to give credit and attribution to Dr. Kevin Vanhoozer, Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, in Deerfield, Illinois... there are a couple of thoughts woven into this sermon that readers of his latest book on *The Drama of Doctrine* might see some similarity... although I would point out that the original thoughts are with John the Apostle. :-)

This world is a stage onto which all of us have been thrown. We have not chosen to be here, now, under the spotlights playing out this story. That we were born and placed into this drama is a matter of Someone Else's choosing. Life is a drama in which we all have our roles. We are "the actors and the clowns waiting for their cues", as one well-known 80's band put it. But something is not right. "When it comes to playing life we always play the fool." And try as we might, we find it impossible to change that reality.

The drama itself seems disconnected, disoriented, and dysfunctional. With the advent of the internet and the wizardry of mobile technology, we actors are connected like never before and yet we are swallowed by isolation. We know so much more about the world around us, yet information overload threatens to crash our personal world. We know all the sordid details of Hollywood and Washington and very little about our next door neighbor. We're on the brink of cloning humans and yet cannot seem to articulate what a human is. What or *who* will make sense of this drama for us?

We should not kid ourselves that the church is any better off. Many have a firmly held belief and mission that they can and will change this drama for the better. Yet those who gauge the vital signs of Christians and the rest of the stage tell us there is very little distinction between those who call themselves Christians and those who do not. On this particular stage of human history, the church itself doesn't seem to be following the script. The church thunders against same-sex marriage yet half of its marriages end in divorce. We speak of an authoritative God who sets the rules for society and the church - - on the one hand -- and deny it's possible for God to exhaustively know the future on the other. We want society, and many times the church, to change its behavior, while at the same time we claim Christ makes no kingship demands of the saint, much less sinner. We claim to be able to invest life with meaning, while at the same time we render the Scriptures devoid of any meaning with which to invest life. We strive to "feel" the pain of the downtrodden and bring justice to the wrong. Yet we continue to neuter the very pain, wrath, and justice of the cross and resurrection that offers healing to the broken-

hearted. We pursue relevance. But “We have become”, to quote the Anglican cultural analyst Os Guinness, “irrelevant.” When it comes to acting out life on the drama stage of human history, the church has played the fool.

Questions

Why is this? What is it that ails the church in this part of the story? How do we keep this from happening to us? And if we find ourselves in this predicament, how do we fix it? It is not my task tonight to explain just what the church’s role in this redemptive drama through time and space is. That is a question left for another day. Instead, we will turn our attention to diagnosis and prevention.

Before we turn to the scriptures, one word of caution needs to be made not only to us, but to myself. I could have saved this for the conclusion, but I think it belongs here at the beginning so that we are cognizant of it from the get go. One of the endearing characteristics of The Chapel is its high premium on the authority of the scriptures, its attention to the text, and its submission to Christ through His text. I have provided a dark picture of our evangelicalism. I think most of us are familiar with it. I’ve come to refer to our own cultural context here in the Miami Valley as a “Dayton Christian world”. The Dayton metroplex ranks in the top five of the country in megachurches per capita. We live within this megachurch context, with all of its trappings. In talking about what is “out there”, I have found in my own life that it becomes quite easy to pat ourselves on the back for getting it right “in here”. We must, in our vigilance for and our prizing of sound doctrine, beware of the pride that can undermine the very thing in which we have pride.

How will we guard ourselves from irrelevance? How will we ensure that we will continue to have something to say to each other and to the world? Let us turn in our Bibles to 1 John chapter 1 where we find the Apostle John struggling with these very same questions in his Act of the drama. Tonight we will place ourselves at John’s feet for what he has to say to his church, is what he has to say to us in our own place in the drama.

John the Apostle’s Drama

At the time of the writing of the Epistles, John apparently is not only leading the church at Ephesus, he is overseeing the church plants in Asia Minor. And things are not going well. John writes to a church in pain. Influential critics have led an exodus, a major exodus, from John’s church. At the heart of the matter is false doctrine mingled with the deadly poison of ego and arrogance. We see John faced with a church that is in ashes.

