

Disputing Doctrine

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Does it really matter what you believe? Why can't we just mind our own business and try to get along with others, no matter what our differences in belief?

Doctrinal disputes among those who profess to be of a particular religion or other system of belief are common — and have been for millennia. This applies not only among those who profess to be Christians, but among those of other religions, or political and other belief systems.

As Christians how are we to handle doctrine? And how should we deal with disputes over doctrine?

Actually, there's a lot to be said for minding your own business and striving to get along with others, even those with whom you don't agree. We'll discuss this more later on, but first let's explore the question of the importance of doctrine.

Jesus appeared on earth as a teacher. His teaching activities are referred to far more often in the gospels than any other aspect of his ministry. His teaching, his doctrine, was a key element which set him apart from other religious leaders. "And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" ([Matthew 7:28-29](#) [KJV]; [Luke 4:32](#) ; "doctrine" or "teaching," as it's translated in the NKJV, is from διδαχή [didaché], doctrine or teaching). They sought to kill him because of it ([Mark 11:18](#); [John 8: 37, 40](#)).

Later, the Apostles Jesus sent forth to preach the gospel were persecuted for their doctrine ([Acts 5:25-33](#)). Jesus had warned that as the message of the gospel was proclaimed, families would be divided, and those involved in doing the work of the gospel would be hated ([Matthew 10:16-22](#); [Luke 12:51-53](#)).

Christ's disciples are sanctified by belief in the truth. Sanctified means separated, set apart for God's purpose ([John 17:14-19](#); [2 Thessalonians 2:9-15](#)). **Note that rejecting or believing the truth is what separates those who are perishing from those who are chosen for salvation.** So yes, doctrine is one key factor which divides and separates the true disciples of Jesus Christ from others. As Paul mentions in this passage ([2 Thessalonians 2:13](#)), it was God's purpose from the very beginning to choose for salvation those who would believe the truth and act on it ([Mark 16:15-16](#)). Note carefully that belief in the truth sanctifies us, as does also the Holy Spirit, and the blood of Christ ([1 Corinthians 6:11](#); [Hebrews 10:29](#)).

So doctrine is not something we can safely ignore or take lightly. It is one of the factors that will make the difference between ultimately perishing or having salvation in God's Kingdom.

Reject False Doctrine

As we've seen our sanctification and ultimate salvation are directly associated with the doctrines we hold to. It follows that we must be able to discern the difference between true doctrine and false doctrine, and that we must embrace the truth and reject that which is false doctrine.

But how are you to know what is true doctrine as opposed to that which is false? The only way you can know is to very carefully test that which is taught, to determine if it's true or false, or if it's partially true, but also partially false.

Some have had the idea that you examine doctrines of a Church before you make a commitment, but once you are baptized you no longer ask questions, you just believe whatever the ministry tells you to believe. That is a formula for deception.

No longer is Scripture, the word of God, the standard of truth. That standard is displaced by the word of a minister, or the teaching of a Church. If you take that approach you are likely to wind up being deceived somewhere along the way. You become easy prey for corrupt, deceitful ministers who are often more than willing to encourage their victims to accept their claims of authority at face value.

I was told that someone, I don't remember who, had remarked something to the effect, "As long as the ministers don't teach against the Sabbath, that's all that matters." But Jesus was accused of breaking the Sabbath, and allowing his followers to profane the Sabbath.

In one incident, Jesus' disciples were plucking heads of grain and eating them as they walked along their way through grain fields on the Sabbath. There is no law in Scripture that would make unlawful the plucking of grain heads on the Sabbath and eating them as one walked through a field. But such was a law of their own devising that the Pharisees had promulgated. Their teaching, or doctrine, on this point was in conflict with that of Jesus. And they accused him of permitting his disciples to profane the Sabbath ([Mark 2:23-24](#)).

When Jesus healed on the Sabbath, that, too, was considered by the Pharisees a violation of the Sabbath. After Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath: "Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath [in their opinion], but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God" ([John 5:18](#); cf. "[Did Jesus Break the Sabbath?](#)").

