

The Mind of Christ In His Word: Part 2



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A ReVision Resource

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Mind of Christ in His Word: Part 2
Strong Souls Part 14
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Welcome to *The Mind of Christ in His Word: Part 2*

For the renewing of our minds toward maturity in the mind of Christ, there is no substitute for daily, consecutive reading and study of the Word of God. By reading the Bible through, over and over, and taking time to meditate, reflect, and apply what we're learning, we lay a solid foundation for continuing growth in the Lord.

We might call this a *Biblical theology* approach to discovering the mind of Christ in His Word. Another approach would be to ask specific questions of the Bible, then to search throughout God's Word for the answers we seek, bringing together light from various parts of Scripture to organize and clarify our thinking on a wide range of topics.

This describes more of a *systematic theology* approach to the Word of Christ, and provides the source for *sound doctrine*. Sound doctrine is indispensable to growing in the mind of Christ and for the daily renewing of our minds to make sound judgments, answer pressing questions, and speak to the issues of the day. In this study, we'll see why doctrine matters, and learn how to approach the Scripture to derive sound doctrine from it.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Cure for Doctrinal Revulsion

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia – remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine, nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith. 1 Timothy 1.3, 4

Doctrinal revulsion?

The concern is growing, among certain Christian leaders, that the followers of Christ in our day have lost their taste for doctrine.

Indeed, it does appear, in many sectors of the Church, that a strain of *doctrinal revulsion* has infected the Body of Christ. You may be feeling some of that yourself. Consider, for a moment, your gut reaction to the word itself: *doctrine*. If what you sense is a kind of aversion, whether mild or vehement, or if feelings associated with irrelevance, arrogance, stodginess, or intellectual smugness stir within your breast, then even you may be experiencing the initial stages of this occasionally-recurring malady.

The Body of Christ has endured this affliction in the past and has always shaken it off and grown stronger as the antidote to doctrinal revulsion has been applied in a timely and relevant manner. For if our minds will not be shaped by sound doctrine, according to the mind of Christ which we possess, then they will be shaped by various winds of doctrine, wafting in from the unbelieving world to blow us off course in our journey with the Lord (Eph. 4.14).

Doctrinal revulsion among the members of the Body of Christ is a bit like an immune-deficiency disorder in the human body. The Church needs sound doctrine to thrive and bear fruit. When doctrinal revulsion sets in, the Body of Christ begins to lose its defenses against lies, half-truths, and outright deceptions, and it lacks the strength to carry out its mission in the world. Its focus tends to turn from Christ and His Kingdom to individuals and their needs or preferences. The vision of the Kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven gives way to a vision of whatever I want, and how I can achieve this and still continue to believe.

This is a condition *contrary* to the purposes of Christ, of course, and inimical to the development of a renewed mind; and it begins with neglect of sound doctrine, which is an early symptom of doctrinal revulsion.

Overcoming doctrinal revulsion

So the way to overcome this contrary condition is to follow the advice of the ancient Celtic Christian preachers, who taught that the cure for a *contrary* condition is to apply the *contrary* of that condition in steady doses. “Contraries are by contraries cured,” the old Celts insisted, and they demonstrated the power of that remedy over four centuries by bringing revival, renewal, and awakening to the Church and the pagan world throughout Europe.

Doctrine derives from applying the mind of Christ to the study of His Word. In the study of doctrine, we gather under a variety of headings the truth we have gleaned from our ongoing study of Scripture, with a view to answering key questions concerning primary truths, such as: Who is God? What kind of creature is a human being? What must we do to be saved? What is the Church? Which ethics does God approve? And so forth.

Doctrine, as Paul believed, is nothing less than good stewardship of the Word of God. Sound doctrine *discovers* the teaching of Scripture, *communicates* that teaching clearly and faithfully, and *applies* that teaching to the work of sanctification and the progress of Christ’s Kingdom. Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to ensure that the sound doctrine he had begun to teach there would continue after him. A grasp of sound doctrine is essential for the renewing of the mind and for growing to maturity in the mind of Christ.

Instead of pushing sound doctrine away, or simply ignoring it, we should be daily renewing our minds in the doctrine of Christ that brings life, health, and strength to our soul.

The challenge to sound doctrine

The danger today, as in every age, is that there are those who, lacking a taste for doctrine, will come up with something else to teach *rather* than sound doctrine, which since it is not sound doctrine will, to one degree or another, be false doctrine. These false teachers have, in times past, been very eloquent and persuasive. Their teachings have seemed to meet people right where they were, scratching some intellectual or emotional itch, and insisting that the Christian life is best understood and enjoyed according to their peculiar explanation of the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

Such teaching, however, always has the effect of diverting the minds of the faithful *away* from Jesus to themselves, leading them to scour the Bible for teachings that reinforce their interests and needs, as they bend and wrest the Word of God to their own destruction (2 Pet. 3.15, 16). Meanwhile, the purveyors of false doctrine gain notoriety, prestige, and a following eager to support them in their teaching, since by so doing they are only supporting their own selfish interests, at the expense of Christ, His Kingdom, and His glory.