We can hear the question: What are you going to say to your congregation now, John? Or what’s left of it? These men were your compatriots. These men were your confidantes. Together you weathered the storm of being thrown out of the synagogues and harassment from the Judaizers. You became a tight knit community because when you were kicked out, you had no one but each other to encourage and uplift and motivate to keep pressing on for the gospel’s sake. You shed tears and possibly blood together. But these men, who were your closest brothers, are gone now, taking with them a good portion of the congregation you had birthed, and weaned, and raised to maturity. Those men

you loved... they played the fool John. You know all too well the pain of the Psalmist who bleeds in Psalm 55,

“it is not an enemy who taunts me— then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me— then I could hide from him. ¹³ But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. ¹⁴ We used to take sweet counsel together; within God’s house we walked in the throng...²⁰ My companion stretched out his hand against his friends; he violated his covenant. ²¹ His speech was smooth as butter, yet war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords.”

These friends of yours, John, have not been content to leave on their own, have they? They have taken undiscerning sheep with them. They’ve left your church in smoldering ruins. And they still aren’t satisfied, are they? They are already beginning to circulate the other churches. You hear them knocking on *your* door, don’t you? These confidantes turned wolves want the rest of your flock. So, what are you going to say to those who’ve stayed behind, John? What do you have to tell them? What is it that will help Polycarp see through the fog? His world has been turned upside down. Is what you said about the Way, the Truth, and the Life, really true?

John’s Response

John, the tender shepherd of flock feeling the hurt of betrayal and mutiny, lays out the parchment. He picks up his quill. And through the pain, yet with boldness and clarity, he begins to encourage and warn his flock by returning to a familiar theme, a theme all of them knew very well. It has been more than a few years since he had first written to his flock,

“¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁶ And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.”

It had been so long ago, it seemed, that he had written this to a flock under the gun from synagogues and Judaizers. Yet nothing was more appropriate for a congregation that might be starting to wonder about whether what they had been led to believe, that Jesus was THE Christ and that believing they had life in His name, was in fact something to stake their lives on.

So John begins to write, in 1 John 1:1-2:6, with John 1 in mind,

“¹ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— ² the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— ³ that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴ And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. ⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. ¹ My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. ³ And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. ⁴ Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, ⁵ but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him: ⁶ whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.”

1 John 1:1-4: Eternal Life as the Word of Life

John begins what probably is a sermon precisely where he began his gospel. “In the Beginning”. This opening paragraph mirrors the same themes of the first chapter of John’s gospel. John places that first chapter back in front of his flock and says this is *still* true. As the wolves, whom John calls antiChrists, knock at the door, John want his congregation to recollect and recall what they had been taught. He is going to ground what he has to say about their situation in what has already been written and even more importantly, in Christ himself.

Christ, what he taught the apostles, and what the apostles in turn taught their followers is John’s hedge against the antiChrists. Notice the progression:

That which was from the beginning – we have heard – we testify to the Word of Life and proclaim the Eternal Life.

Much could be said about this introduction in 1 John 1. This is one of the most complicated sentence structures in all of the New Testament. Some have claimed that John is excitedly incoherent. I beg to differ. I think it is highly structured and John is further developing some thoughts that are present in the first chapter of the gospel of John. There is much to be gleaned here, but for our purposes tonight there are some highlights I want to point out. I believe John has a two-fold purpose in what he is writing here:

1. the importance and effectiveness of the body of doctrine that the apostles had given the church.
2. the relationship between Jesus Christ and that body of doctrine that the apostles had given the church.

There are nine key phrases in these first four verses that link together and describe each other. In the middle we find John's key assertion to his flock and against the antiChrists:

We testify to the Word of Life and proclaim the Eternal Life

John reasserts what he had claimed at the end of his gospel: that he personally had witnessed the life and ministry of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Not only did John bear witness to the Lamb, he wrote it down so that his Gospel of John audience, who already had begun to feel the heat from the Judaizers, would continue to believe that Jesus was indeed The Messiah, and it was His name in which there was life more abundant. Here in first John, John reminds it's through John's eyes, ears, and hands that they have been more blessed than he... unlike John and unlike Thomas, they have not seen, they have not heard, they have not felt, and yet they believed. And what was it that John had seen, heard, and touched? Here he calls it "The word of Life."