In a later incident Jesus had healed a man of blindness. "Therefore some of the Pharisees said, 'This Man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath' " ([John 9:16](#)).

Jesus did not really break the Sabbath, of course, but he had violated man-made rules about Sabbath keeping. Those who incited the murder of Jesus Christ were Sabbath keepers, or claimed to be, and they had falsely condemned Jesus as a Sabbath breaker.

Your understanding of doctrine has to go far beyond a superficial conception of Sabbath keeping if you want to avoid being deceived. Jesus said, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" ([John 8:31-32](#)).

To keep the words of Jesus, the words of the Bible, you have to know what those words are. So you must study diligently, to learn what the Bible itself teaches. "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" ([2 Timothy 2:16](#)).

The standard of truth is the inspired word of God, recorded and preserved in Scripture for our instruction ([2 Timothy 3:16](#); [2 Peter 1:21;3:2](#)). It is not what some person who has a title says is the word of God. Jesus praised the Church at Ephesus for putting to the test those who claimed, falsely, to be apostles. "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars" ([Revelation 2:2](#)). Paul warned the Corinthians, "For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works" ([2 Corinthians 11:14-15](#)).

The standard of truth is the word of God preserved in Scripture; it is not what a particular Church organization of men teaches. Jesus said in a prayer to the Father, "Your Word is truth" ([John 17:17](#)).

A person in a leadership position in another Church of God fellowship was told by ministers in that Church that he was not to use any Scripture which might cause someone to doubt "what the Church teaches." He was also told that even if he did not believe that a teaching of the Church in question was true, he was to teach it anyway, as though he believed it "one hundred percent."

Yet, God's word says, "You shall not bear false witness..." ([Exodus 20:16](#)). And, "...all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" ([Revelation 21:8](#)). And, "The hypocrite with his mouth destroys his neighbor, But through knowledge the righteous will be delivered" ([Proverbs 11:9](#)).

In a different fellowship, members have been told blasphemously that they have access to God only through the leader of that Church. Do not be deceived by such claims. "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus" ([1 Timothy 2:5](#)).

Jesus told his disciples to "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" ([Matthew 16:6](#)). At first they did not understand, they thought he was talking about literal bread. But when Jesus explained further, "Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and

Sadducees” ([Matthew 16:12](#)).

The Pharisees and Sadducees were the religious leaders of the day among the Jews. Their doctrines were the officially sanctioned teachings of the “Church” of the time, if you want to put it in those terms. Yet, Jesus condemned many of their teachings, and told his disciples to beware of them. Those same leaders opposed the message of Jesus, and the message of his Apostles.

The standard of truth is Scripture correctly understood and faithfully taught. It’s not what self-appointed, unlearned, supposed “Bible experts” may claim is the truth ([Acts 17:10-11](#); [Isaiah 8:20](#)). It’s not fables spun through misguided speculations about prophecy, history, the spirit world, or other philosophical fancies ([1 Timothy 1:4](#); [4:7](#); [2 Timothy 4:4](#)). Nor is it the pretentious, scornful, derisive speculations of God-hating “scholars” who attack the integrity of the Scriptures at every turn. Nor is it the deceptive teachings of those who have subtly blended truth with philosophical speculation and practices borrowed from heathenism and called it “Christianity.” Nor is it the word of anyone else who has perverted the truth or leads others into deception, whatever his methods or motives.

All sorts of unsound, false ideas have been promulgated over the years by such individuals. People who are not ministers, necessarily, although they might be, but who make false claims about this, that, or some other teaching or doctrine.

Some people automatically believe what a minister tells them, no matter how foolish or contrary to fact or a sound understanding of Scripture the teaching. On the other hand, others more or less automatically latch on to foolish ideas of novice or deranged so-called Bible scholars, no matter how shallow and misleading the teaching is.