Paul said that false teachers taught contrary to sound doctrine (1 Tim. 1.10), as they made things up out of their own minds to further their own interests and agendas. Such teachers are a threat to sound doctrine, and thus to the health of the Body of Christ, because they woo people away from simple trust in the plain teaching of Scripture.

As then, so it has been in every age of the Christian movement, and so clearly, it is in our day. If we would ward off the present pandemic of mere speculation leading to contrary doctrine and doctrinal revulsion, and if we would discover from Christ's Word those truths that contribute to the renewing of our minds, then we must understand sound doctrine, and get as much of it as we can into our spiritual systems.

For reflection

1. Why do you suppose some people today are becoming skeptical of doctrine?
2. Why is teaching doctrine a matter of *stewardship* of God's Word?
3. How would you describe your own understanding and use of Biblical doctrine? Would you say you are a student of sound doctrine? Or are you a bit put off by it? Explain.

Next steps – Conversation: What is your own response to “doctrine”? What can you do to begin having a richer diet of sound doctrine in your daily spiritual fare?

2 Not Whether, but Which

“When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none. Then he says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when he comes, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first. So shall it also be with this wicked generation.” Matthew 12.43-45

No spiritual vacuum

Jesus taught about a man afflicted with an unclean spirit, who, having been cleansed of that spirit, failed to reformat his soul with *true* teaching, that is, *sound doctrine*, and so he became even more vulnerable to falsehood and danger than he was before his healing.

This happens to a lot of believers. They hear sound doctrine, the plain teaching of the Bible about the Lord Jesus Christ and the Gospel of the Kingdom. They are convicted and persuaded, and they believe, sweeping their souls clear of years of falsehoods and lies to make room for the Gospel and the Spirit of God.

They may even make progress for a while – reading, studying, and learning sound doctrine, so that they can strengthen their souls – minds, hearts, and consciences – to help them live the Christian life day by day.

But then they begin to neglect sound teaching. Going to church becomes just something they do to be with their Christian friends, and to enjoy themselves “in the Lord.” Participation in Bible study or Sunday school becomes simply more of the same. Personal reading and study of the Word of God decline or drop off altogether. Neglect of sound doctrine – the first stage of doctrinal revulsion – begins to set in.

There’s no such thing as a spiritual vacuum in the cosmos. Whatever of our time, attention, interest, or strength is not devoted to the Lord, and His Kingdom and glory, will become susceptible to being taken over by *contrary* interests. These often take the form of false teachers who appeal to our selfish interests and encourage us to make of the faith of Jesus Christ a kind of spiritual smorgasbord for whatever we think we need. We leave off the solid food of sound doctrine and dabble in the sweets and crunchies of mere self-interest – if we spend any time in the Word of God at all. Our mind enters a period of arrested development which will become permanent atrophy unless serious measures are engaged.

Still feeding

Just because people seem no longer interested in the sound doctrine of God’s Word doesn’t mean they aren’t feeding on *some* doctrine. After all, doctrine of *any* sort is merely teaching, ideas presented for consideration which exert powerful effects on how we think, feel, value, and live. If we’re not feeding our minds on the sound doctrine of Scripture, because we have become infected with a form of doctrinal revulsion, we’re still going to feed our minds. But the food we will give them will be merely the vain hopes and speculations of human minds, whether of persuasive friends or charismatic authorities, or simply our own best thinking.

Rather than continue toward the *renewing* of our minds in the mind of Christ, we will revert to *dulling* our minds around a focal point of mere self-interest.

Neglecting or even rejecting *sound* doctrine – the teaching of Scripture that leads to a life of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit and good works in service to God and men – doesn’t mean that we necessarily reject *all* doctrine. The question is not *whether* we will be informed and shaped by some teaching – some doctrine – or other; the question is *which* doctrine will fill our soul, and what will it bring along with it to inhabit and direct our mind, heart, and conscience?

The fruit of sound doctrine

Sound doctrine brings a renewed mind, the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, love for God and neighbors, wisdom, a servant's heart, a desire to be transformed increasingly into the image of our Lord and Savior, and increasing peace and joy in the Lord. If such fruit is not showing in your life, you may be feeding on the wrong doctrine.