What does John say about this word of Life?

1. The word of Life was from the beginning (vs. 1)
2. John and the apostles heard, saw, looked on, and touched the word of Life (vs. 2)
3. The word of Life was made manifest (vs. 2)
4. John and the apostles testify to the word of Life (vs. 2)

The word of life isn't the only thing John has seen and is bearing witness to for his flock. John says in verse 2, we have seen the word of life and testify to it, the word of life, and proclaim to you the "eternal life". So, what does John say about this eternal life?

1. The eternal life was with the Father (vs. 2)
2. The eternal life was made manifest (vs. 2)
3. John and the apostles saw and heard the eternal life (vs. 3)
4. John and the apostles proclaim the eternal life (vs. 3)

The parallels between "word of life" and "eternal life" could hardly be more obvious. What John says about the one he says about the other. His point is emphatic: to have one is to HAVE the other.

1 John 1:5-2:6

How important is the word of life to John's church? There are at least 16 results of the "word of life" and its impact on John's church in these first few verses. Some are more obvious than others. We're not going to tease out these results. What I want us to see, collectively, is the relationship between the "word of life" and the church:

1. Eternal life (fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ; vs. 2,3).

John begins his encouragement of his vulnerable flock by telling them that it is through the word of life that has been proclaimed by John and the apostles that they *have* eternal life. This fellowship with the Father is apparently something that the antiChrists, John's former compatriots, had been claiming for themselves.

2. Fellowship with the apostles (vs. 3)
3. Fellowship with one another (vs. 7)
4. Light for the walk (vs. 7)
5. Knowledge of the truth (vs. 6)
6. Cleansing from sin (vs. 7)
7. Avoiding self-deception (vs. 8)
8. Life in the truth (vs. 8)
9. Exposure of sin (vs. 8)
10. Leads to confession of sin (vs. 9)
11. Internalization of the word via union in Christ (vs. 10)
12. Keeps us from sin (2:1)
13. Assurance that we know and are in Christ (2:3,5)
14. Awareness of Christ's commandments (2:4)
15. Exposure of the liar, or the antiChrists (vs. 4)
16. Catalyst for perfecting the love of God in us (vs. 5)

And John is only getting started. 1 John 2:21-25, John says,

²¹ I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. ²² Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. ²³ No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also. ²⁴ Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵ And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life.”

And there at the end we again see John drawing parallels between the word of life and eternal life. Ultimately, all that John says about walking in the light, abiding in Christ, loving one another, loving each other in deed and truth, all goes back to his first parallel: the word of life is eternal life.

You begin to realize the implications of this list and you begin to see that John understands the “word of life” in much the same manner as Paul sees “sound doctrine” in Timothy and Titus. John points his church in pain back to the gospel of Jesus Christ and tells them, “there is your hope”. This body of truth we gave you is eternal life itself. It is what sustains the church through good times and bad. And that kind of parallel between the “word of life” and “eternal life” is a double edged sword. It is this “word of Life” that separates the sheep from the wolves, the true children of God from the antiChrists

who have gone out from them because they were never truly “of them.” John is saying that in leaving the fellowship and in cutting themselves off from the apostles’ teaching, the antiChrists and their followers were sealing their damnation. That kind of rejection has eternal consequences.

That which was from the beginning

But this is only scratching the surface as to what John is getting at when he uses the term the “word of life.” There is much more that John wants his suffering church to see in this first section and indeed the entire book of 1st John. John says the “word of Life” was “from the beginning”, and he says the “eternal life” was “with the Father”. John says the apostles “heard”, “saw”, “looked on”, and “touched” this “word of Life”. He says the apostles “saw” and “heard” the “eternal life”. John tells his church that the “word of Life” was “made manifest” and he says “the eternal life” was “made manifest”. The natural question arises: What kind of “word of Life” and “eternal life” can be seen, heard, and felt?

