

# **Voices: The necessity of theology and doctrine for ministry**

March 20, 2019

As an undergraduate student a few years ago, I remember hearing a frequent complaint from some students in my school's department of theology and ministry: "Why do I need to know this? How is this relevant to ministry?"

These students were complaining about specific required courses for ministry majors, courses like Methods of Biblical Interpretation, Christian Doctrine, and Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview.

These courses were notoriously difficult, so it's understandable why they frustrated students. But the complaint that always made me cringe was, "I don't need to know this for ministry."

## **The decline of theology among evangelicals**

According to a 2018 [survey](#) by Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research, 78 percent of self-identified evangelicals in the United States agree with the statement, "Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God."

This is one of the oldest and most serious false teachings in the history of Christianity and is just one example of how severely many Christians in the U.S. misunderstand what Christians ought to believe.

Second Timothy 4:3-4 warns: "For the time is coming when people will not

put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths” (NRSV).

It appears this warning has come true. Sadly, this is not the result only of false teachers promoting heresies in the church, but also of orthodox believers neglecting to teach sound doctrine consistently.

I have heard many Christians, including some ordained ministers, argue that doctrine and theology are secondary—if not altogether unnecessary or even harmful—in the life of the church. These Christians instead emphasize relationships and acts of service.

## **Are theology and ministry a zero-sum game?**

I am sympathetic to the above perspective in some ways. Theological controversies have fractured relationships and torn apart fellowship in both local churches and denominations. Many self-proclaimed “defenders of orthodoxy” are profoundly hateful and lack any sense of charity, viciously attacking alleged “heretics.” I’ve seen it happen, and I’ve been a victim personally.

With this in mind, it’s easy to see why some Christians would rather sideline doctrine and theology in favor of relationships, affection and acts of service. But this approach simply won’t work, and it promotes—perhaps unintentionally—a false dichotomy.

Christians do not have to pick between rigorous theology and more personal/practical concerns. In fact, I would argue theology and doctrine are integral to healthy church relationships and holistic ministry.

Moreover, the Bible *requires* us to have both. Scripture never prioritizes

practical ministry over sound theology but binds them together.

## **A biblical perspective on the connection between theology & ministry**

The Bible is replete with commands and instructions about doctrine, relationships—both with God and with other believers—and acts of service. The interweaving of these three aspects of church life is built into the structure of the Bible itself.

Just read any of Paul’s epistles. He skillfully weaves enormous and complex theological arguments together with instruction about faithful living and healthy Christian relationships.

The Psalms use beautiful poetry to make claims about who God is, how he relates to humanity and how God’s people ought to live in relation to each other and to God.

The Gospels use narrative to explain the identity of Jesus—itsself a theological and doctrinal issue—and connect his identity to relationships and faithful living.

The first section of Deuteronomy is an extended theological argument that uses stories from Israel’s history to justify and explain the Law, which itself governs relationships within the people of God and prescribes acts of service and justice.

## **The logical connection between**

# theology and ministry

It doesn't make logical sense to separate theology and doctrine from relationships and service.

Our relationship with God is the foundation of all our other relationships, and knowing God fundamentally involves knowing things *about* God. God cares what we think and say about him. Yes, there is more than cognitive knowledge involved, but there is not less.

You can do acts of service without doing theology, but the moment someone asks you *why* you do what you do, what will you say? You need doctrine and theology to offer an explanation. Our actions are born out of our beliefs and convictions.

More pragmatically, doctrine is necessary for fellowship. Unlimited theological diversity *does not work*. If you have a church or denomination wherein people have fundamentally different understandings of who God is and what it means to be a Christian, fellowship will eventually break down.

## Living our theology in the midst of relationships

How do we fill this doctrinal gap we see in the American church today?

First, we need to take responsibility for it. Rigorous study of the Bible, church history and theology is not exclusively the task of universities and seminaries. It is the responsibility first and foremost of the local church.

Theological and doctrinal instruction must be a part of preaching. Catechesis needs to be a regular practice. Local churches need to have clear statements of faith and need to make sure members understand them.

We must articulate and uphold explicit doctrinal standards.

Men and women preparing for teaching roles in the church are held to a higher standard by God (James 3:1), so we must seek out the highest quality theological education we can get. Not everyone needs a Ph.D. or a 4.0 GPA, but ministers ought to do the best they can manage according to the means God has provided them, both during and after formal education.

Finally, we must be kind and compassionate. We should study theology and uphold sound doctrine for the sake of loving God and loving others. We should be firm, but never harsh. We should exercise charity, delineating between primary, secondary and tertiary issues. And we should never lose sight of the people for whom we do this.

*Joshua Sharp is a Master of Divinity student and graduate assistant in the Office of Ministry Connections at [Truett Seminary](#) in Waco, Texas.*