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A PASSIONATE PLEA FOR DOCTRINE

By Antony Rees

Trinity Sunday, just passed, holds a unique position in the Festivals that comprise our Church Year. It is the only one that is concerned with a doctrine not with an event. Here we are immediately faced with a difficulty. Our Church culture in the main has little time for doctrine as such. Experience, the feel good factor, have upstaged it. And not without reason. Doctrine, they say, is dry, divisive; it makes us judgemental, and rationalistic. Dogma makes us dogmatic. The persistent call of the day surely is for the simple Jesus. Alas! such a person does not exist. Not until the Council of Chalcedon in 451AD did the early Church manage to hammer out the complexity of Jesus' person. Then it is not easy to get one's head around the fact that (as John Stott has emphasised) no other person who has ever lived has been so self-conscious and egocentric in his claims and yet more utterly self-effacing and humble in his actions. Is that simple? But leaving this aside

First: Doctrine is Essential for Prayer

The facile assumption that to be devotionally warm we must be theologically illiterate does not gain much sanction from the prayers of the Bible. For instance, after Peter and John have been threatened and forbidden to preach in Jesus' name they make their way to their Christian brethren and betake themselves to prayer. And how do they pray? They pray doctrinally –

“Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them”
Acts 4. 24.

Second: Doctrine is Essential for Worship

When we praise the Lord together we may not quite imitate the children's chorus – ‘I'm H. A. P. P. Y.. .’ – that's not exactly bursting with theological content, is it? But it is not much of an advance on this when we sing ‘We worship You, we worship You, we worship You.. .’ But why should we worship the Lord? Handel's setting of the Hallelujah Chorus should get us on track – ‘For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth’. We don't just worship, we worship ‘because’ or ‘for’ ‘So go on, specify, even if it means running into the embrace of wholesome doctrine!

Third: Doctrine is Essential for Holiness.

Christian morality, a Christian life style cannot stand on its own. It needs a foundation. The Apostle Paul is meticulous about laying out the bread of doctrine first before ever spreading on the butter of practical application. Without this doctrinal foundation we will inevitably fall into the trap of mere moralism and worse - without a foundation the house falls down.

Fourth: Doctrine is Essential for Church Unity.

Look now not at the universal, catholic Church but at a local expression of the Body of Christ. Within such a gathering it is inevitable that disagreements occur. What is the Vicar to do? Surely the teaching Elder's job (1 Tim. 5.17) is to bring the Word of God to bear on these situations, to get behind all the likes and dislikes, the preferences and prejudices to the doctrinal principles and teach these in a conciliatory, unprejudiced way. (2 Tim. 2. 23f.) To take one example. Here is controversy in a Church about having coffee after the Service not in the Church hall but actually in the Church itself. Some feel so strongly about this that they term it ‘sacrilege’, desecrating the Sanctuary, the House of God. But when we look at the New Testament doctrine of the Church, what do we find? The Church is never a building but the people of God assembled together. And in this assembly our relationship to each other is just as important as our relationship to the Lord.

Fifth: Doctrine is Essential for Preaching.

We have kept the best wine to the end. Maybe my diagnosis is wrong but I sense that many of our modern preachers are far too teetotal in this context! I sense that the desperate need of the hour is for doctrinal sermons, apostolic teaching. Otherwise, the “hungry sheep look up and are not fed.”

Archbishop Garbett used to say that he always knew when a Clergyman in his Diocese had stopped reading because if he were an Anglo-catholic he would become a ritualist and if an evangelical - a sentimentalist. Ouch! - that hurt.

Having ministered in India, North London and at Oak Hill College Anthony Rees is now retired.