When John says the “word of Life” was “that which was from the beginning”, and he says the “eternal life” was “with the Father”, John’s church would have immediately recalled the first few sentences of John’s Gospel. To those who would wonder “what was from the beginning”, John’s congregation would respond, “In the beginning was The WORD, and The WORD was *with* God and The WORD was God” (John 1:1-3). This WORD “became flesh” and “dwelt among us” (John 1:14). We have *seen* the WORD’s glory, full of grace and truth. There in the Gospel of John, he begins his letter with divine claims about “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). This Lamb was The WORD who was “in the beginning”; this Lamb was the WORD who was “with God” and “was God”. This Lamb pre-exists time. This Jesus is the source of life itself. This Lamb was The WORD who became flesh and dwelt among us, “making manifest” The Father (John 1:18), and coming as grace and truth (John 1:17). It is this WORD that was “in the beginning” and “with the Father” that is “the way, the truth, and the life” outside of whom there is no “coming to the Father” (John 14:6).

By applying this same language to the “word of life” and “eternal life” here in 1st John, John is saying that this “word of Life” and “eternal life” is none other than the WORD who was “with God” and “was God”. This “word of Life” that was “seen”, “heard”, and “touched” is the same WORD who became flesh and dwelt among us.

If this is the case, the question arises as to why John would use the phrase “that which” rather than “the One who”, and why John would choose to use the word “word” here with a little “w”, rather than being more specific about the identity of The WORD as he was in his gospel. We must remember that John is writing into the smoldering ashes of a church in severe crisis. In the John’s Gospel he was concerned to tell his audience about The Person. Here, he wants those who know the Person to focus on the message. John wants his church to see both The Person and the message. The Person is the message and the message is the Person. A church struggling to find answers in the midst of pain is encouraged that their eternal life is wrapped up in a Person. Their fellowship with the Fa-

ther comes through His Son. How do they know this? Because they have the message from the Son, the message who indeed *is* the Son.

And as they apply the word of life to their situation... they are applying Christ himself to the situation. Sound doctrine, first and foremost, is a Person, not an academic exercise. Sound doctrine is not first and foremost a body of thought and practice that is used to defend the truth. Sound doctrine is first and foremost a Person who is Truth Incarnate. The WORD that was from the beginning and with God and became flesh is the source of the word of life. The apostles didn't create this word of life. The word of life did not originate with any man. This word of life had flesh and bones that could be seen, heard, and touched.

How important is the Incarnate Word of life to John's church? It is Christ who is Eternal Life himself, bringing the church into fellowship with the Father. To possess Christ is to possess eternal life. To possess eternal life is to possess Christ. To have the word of life is to have Christ. Eternal Life, for John's flock, is not just in terms of the ability to live forever, but in terms of a Person and their relationship with and possession of Him. Eternal Life isn't just an esoteric idea in the sweet by and by. It is past and present in the person of Christ through the word of Life. Their possession of the word of life and their fellowship with the Father and the means, for John's flock, that their eternal life is in the "here and now". Regardless of how the drama is being played out on their stage of redemptive history, the hope for John's flock that gives meaning to a crisis that seem meaningless is found in Christ and his word of life. What John has seen, heard, and touched is now being passed on to his flock to be lived out in the heat and the dew of their situation.

And regardless of what the antiChrists are saying to seduce their own followers, it is in Christ and His word of life that the church has fellowship with the apostles and with one another. It is Christ, who is the Light, that gives light for the walk through His Word and Spirit. It through Christ, the Truth incarnate, that there is knowledge of and living by the truth rather than the lie. It is Christ who cleanses from sin. It is Christ who exposes us for who we are so that we are not self-deceived. Life in the truth is nothing less than life "in Christ". It is through Christ we are aware of our sin, leading to confession of it. Because we are united to Christ THE WORD who was with God from the beginning, the Word is internalized in us, keeping us from sin. And when we do sin, it is Christ "the righteous", the eternal WORD who is our Judicial Advocate with the Father. The assurance for John's congregation they know and are in Christ, as it comes through the message of the word of life, is given from none other than Christ himself. It is Christ through his Word that perfects the love God in them as they interact with each other and deal with the aftermath of losing friends and family in the church crisis. When the antiChrists come knocking on the door, as this church answers with the word of life they are answering not just with a message but a Person, the Light who is the exposure of their evil and wicked practices.