You may be saying, "Well, I've never heard doctrine taught like that! All I've ever heard is a kind of pompous parading of pseudo-spiritual knowledge that has nothing to do with where I live!" If that's the case, then you haven't been listening to sound doctrine, but *false* doctrine, or at best, true doctrine poorly communicated. For sound doctrine goes beyond mere talk and focuses on a transformed soul, expressed as love, as Paul makes clear in 1 Timothy 1.5.

And if you haven't been listening to and studying sound doctrine, then you've been listening to the teaching of men – which promotes self-love, pride, sham righteousness, and a sense of superiority over those who "just don't get it." False doctrine doesn't encourage *growth* in the mind of *Christ*; rather, by diverting our focus to ourselves, it creates a mindset of always seeking to justify oneself and indulge whatever interest or view may be fashionable.

Throw out sound doctrine and you don't escape doctrine. You simply open your soul to false doctrine. The question, where embracing doctrine is concerned, is not whether, but which. You will fill the sails of your soul with sound doctrine, or they will fill with the self-serving winds of doctrine that blow us off course in our journey with the Lord.

For reflection or discussion

1. Do you agree that *some* form of doctrine is inescapable? Give some examples of the kinds of doctrines people embrace who do not accept Biblical doctrine.
2. What would you say are some of the main doctrines of Scripture? List them below, and give a brief definition of each.
3. How important are these doctrines? Can Christians afford to neglect them? Why or why not?

Next step – Preparations: Spend extended time in prayer, looking to God to reveal the various ideas and aspirations – doctrines – that shape your life and guide your day. Repent of any that are merely self-serving, and devote yourself afresh to growing into the mind of Christ.

3 Why Doctrine Matters

And since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, “I believed and therefore I spoke,” we also believe and therefore speak... 2 Corinthians 4.13

Belief and life

What Paul says here about his speech is true of every other aspect of our lives: we *live* what we *believe*. And what we *believe* is shaped by doctrine, whether it is the sound doctrine of God’s Word or shifting and deceitful winds of doctrine that blow continuously against us.

Put another way, as Jesus frequently explained, how we live demonstrates or reveals what we believe. And, of course, what we believe is informed by the *content* of our thinking. And, since thinking is primarily about information, ideas, opinions, preferences, and the like, what we think – and therefore what we say and do – will be unavoidably shaped by the worldview we embrace.

If we want to live like mature Christians, rather than like infants, then we will need to press on toward maturity by seeking the mind of Christ. And that means feeding our minds with the sound doctrine of the Word of God.

Doctrine – teaching, information, viewpoints, opinions, worldviews – matters because it shapes beliefs, which, in turn, determine our affections, fortify our conscience, and guide our conduct in the world. The things some people believe – that is, the doctrines they have embraced – make them a blessing and a boon to society. Those whose beliefs are informed by ideas of generosity, selflessness, compassion, and love are more likely to be the kind of people we like to be around, as opposed to those whose beliefs have them and their interests at the center of the universe, and you and yours merely as means to whatever ends they might desire at any given time.

Right beliefs lead to right living, living that honors God and blesses others; and right belief is the product of right and sound doctrine.

Sources of doctrine

For most people, the doctrines which shape their beliefs, and, in turn, guide their conduct, come to them from a variety of sources, and are often uncritically embraced. Their thinking is a pastiche of ideas, notions, tastes, and habits which they have absorbed from the information environment to which they expose themselves. That environment lobs doctrine at people continuously. Advertising affects how people think about material possessions. The opinions of our friends or of people we esteem influence our thoughts as well. What we read, see on the evening news, enjoy in pop culture, are told by our politicians – all these ideas and opinions – all this *doctrine* – affects our thinking and beliefs, which in turn determine how we live.

To set the matter in a more Biblical framework, there is doctrine which emanates from the *Spirit of Christ*, speaking in His Word; and there is doctrine which emanates from the *spirit of the age*, speaking through the voices of media, advertising, false teachers, pop culture, education, and so forth. Paul warns that such “winds of doctrine” can keep us from reaching maturity in our thinking (Eph. 4.14) making us, therefore, unlikely to be of much service in advancing the rule of King Jesus.

We don’t always examine what we hear as carefully as we should. And so it may surprise even us when, in some conversation or situation, we find that our thinking merely reflects that of the people around us and offers very little, on any topic, that would suggest we have been renewed in the mind of Christ. Thus we prove the truth of Socrates’ admonition, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

An unprotected mind

False doctrines can invade a mind that is not protected by sound doctrine like termites sneaking into the bones of a beautiful home. We may not even be aware of the thoughts, outlooks, and opinions which are taking shape in our minds until they suddenly and unexpectedly surface. Or we may understand full well the ideas that are guiding our beliefs, and we may be living entirely in line with them, content with worldliness of thought and life. Unless the sails of our soul are squarely unfurled into the winds of the Spirit, false winds of doctrine will blow us off course in our journey with Christ and keep us from realizing the power of a mature mind.