Again, the only way you can escape deception is exercise caution, study the Bible diligently, prove from the Bible the accuracy of any teaching, and pray for understanding and spiritual wisdom. Also, be careful with whom you associate. If you are spending a lot of time with deceivers, the chances are very good that you will become one of them.

Paul contended with such deceivers during his ministry. This is mentioned several places in the New Testament. He wrote to Timothy, “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. Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith, from which some, having strayed, have turned aside to idle talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm” ([1 Timothy 1:3-7](#)).

Peter warned about those who twist the Scriptures to their own destruction. “...and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation — as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to

understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked" (2 Peter 3:15-17).

Paul had preached to the Corinthians and established the Church in Corinth. He and other apostles had preached to them about the resurrections. But later, to the Corinthians he wrote: "Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" (1 Corinthians 15:12).

There were self-appointed teachers among them making such claims. After discussing the subject further, Paul warns the Corinthians: "Do not be deceived: 'Evil company corrupts good habits.' Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame" (1 Corinthians 15:33-34).

Study the Bible diligently, and be very careful about drawing conclusions which cannot be sustained from a careful reading of **all** the Scriptures on a given subject.

Guard Your Mind

Some who read this article will have been already instructed in a rich store of knowledge that few others have received. The same truths are available to others among you who are prepared to receive them.

It would be a shame to cast away the truth for some perceived temporary gain. How much is your eternal life worth? If you value the idea of being in God's Kingdom, it would behoove you to carefully guard your mind from deception from any quarter. "Understanding is a fountain of life to him who has it, but the instruction of fools is folly" (Proverbs 16:22; Green's Modern King James; cf. Proverbs 4:20-23; 1 Timothy 6:20-21).

Be Willing To Change When Shown You Are Wrong

While you or I may have learned a great deal of valuable knowledge, none of us knows everything. And some things we may think we know at times may, in fact, be wrong. Aside from Jesus Christ, whose understanding was perfect, even the most honest and diligent students of the Bible can, and do, make mistakes.

It is challenging to admit you have been wrong, especially about a deeply held belief or ingrained tradition. It may be even more intimidating to come to the realization that your Church or a respected leader has been wrong. To openly admit such a reality may cost you long held friends, associates, or even family members.

Yet, following where the truth leads is rarely without cost. The Apostle Paul demonstrated his willingness to give up virtually everything, his status, reputation, mode of living, etc., to follow the truth. "Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss

of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ” ([Philippians 3:8](#)).

Paul had been a leader among the leaders of the Jews, possibly a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme governing body among the Jews under the Roman authority. Yet, he had to forsake his privileged position to follow Christ. (1)

Similarly, a minister, as well a lay-member, of a given Church may come to the realization that some, or perhaps even many, teachings of his Church are false. The well-known minister, founder of the Worldwide Church of God, Herbert W. Armstrong, wrote of the difference between a minister who chooses to put Christ first, at whatever cost, or to serve men:

I know of evangelists who probably are sincere in supposing they are serving God – and who would like to be free to proclaim many truths they now hold back. They reason something like this:

“If I go farther, and preach those things, I’ll lose all my support. I’d be cut off from the ministry altogether. Then I could preach NOTHING. Better serve God by preaching as much of the Biblical truth as possible, than to be prevented from preaching anything.” They are relying on the financial support of MEN, or of organizations of men. Anyone in that predicament is the SERVANT OF MEN, and NOT OF GOD, whether he realizes it or not.

(Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong, vol. 1, ch. 30).

When you are shown very clearly from the Scripture that something you have believed is not true, you should be willing to change. Many people grow up believing all kinds of false traditions and teachings concerning the Bible. Quite often, the main impediment to their learning and growth is a refusal to abandon false teachings in favor of the truth.

Even if convicted and convinced of the truth about certain points of faith or doctrine, individuals may fail to follow where the truth leads out of fear, or stubbornness, or a desire to please men, or all of these factors. Jesus said, “How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God?” ([John 5:44](#)).