What does this mean for us? What are the implications for our own drama? Where do we find ourselves in the text? We, like John's audience, live in the wake of the witness of John to what he has seen, heard, and touched. And though our crises in our own part

Conclusion

in the drama of redemptive history might be different in its particulars than John's church, the threat of the antiChrists is always imminent.

- Sound doctrine responds to the cultural and spiritual conditions of the drama in which we find ourselves. The word of life teaches us how to act and react as we manage real-life crises.
- Sound doctrine is the stuff of real life. Without sound doctrine, there can be no sound living. If we do not have sound doctrine, we cannot love one another in deed and truth, we cannot walk in the light, we cannot live in the truth, and we cannot abide in Christ.
- The word of life creates, fosters, and sustains our community life. It is through sound doctrine that we have fellowship one with another. Sound doctrine is inseparable from being able to see the glory of the God who is light, how that light exposes our sin, and moves us both corporately and individually to confession of sin that marks this fellowship we have with each other and the eternal life we have in Christ. It is through the word of life that we understand who we are in Christ and what our role is on the stage of redemptive history.
- Sound doctrine is the antidote for false doctrine and the prescription for a healthy church. It is the word of life that keeps the antiChrists and their false teaching at bay. Where there is false teaching, the word of life is absent. It is the function of sound doctrine to mark out the line between true and false teaching. You've heard Pastor Russ say it many times, and you'll hear me parrot it here because it's all over John's epistles: sound doctrine unites, it does *not*, divide. Sound doctrine exposes error and when the error is exposed, it runs from sound doctrine. Hence, they went out from us, because they were not of us (2:19).
- Sound doctrine, this entire body of truth – grounded in and centered on Christ -- is eternal life for our souls. It is what gives life to this drama. It is through the word of life, passed on from the apostles down through the ages to our place in the drama, that we have fellowship with the Father and with His Son. Sound doctrine, then, is our source of life. It is the difference between life and death. And we neglect it to our eternal peril.
- Our assurance of eternal life goes beyond the mere message of the word of life, but is grounded in The WORD who is from the beginning, was with the Father and became flesh for us. Chapter 5:13, in light of chapter 1, is understood thusly: I am passing along, restating, and proclaiming the word of life that was manifested to those of who are already in fellowship with the Father and His Son so that you may be assured, because Christ is our Eternal life, you *have* eternal life.
- The essence of sound doctrine (little "d") is in THE WORD, Doctrine (capital "d"). It is only through the word of life that we are connected to and have fellowship with THE WORD of life. To love Christ is to love sound doctrine. To have eternal life through this word of life is to have Christ himself. And just as important... to not have sound doctrine is to not have Christ. To say, with our pop

Christianity, “I don’t need doctrine, I just love Jesus”, is to place our souls in danger of damnation for there is no loving Jesus outside of doctrine.

What is our responsibility?

Challenge

Let us point people to Christ, even as we engage them in the text.

Those of us who are members of Clearcreek Chapel have covenanted together to place a high premium on sound doctrine. In giving high regard to sound doctrine, we must also be mindful of an inherent tendency to elevate the text to the exclusion of Christ. The end result is behavior modification at best. Legalism at worst. We must be mindful that the word of life is inseparable from the WORD Himself. In giving people hope, yes, we bring them to the text and we counsel and preach from the text. But we must not stop at the text. It is Christ who must be seen. It is Christ, THE WORD, who makes The Word living and active. In aligning ourselves with the text, we must be conforming ourselves to Christ.

Let us be diligent in studying and proclaiming sound doctrine.

Let us defend our church against false doctrine.

Let us prize it.

Let us hold this Word high, and in doing so hold high THE WORD. It is through this Word that Christ creates and sustains our community. The Word is “living and active” because Christ, through His Word, is our source of life.

Let us love Sound Doctrine, for as we do so we will love each other.

Let us love the Word, and in so doing, love Jesus.