If what we hold to be true, and therefore what directs our lives, is shot through with self-interest, expediency, pragmatism, materialism, and moral relativism, we're not going to contribute much to bringing the mind of Christ to light in our sphere. Even more important, our desire to serve and glorify God will be thwarted to the extent that the spirit of the age, rather than the Spirit of God, is the source of our doctrine.

C.S. Lewis once warned that "The right defence against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments" (*The Abolition of Man*). If we want to prevent our words and deeds from being false, selfish, and counterproductive to Kingdom living, and if we want to glorify God with our beliefs and lives, then we need to raise a hedge and infuse an atmosphere of sound doctrine into our minds. Only sound doctrine can enable us to recognize false and deceitful ideas and, by discernment and persuasion, send them packing before they settle into our brains.

Everyone believes something – you, the people in your life, the people who are running this world. And those beliefs are grounded in doctrines of one kind or another. It matters what we believe – whether the good stewardship of sound doctrine or the vain speculations of self-interested minds. The Wind of God or the deceitful winds of the world. If we would be renewed in the mind of Christ, and live a mature experience of following Him, then we must pursue and tack into the sound doctrine of Scripture. We must continuously seek and follow the Wind of God, delighting in Him and His Word, allowing sound doctrine full rein in our thinking and affections, and living consistently with what the sound doctrine of Scripture teaches.

Sound doctrine makes for a well-kept heart and a strong soul. Everything in life follows from that.

For reflection

1. What do we mean by saying that belief shapes action? Can you give some examples?
2. Review the list of important doctrines you prepared for the preceding installment. For each one, suggest some ways that this doctrine shapes our actions.
3. How do the vain speculations of those who reject sound doctrine shape their actions? Can you give some examples?

Next steps – Preparation: Give thanks to God for the sound doctrine of His Word. How would you counsel new believers to be continually renewed in the mind of Christ?

4 The Source of Sound Doctrine

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine... 2 Timothy 3.16

Theologians all

We have considered a few of the sources of false doctrine, those vain speculations which are the fruit of nothing more than the best thinking of human minds. Advertising, education, friends, the media, politicians, pop culture – these are just a few of the ways false teaching insinuates itself into our thinking, beliefs, actions, and lifestyle.

False teaching can also come from within the Church, as teachers, afflicted with doctrinal revulsion, head off in pursuit of some whim or intellectual fancy and set themselves up as having gained some “new insight” into what it means to be a Christian. And that “new insight” may be only to debunk sound doctrine and insist, for example, that we really just need to accept and love one another.

These winds of doctrine seek to fill the sails of our souls and drive us off course in our journey with Christ. We must learn to recognize and resist them, and set our soul – heart, mind, and conscience – to the pure winds of God’s Spirit. Sound doctrine, in contrast to speculative thinking, is a work of God’s Spirit, as He, through the whole counsel of God in Scripture, teaches us how to think, believe, and live with respect to every aspect of human life.

The Spirit teaches us how to compare Scripture from one part of the Bible with Scripture from other parts in response to our interests, queries, studies, or meditations (1 Cor. 2.13). As the Bible sheds its light on our questions, our task is to sort out the various texts and teachings, compare and combine them, and use them to help us understand God’s will, purpose, and plan.

Yes, it takes time, it can be difficult, and it requires much patience and perseverance. But this is the work of searching the Scriptures that makes for a sound mind and a strong soul (Acts 17.11).

Sound doctrine is nothing more than Scripture ordered to the task of addressing the primary concerns of belief and life. This is the work of theology, of discovering by reason and logic the mind of the *Logos*, as He guides us into all truth in His Word (Jn. 17.17), and renews us in His mind (Rom. 12.1, 2). Theology – the discipline that leads to sound doctrine – is nothing more than the pursuit of the knowledge of God and His glory. And that makes every believer a theologian.

The work of theology comes with the turf for those who are called to the Kingdom and glory of God (1 Thess. 2.12).

Examples in Scripture

We see examples of this process, the discipline of theology, at work in the Bible itself. For example, as part of his argument concerning why salvation must be all of grace, and all dependent on the righteousness of Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul offers a brief synopsis of the problem of sin in Romans 3. Drawing from various passages in the Psalms, Proverbs, and Isaiah, and combining them in a logical order, Paul explains the devastating effects of sin on our minds and wills, making us ignorant of God’s truth, hostile to God, and in danger of His wrath.

