

Six Things That Are Irrelevant When It Comes to Doctrine

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Doctrinal disagreements afflict many churches today, and the outcomes of these disagreements usually have significant implications. The stakes of these debates might include whether to hire a particular pastoral candidate, what the particular membership requirements at a church will be, or how the worship services at a church will be conducted. Should women be allowed to preach? Will a church baptize infants? What will the church teach regarding the so-called “charismatic” gifts? The list of possible situations where doctrine makes a crucial difference is endless.

Because doctrinal controversy is both common and a high-stakes situation, it is imperative that Christians, especially church leaders, have a sensible and biblical approach in navigating and settling these conflicts of perspective. Below are six common approaches that are all invalid and irrelevant and should *never* be allowed to be determinative in any church controversy.

What Other Churches Do

Frequently during discussions about policy and doctrine, one or more parties may point to what other churches do. “First Competition Church down the street allows women to preach,” one might say, “and that church is a much larger church than we are. Therefore, they must be right, and we too should allow women to preach.”

Unfortunately, what other churches do may be wrong. Regardless of the other church’s size or prestige, that church, just like any church, is filled with imperfect sinners who often get things wrong. Whether your church should adopt a practice or view on any issue should be determined solely by what the Bible says, not what another church says. If the Bible teaches a view, all churches that teach in conflict with the Bible’s view are wrong and should not be followed in their error.

Understand that we are not discussing here issues that are not addressed by the Bible. For example, a decision regarding whether your church should install red or green carpet can be informed by the experience of other churches. But when the issue is anything that the Bible addresses, God’s Word alone is authoritative, and what other churches do or say is irrelevant.

What My Previous Church Did

This is merely a variation of the above. More than once I have heard someone say, “I don’t believe in infant baptism because the church where I grew up didn’t believe in it.”

Again, whether a view is right or wrong depends solely on what the Bible says about the issue. One’s childhood church or church background can be wrong, but God’s Word is never wrong. Anyone who professes the name of Christ is obliged to submit to Christ’s lordship and bring his beliefs into submission to Christ’s Word, not into submission with one’s previous church.

What the Early Church Did

This too is a variation of the first irrelevant item above. Often during discussions regarding doctrinal practice, one might state, “This view is right because this is what the early church did.”

By “early church,” one usually means the Christian church during the first three to four centuries. The assumption is that whatever the early church did and taught must be true and right.

The flaw in this assumption is obvious. The early church was not infallible. In fact, the early church was no more infallible than the church today. Even the earliest of the early churches (i.e. churches of the New Testament era under the leadership of the apostles) demonstrate that earlier does not guarantee better (e.g. 1 Corinthians, Galatians, etc...).

Whether a practice or view is biblical is not determined by church history. Whether a practice or view is biblical is determined only by the Bible. This is common sense.

What My Friend Does

Yet another irrelevant issue when discussing doctrine is what some friend of mine (or anyone else) does or believes. For example, in the controversy regarding the charismatic gifts, some Christians say, “The spiritual gift of tongues must exist today because my friend Sally speaks in tongues.”

But does one’s sincere belief or experience validate a claim? In other words, if someone believes something to be true, does that make it true? Several centuries ago everyone on the planet believed that the earth was not round but flat, and yet this planet was round even though no one believed it. Today 25% of the world’s population identifies itself as Muslim, and the vast majority of these millions sincerely believe that their religion is the one true religion. Many believe this so sincerely that they are willing to die for their beliefs. Does their sincere belief mean that Islam is right (and therefore Christianity is wrong)? The vast majority of the world sharply disagrees with Christ’s claim to be “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). Does that make Jesus wrong (and therefore our gospel false)?

Clearly whether something is true does not depend on whether someone believes or practices it. Sincere belief can be a sincerely *wrong* belief. When it comes to doctrine and theology and biblical truth, the validity of any perspective or claim is settled by Scripture and Scripture alone, not someone’s experience or belief, no matter how sincere.

What the Culture around Us Thinks

A significant portion of doctrinal conflicts in the Christian church is influenced by the surrounding secular culture. Many Christians instinctively feel an obligation to continually “adapt” their faith to conform to the culture, usually in order to “stay in touch” or “keep up” with the world.

Several denominations in the United States provide tangible examples of this phenomenon. The United Methodist Church, the Anglican Church, the Episcopalian Church, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and several other mainline Protestant denominations have witnessed their organizations drastically change their views regarding the inspiration of Scripture, the necessity of Christ and the gospel for salvation missions, homosexuality, and the role of women in the church due mainly to their decision to be influenced by the surrounding culture.

Although it is a certainty that the secular culture around us will continually change, God's Word does not change, and because Christians are to take their marching orders from God and not the world, Christians are not to adapt their practices and beliefs to the ways of the world. The meaning of Scripture does not change, and there is no logical or righteous reason for Christians to allow the world to influence the church in ungodly ways.

What Some Pastor Says

Bible reading has fallen on hard times. Most Christians rarely actually ever read and study the Bible. Even those in church leadership often fall under this description. Rather than having a fresh and fluent first-hand knowledge of the content of Scripture, many Christians settle for simply trying to gather tidbits of wisdom and knowledge from their pastor's sermons. This is evident whenever someone says, "I believe this particular perspective because Pastor Brown says it's right" or "Three different pastors agree with me on this." Although the words of a wise pastor are precious and should be considered carefully, personal convictions are to be derived through a Berean attitude of "examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so" (Ac 17:11).

When we stand before Christ one day to be judged, we will be rewarded based upon how well we obeyed God's Word, not how well we obeyed the words of pastors. Even when the pastors instructing us are right in their teaching, there is still a subtle yet crucial difference between doing something because it is the commandment of Scripture and doing something because Pastor Brown said so.