If one turns his back on truth that has been revealed to him, and rejects it outright, he may soon lose whatever understanding he might have gained. In time, if he continues to reject the truth, he may well wind up in worse shape than he was before ([2 Peter 2:20-21](#)).

The process of falling into deception can be gradual. Others sometimes, having once known the truth, and even followed it for awhile, rashly and rather suddenly throw it overboard and adopt error, and will not be dissuaded from foolish and error laden ideas no matter how much proof is presented exposing the truth ([2 Timothy 4:3-4](#)).

We Must Be Willing to Prove All Things

Paul admonished, “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” ([1 Thessalonians 5:21](#); KJV). The Greek word **δοκιμάζω (dokimázō)** translated “prove” is in the present

tense, imperative mood, implying continuing action. Proving the truth is a lifelong pursuit.

While we hold fast to what is good, what is true from the perspective of Scripture, we must be flexible enough in mind to cast aside error when it's exposed and grow in grace and knowledge of the truth ([2 Peter 3:18](#)).

A willingness to admit error, to admit that you have been wrong, requires humility, intellectual honesty, a diligence in making inquiry, caution, and a mind surrendered to God and his word.

Paul instructed Timothy, "But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife. And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will" ([2 Timothy 2:23-26](#)).

Are you willing to learn, to be taught from God's word, and meekly submit to it, when the truth is clearly and convincingly presented, and no reasonable objections can be made to the truth of what is being taught?

We should be praying for God to correct us where we need to be corrected, as we pray that God will preserve us in his truth ([Jeremiah 10:24](#); [2 Thessalonians 2:15](#)). The traditions spoken of here in 2 Thessalonians are the teachings, the doctrines, preserved in the word of God.

Who Sets Doctrine in the Church?

The true doctrines are those preserved in the Word of God – the Bible. The doctrines of the true Church of God, whose members are enrolled in heaven, are set by God, through Jesus Christ, who is the Logos, the Word, through whom God has spoken to us ([Hebrews 1:1-2](#); [12:23](#); [2 Peter 1:19-21](#); [2 John 1:9-10](#)).

The statement in the latter verse, "Do not receive him into your house nor greet him," is in the context of refusing to receive someone promoting heretical teachings as a brother. We are not to regard heretical teachers as members of the Church, or someone we should pay heed to. But while we may exclude such a person from spiritual fellowship, we should not be unkind to the one who is deceived ([Matthew 5:47](#); [Luke 6:35](#); [Romans 12:17-21](#); [Galatians 6:1](#); [James 5:19-20](#)).

But what about unity? If there is no human authority present to set doctrine won't there be disunity?

Where there is human nature, carnality, there will be a measure of disunity ([1 Corinthians 3:3](#)). Thus, in any organization involving fallible human beings, unity will be imperfect.

Unity is important, but not at the expense of the truth. Genuine fellowship among Christ's followers is predicated on our mutual fellowship with the Father and Jesus Christ ([1 John 1:3](#)). Our fellowship with God, in turn, requires walking in the truth ([1 John 1:6-7](#)). Genuine unity comes about through a mutual fellowship with God and Jesus Christ, as we walk in the light of truth, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit ([Ephesians 4:3](#)).

Genuine unity of the Spirit and faith requires growing in the knowledge of the truth, avoiding error, and speaking the truth in love ([Ephesians 4:13-15](#)). Thus through sharing common understanding of and belief in the truth, and fellowship with God in the Holy Spirit, we are drawn together in unity.

Within the body of Christ is order and peace through the limited authority of those placed as overseers ([1 Corinthians 14:33](#); [Acts 20:28](#); [Ephesians 4:11-12](#)). But adherence to the truth of God's word should never be surrendered for the sake of unity, or any other consideration. Loyalty to God and his truth must always take precedence.