By searching, comparing, and ordering Scriptures, he developed a summary of the doctrine of sin, which then helps to explain why salvation and righteousness can only be attained by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Similarly, in Hebrews 1, the writer is making an argument that Jesus, as the Son of God, is more to be revered and obeyed than the angels. His belief concerning this question draws from at least three different books of the Old Testament and five different passages. The writer wasn't making up His doctrine of Jesus to suit the needs of his readers, or merely to express some personal whim. His convictions are the fruit of careful study, comparison, analysis, and synthesis of the relevant texts of Scripture.

This pattern of searching, comparing, and ordering the Scriptures is what Jesus was thinking about when he commended the wise scribe who brings out of the treasury of God's Word insights from both old and new revelation – the Old and New Testaments (Matt. 13.52). By faithfully pursuing this work, we increase in the knowledge of God, His Word, and sound doctrine, and thus have our minds shaped more to reflect the mind of Christ.

Doctrine for all of life

What Paul did for the doctrine of sin and the writer of Hebrews for the doctrine of Christ, we have the privilege and calling of doing for every aspect of life. Scripture is profitable for doctrine, for discovering the will of God about all of life, every good work (2 Tim. 3.17). As we learn how the mind of Christ thinks concerning all aspects of life, we learn what we must believe in order to mature in Him; and we are renewed in our minds, and live as servants and ambassadors of Christ in His Kingdom and for His glory. By applying ourselves to sound doctrine, we are led to believe as we should and live as God commands and promises, in the hope of knowing His blessings and manifesting His glory.

Sound doctrine thus comes to us as *revelation* – God disclosing for our edification whatever He considers necessary for faith and life. Human beings do not discover or invent sound doctrine; nor must they fall into the trap of thinking that sound doctrine changes with the changing circumstances of the times or the needs and whims of people. Sound doctrine, being revealed by God, is true and lasting. It needs only to be studied, understood, believed, and applied to have the promised effect of transforming our souls and equipping us to love God and our neighbors.

But if we succumb to doctrinal revulsion, our openness to sound doctrine – and with this, our access to divine truth and a renewed mind – will be sorely compromised.

For reflection

1. What do we mean by saying that the Holy Spirit is the source of sound doctrine? Why is this important?
2. Meditate on 1 Corinthians 2.12, 13 and Acts 17.11. How do these guide your thinking about the work of sound doctrine? Is this work part of your own spiritual disciplines?
3. What are some questions Christians should be asking the Bible these days? How does asking such questions relate to the work of sound doctrine?

Next steps – Demonstration: Give thanks to God for the sound doctrine of His Word. Which aspects of the treasury of sound doctrine do you expect to live out today?

5 Developing Sound Doctrine

These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. Acts 17:11

A community project

Every believer has the mind of Christ and is growing in the right use of that mind. Every believer in Jesus Christ is therefore a theologian, in that we want sound doctrine to guide our thinking, planning, decision-making, and actions. But since sound doctrine doesn't come to us all at once or without some effort, it's important that we understand what's involved in acquiring the doctrine that shapes our mind to the mind of Jesus Christ.

Developing sound doctrine is not the work of isolated individuals. Since we all tend to read the Scriptures through a particular lens – our background, learning, experience, interests, and biases – and since we are naturally inclined to find in Scripture whatever reinforces our inclinations or views, we need an approach to deriving sound doctrine from Scripture that can keep us from drifting away from true knowledge of Christ and His will because of some false wind of doctrine.

Deriving sound doctrine from Scripture is a work of the whole Church – present and past. And each of us has a role in this work. Only as we come together over the Word of God, submitting to the Spirit of Christ, can we expect to avoid the pitfalls of whatever wind of doctrine may distract us from being renewed in the mind of Christ. The believers in Berea desired to know whether what they were being taught by Paul and his companions could be relied on as sound doctrine, so they searched the Scriptures daily. This would have been an act of communal conversation and discussion, since it's likely the only available Scriptures were to be found in the local synagogue. But the Bereans understood what was at stake, so searching the Scriptures daily became the task of the entire believing community.

We can follow their example in taking up the work of discerning and practicing sound doctrine. Luke's concise comment about the believers in Berea offers four guidelines for acquiring sound doctrine, four disciplines in which we must participate if we are to learn the true teachings of Scripture and use these to renew our minds against doctrinal revulsion and other spiritual ills.

Four disciplines

Note first that we cannot do sound doctrine apart from *the Word of God*. We have considered already the importance of daily reading and study so that all members of the community both *receive* teaching from the Word of God and learn to *practice* that teaching in their daily lives. Here I simply want to reinforce this point as the foundation of the four disciplines involved in acquiring sound doctrine. The Scriptures are the touchstone of sound doctrine. Reading, studying, meditating, and being taught the Word of God are thus indispensable to having one's soul readied against any false wind of doctrine. Every member of the community can learn to delight in the reading and study of God's Word as a daily discipline, so that every member becomes increasingly equipped by God's Spirit to make their contribution to a healthy, growing church (Eph. 4:11-16).

