

Doctrine Matters

By Bob Young

I am continually impressed when I travel overseas with how bold we are in proclaiming the gospel. I remember Eulalio, a Baxter student, who baptized almost 200 in 2 1/2 years before he returned to the Dominican Republic to work in church planting. I am reminded that the same boldness and clarity are essential in effective evangelism in our own culture. Consider the conclusions of some recent research.

Those who study religion and its impact in our society continue to surface helpful, and at times surprising, research results. A recent report indicated that people who see themselves as lost and out of Christ think doctrine is very important. Of those who admitted that they were lost and without Christ (generally without a church home), a majority indicated that it was important to them to know up front what a church believes and teaches. This communicates their realization that not all churches are alike. It also communicates that they place a high value on finding a church with acceptable teachings (doctrines). A third point of interest is that they want a church that will be consistent and not waver in those beliefs or doctrines.

Asked specifically, over 91% indicated that doctrine is important. This news may not be as good as it seems at first glance, for what they are saying is not that the content of the doctrine matters, but that churches must be uncompromising and clear in their doctrine.

Since this may seem to contradict what we are reading about our increasingly pluralistic and theologically tolerant culture, an illustration will help clarify. I remember a family who were baptized in a church where I ministered. When I asked them what they thought about the church's non-use of instruments of music in worship, they replied, "Every church has the right to set the order of worship and to demand that people comply. If that is what this church believes, that's alright with us." Note their belief that the right to interpret Scripture is the right of every church. They had little if any awareness of objective truth. In this view, the church controls worship, not the Bible. Their only expectation was that the church should know what it believes and practice it without allowing compromise. The results of the research are not suggesting a reversal of the pluralism and tolerance, only that many unbelievers and "pre-Christians" are uncomfortable in a situation where they do not clearly know what to believe and what to practice. Such individuals for the most part would affirm the right of others to believe and practice differently.

What this research means for the church is that visitors to our assemblies want to discover among us truth and conviction. They seek a clear message from God. Then they will decide whether it is a message they are willing to accept, or if they will continue their search for a church home. In the research, growing churches are those that speak clearly in doctrinal matters. Doctrine matters, not only to God, but to many in our world. People want to know what we believe, they want to see that we genuinely believe it as reflected in our lives, and they want to see how that doctrine is lived out in our loving relationships. That means that we must be clear about what we believe, consistent in how we live our beliefs, and caring in our relationships. These three concepts are interrelated.

- We must be clear about what we believe. We must have a faith that is convicted of truth. We must do more than believe, we must with conviction base our lives on that truth.
- We must be consistent in our lifestyles. We must adhere to a distinctive code of conduct which grows out of our convictions and beliefs.
- We must be caring in our relationships. This not only informs the nature of the fellowship of God's people; it also calls us to continue zealously to reach out to others.

What church will reach out effectively without a clear understanding that eternal salvation is only through Christ and that those without Christ are eternally condemned? Churches that are lukewarm in their doctrinal beliefs do not attract unchurched people.

Compromise may be the rule in our society, but people expect more when they go to church. People value doctrine because our society is in search of absolutes. People want to learn truth, know truth, live truth--even when they believe that truth may be different for another person.

The research suggests that clear, consistent, caring teaching will bring people to church and keep them there.