Avoid Unprofitable Disputes Over Doctrine

We are instructed often to avoid getting into foolish disputes and debates over doctrine ([2 Timothy 2:23-25](#)). The Church is not a debating society. A minister should be able to teach the truth of God's word effectively, and must teach it faithfully to be worthy of his office ([1 Corinthians 4:1-2](#)).

Ministers, or anyone in a teaching role in the Church, should be approachable and open to questions, but not get embroiled in endless controversies over matters which have been thoroughly explained. Some people want to argue just for the sake of arguing. A spirit of contention and debate is a work of the flesh ([Galatians 5:19-20](#)).

Quite often individuals in the Church, especially those new in the faith, want to see others, especially friends and relatives, converted, and so begin to try to argue them into believing the truth. Is this wise? Should we try to convert others?

It is our responsibility as a Church to proclaim the gospel to the world as a witness ([Matthew 28:19-20](#); [Mark 16:15-16](#)). The public preaching of the gospel is done through our publications, and other means. It is a collective effort. The ministers are charged with the public preaching of the gospel, although we all play a part in supporting that effort ([Romans 10:14-15](#)).

At the same time, Many people have come into the Church through the influence of friends, acquaintances, or relatives. On the other hand, many have been estranged from former friends, and even family members, as a result of believing the truth. We must not be ashamed of our faith, knowing that we may suffer persecution because of it ([Matthew 10:32-39](#)).

But we are to be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves" ([Matthew 10:16](#)). We should exercise graciousness, wisdom and discretion in how we deal with people ([Psalm 112:5](#)).

There are various ways you can be involved in promoting the gospel without preaching at others or haranguing them. As many have learned by experience, however, it's generally not a good idea to enter into disputes with your friends, relatives, and acquaintances over religion. Most people don't appreciate others trying to impose their religious views on them, and it often creates unnecessary offense and conflict.

When Jesus was told by his disciples that the Pharisees were offended by his teachings he said, "Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch" ([Matthew 15:14](#)). We are to avoid foolish and ignorant disputes ([2 Timothy 2:23-24](#)). Even Paul, when he was publicly preaching the gospel as he was commissioned to do, went only so far in disputing with those who were unwilling to hear ([Acts 18:5-7](#); [19:8-9](#); [28:23-31](#)).

The chance of you convincing someone of the truth of the Bible who is not open to receiving it is slim to none. Those who have become converted partly through the influence of members, have generally not been harangued into it. Usually they see the person's example, ask some questions, and begin to become interested of their own volition. The best way to influence others is by setting a good example in your personal conduct ([Matthew 5:16](#); [Titus 3:8-9](#)). Do your best to live at peace with others, without compromising the truth ([Romans 12:18](#); [1 Peter 2:11-12](#)). You can be sure that if you are living by God's word, people will notice.

If someone asks you, however, about your faith, you should be ready to answer confidently ([1 Peter 3:15](#)). If you can't explain a doctrine clearly and effectively, you probably don't know it as well as you might have thought.

In summary, respect sound doctrine as the truth by which you are sanctified, reject false doctrine, be willing to change when you are wrong, remember that Christ sets doctrine in the Church, avoid foolish disputes over doctrine, and live as a light to others, ready to defend and explain your beliefs clearly and logically when asked about them.

These steps will help you considerably in reaching the goal of the Kingdom of God.

Notes:

1. Paul had been trained in his youth as a Rabbi, or teacher of the law, by Gamaliel, one of the most respected of the leading Pharisees ([Acts 22:3](#); cf. [Acts 5:34](#)). Before his conversion to Christianity, Paul had been active in persecuting Christians under direct appointment by the Sanhedrin ([Acts 22:4-5](#); [26:10-12](#)). He declared, "I cast down my pebble," i.e., cast his vote, to condemn to death Christians who had been arrested and brought before a council for judgment ([Acts 26:10](#)). These facts appear to strongly imply, though do not prove with certainty, that Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin before his conversion. (See Robertson's *Word Pictures in the New Testament* on [Acts 22:5](#) and [Acts 26:10](#)).

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