But notice as well, in the second place, that this is not done in a merely individual way, as I have said. While each of us should work to develop good disciplines of Scripture reading and study, we need to *come together with other believers* to compare our notes, discuss our insights, and discover the applications God would have for us as a community. Only by searching the Scriptures together can we hope to find the best answers to our questions, and to make sure we're asking all the right questions.

Since leaders in the Christian movement have been doing the work of discerning sound doctrine for nearly

2,000 years, we would be wise to consult the community of our believing forebears on matters of doctrine, to learn their insights and understandings on sound doctrine. In the writings of the Church Fathers, medieval thinkers, Reformation pastors and theologians, Puritan divines, historic creeds and confessions, and even more recent and contemporary Christian thinkers, we can find wisdom to flesh out the bones of doctrinal understanding, and keep from drifting into false thinking about the mind of Christ.

In the theological work of our forebears, we find a consistent thread of sound doctrine which can be of great help to us in renewing our mind and growing into the mind of Christ. Happily, many of their most important works are readily available for us to consult, and we should make a point to do so. Those who will not consult the voices of our forebears will be just that much more vulnerable to being led astray into false teaching and doctrinal revulsion. This great cloud of witnesses can be of great help to us in learning to address issues and questions about belief and life.

Third, we need to work together in studying the Scripture with *specific questions or concerns* in mind. In our Bible study group, for example, we may want to learn whether there is a Biblical teaching about marriage and family life (there is). Or we might join with a few friends to discover the teaching of Scripture on such matters as work, loving our neighbors, arts and culture, current issues and events, and more – how to think about such matters from our perspective in the Kingdom of God. In the early Church, part of the time for worship involved people sharing insights from Scripture with a view to edifying one another in the faith (1 Cor. 14.26, 31). Many questions might prompt us to seek out partners or groups to read and study a particular matter.

So in cases like these, we'll get together a raft of questions to ask the Bible, and assemble some useful resources to guide us in our study – such as a concordance, a Bible dictionary, a few of the venerable creeds and confessions of the Church, and perhaps a synopsis of historical theology to enable us to see how our questions have been addressed throughout the ages. We'll also seek wisdom and insight from our pastor. We continue asking questions and searching Scripture and other sources until all our concerns have been satisfied and all the gems of Scripture have been mined. Then we will be ready to do the hard work of synthesizing our findings into specific answers.

Since new questions will always emerge, it will be good for us to understand the broad framework of sound doctrine, and how to practice the skills of searching the Scripture together for answers to all our questions within that framework of orthodoxy. We ought not simply receive any teaching from one source, whether a pastor, a favorite writer, or our own thinking. The more each of us engages the questions of the day with a systematic approach for acquiring sound doctrine, the more we will discern the truth on any matter as God has made it known throughout the ages.

Finally, and looping back to our first discipline, the work of sound doctrine is an *ongoing, daily duty*. Even though the faith of Christ has been handed down once for all, and our forebears in the faith have hammered out the major doctrinal issues already, still, *we* have not learned all that has been taught or that must be learned, nor are we skilled in knowing how sound doctrine should be applied to our daily experience in every case. What better way to use part of our precious time each day than to practice the skills for developing sound doctrine and engaging in the adventure of learning Jesus?

So this work of seeking the sound doctrine of Scripture on all matters of faith and life is one to which we must become devoted, a spiritual discipline that we neglect to our peril, and at the risk of lapsing into doctrinal revulsion over time. If it seems like hard work, well, it is. But gaining the solid food of sound doctrine can become an exciting and highly satisfying discipline for growing into the mind of Christ (Heb. 5.12-14).

For reflection

1. How should doctrine factor into the daily life of a believer? What if it doesn't?

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2. Suggest some ways that, let's say, a Bible study group could work together to make sure that their efforts were guarded by sound doctrine.
3. How might you integrate the work of developing sound doctrine as part of your daily spiritual disciplines?

Next steps – Preparation: What resources do you currently possess to help you in the work of developing sound doctrine?

6 The Use of Sound Doctrine

Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith... 1 Timothy 1.5

Doctrinal let-down

We won't grow strong in our soul without a healthy diet of sound doctrine to grow us into the mind of Christ. Doctrinal revulsion – in all its many forms – will stunt our growth as believers because it clouds the mind, starves the heart, and weakens the conscience. Like many physical maladies that can beset us, the spiritual condition of doctrinal revulsion is sometimes triggered by a preceding condition. We might refer to that condition as doctrinal let-down. Here's how it works.

We get excited about sound doctrine because, well, we've heard this is really good stuff. Then we begin to apply ourselves to learning it. We read some books, take a course or two, and share in some "doctrine conversations" with Christian friends. Feeling like we're "in the know" can be a heady experience, and this intellectual high can last for quite a while.

After a while, though, all this begins to feel a little stale. We keep going over the same doctrines, affirming the same positions, condemning the same opponents, and reaching the same conclusions concerning what we're supposed to believe. But the excitement is gone. The adventure of learning has become wearisome, and we just don't feel like we're growing in the way we think we should.

Doctrine, we conclude, isn't helping us know the full and abundant life Jesus promised (Jn. 10.10). Perhaps we should look somewhere else?

This is doctrinal let-down, a pervasive sense of disappointment and staleness when it comes to the teaching of God's Word. Unchecked, it can lead to a serious case of doctrinal revulsion and all the maladies of soul that can trigger.

The problem

What's the problem here? How does this happen?

There are three primary reasons for doctrinal let-down. First, what we are reading, studying, and discussing is *incomplete* doctrine – not *false* doctrine exactly, but *incomplete* doctrine that tends to dwell on intellectual categories but that never sinks into the heart so that it issues through the life. A merely intellectual approach to doctrine does not renew the mind but dulls it instead.

The second cause of doctrinal let-down is *misunderstanding the nature of sound doctrine*. Sometimes it's not the writer or teacher's fault that our understanding of doctrine is incomplete. Sometimes we become too easily contented with the *substance* of sound doctrine – all those terms, definitions, arguments, and proofs – and we're not sufficiently concerned about what it all means or how it applies.

And this is linked to the third cause of doctrinal let-down: not understanding that the *use of all doctrine*, and all study of doctrine, *is love*, and that doctrine is not *sound* until it comes to expression in our lives in ways that demonstrate growing love for God and our neighbors. This is the goal of all sound doctrine, the aim of all Christian instruction.

We will grow tired of doctrine – sound Biblical teaching – and perhaps even a bit smug or bored about it unless we put sound doctrine to good use in loving God and our neighbors. Doctrine that works through love is not only the antidote to doctrinal let-down, it's the panacea guarding against it.

More than a mind challenge

For sound doctrine to lead us to love, however, we need to see it as something more than merely an intellectual exercise. We must study the truth, as the Spirit leads us in searching the Scriptures. But *learning* the truth is more than an activity of the mind.

Paul says sound doctrine must penetrate our heart, examining our feelings and aspirations, ordering and refining our affections, and helping us learn what to desire and what to hate, according to what God is revealing in His Word. A sound mind helps to sustain a well-kept heart, so that both how we think and what we desire line up to move us to love.

At the same time, sound doctrine will impact our conscience as well, reinforcing existing convictions and equipping us with new values and priorities to guide our new insights and affections into a faith rightly lived. The conscience releases the will to do what a sound mind and a well-kept heart determine is the proper course of love.

And then sound doctrine comes out in *sincere faith*, as Paul puts it. The word in the Greek is “unhypocritical.” The love that issues from sound doctrine is pure, disinterested, others-directed, and aimed at edification. It is nothing other than the pure grace of God working through us.

We might say: Sound doctrine accomplishes its purpose as it forms the mind, engages the heart, and moves the will to acts of self-denying love. Sound doctrine is only *sound* when it issues in the kind of love that Jesus exemplified throughout His earthly sojourn, and which He continues to demonstrate even now as He intercedes on our behalf at the Father’s right hand.

To ward off doctrinal revulsion, beware of the onset of doctrinal let-down. As part of your daily reading and study of Scripture, take a good dose of sound doctrine – doctrine that engages your whole person and sets you on a course of Christ-like love for the people you will see today.

For reflection

1. What do we mean by “incomplete” doctrine?
2. How does “incomplete” doctrine contribute to doctrinal let-down and doctrinal revulsion?
3. How can church members help one another to overcome the effects of incomplete doctrine?

Next steps – Transformation: How can you better prepare for works of love each day? What can you do to connect your reading and study of Scripture, time in prayer, and the people you will see in the day ahead, so that the love of Jesus flows through you to them?

7 The Truth that is in Jesus

But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus...
Ephesians 4.20, 21

The standard of sound doctrine

There is one measure, one standard of sound doctrine which we must always keep in mind as we take up the study of this subject: sound doctrine brings us to Jesus and shapes us into His image.

A strong soul – heart, mind, and conscience – is devoted above all to knowing Jesus and increasing in Him. Whatever we study of doctrine, in whatever format or context, our studies will not be complete until they bring us before Jesus, to see, know, love, and serve Him with all our soul and strength.

Jesus, after all, is the very truth of God (Jn. 14.6). He embodies all the promises of God’s Word (2 Cor. 1.20), and all the teaching of Scripture is ultimately about Him (Jn. 5.39). Jesus is the wisdom of God (Col. 2.3); He is the hope of glory for which we have been redeemed (Rom. 5.1, 2; Col. 1.27); the knowledge of Jesus is eternal life (Jn. 17.3); and Jesus shows us the path of true discipleship along which we hope sound doctrine will lead us (1 Jn. 2.1-6).

Thus, any doctrine which does not lead us to Jesus, improve our contemplation of Jesus, help us in understanding the work of Jesus, and equip us to love and follow Jesus, is either *false* doctrine or *incomplete* doctrine at best. And any study of sound doctrine which does not set out and proceed along a course determined, like those ancient Greeks, to “see Jesus” will lead either to doctrinal let-down and doctrinal revulsion or doctrinal smugness and self-righteousness in due course.

Learning truth

Paul says that the truth of God is in Jesus Christ. We are only learning truth – we are only learning sound doctrine – when we are putting off our old selves and being clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, so that, increasingly, His image, the reality of His resurrected life, shines through us to the world in all our words and deeds (Eph. 4.17-24; 2 Cor. 3.12-18; 1 Cor. 10.31).

As reading and studying the Bible intends to shape us into the image of Jesus Christ, so also with the study of sound doctrine. Doctrine should edify and delight us because, when it is *sound*, it brings us into the presence of Jesus Christ, Who is making all things new in our lives.

Studying sound doctrine then, far from being a merely intellectual exercise, or something dry and irrelevant to life’s daily grind, or even something to puff up our spiritual arrogance, is a highly devotional activity. Through the study of sound doctrine, we seek to gain a clearer vision of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to behold and engage the glory revealed in His wonderful face (2 Cor. 4.6; cf. Rev.1). We want sound doctrine to bind us more closely to Jesus and to help in us in setting Him always before us (Ps. 16.8).

Sound doctrine exalts Christ as the beloved Son of the Father, the Upholder of the cosmos, the Redeemer of the lost, the Shepherd and Sanctifier of His flock, the Keeper of the Lord’s chosen, the Friend Who sticks closer than a brother, and the King of kings and Lord of lords. The true measure, and the highest standard, for *all* our doctrinal studies must be the extent to which such studies show us Jesus and engage us with Him, so that we know, love, and serve Him more fully, and are becoming consistently more like Him.

Don’t despair!

So, if you’re experiencing a bit of doctrinal let-down, or even doctrinal revulsion, these days, don’t despair. Rather, take heart! Don’t let someone lure you away from the idea of doctrine *per se*, as if somehow doctrine

were unnecessary or optional. *Doctrine* is unavoidable, as we have seen; but only *sound doctrine* will lead us to a closer walk with Jesus Christ.

Set your mind on Christ and the things that are above (Col. 3.1-3), then pursue sound doctrine as a powerful means of sharpening your focus on the Lord of glory, strengthening your ties with Him, adding to your reasons to thank and praise Him, and transforming you, from glory to glory, to be more like Him.

So if you're resolved to take up the study of sound doctrine and to shake off the lingering symptoms of doctrinal revulsion, make sure that the course of study you plot has Jesus in the thick and focus of it all. Don't just read and study to gain knowledge; read and study to gain more of Jesus Christ.

Doctrine matters. And *sound doctrine*, that helps us grow in Jesus Christ, matters supremely.

Let the love of Christ constrain you to seek more of His Presence, promise, power, favor, and fruit through the disciplined and careful study of sound doctrine; and tell any who would make light of your determination to shake off their doctrinal revulsion and join you.

Doctrine can renew your mind – and your soul and all your life – in our Lord Jesus Christ, as you learn Him through your studies, and live for Him by whatever you are learning.

For reflection

1. What do we mean by saying that doctrine, when it is sound, brings us to Jesus?
2. From what you have learned about sound doctrine, do you think this is something that believers should let go? Why or why not?
3. How can believers encourage one another in seeking Jesus through all their studies in Scripture and sound doctrine? How might we benefit from so doing?

Next steps – Preparation: Find someone to be a study partner with you as you take up the study of sound doctrine. Learn together, and encourage one another to learn Jesus through all your studies.

The Mind of Christ in His Word: Part 2

For reflection or discussion

1. What do we mean by *sound* doctrine? What's the difference between *sound* doctrine and *false* doctrine?
2. How can we know when we're being influenced more by *false* doctrine than by *sound* doctrine?
3. Why is it so important to sound doctrine that we maintain regular reading, study, and meditation in Scripture?
4. Why should we care what our forefathers in the faith believed about sound doctrine? How can we learn from them?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned about sound doctrine for the renewing of your mind in the mind of Christ? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.