**A “Buffet Style” Christianity: Negotiables & Non-Negotiables of Christian doctrines (JD11)**

It’s the dreaded “D” word! What is it? Doctrine! A study indicates that 36% of conservative Protestant youths think it’s okay to pick and choose parts of the faith they agree with. The number may not improve much with the adult Christians! In some ways, this is a reaction against intolerance that some Christians exhibit against other believers on account of not-so-essential doctrines. For instance, in 2005, *International Mission Board* of Southern Baptist Convention decided to no longer accept missionary candidates who speak in tongues; the vote was 50-to-15. As if that wasn’t intolerant enough, shortly thereafter, the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches severed ties with Cedarville University, a Christian school in Ohio, on account that the college decided to receive support from Southern Baptist Convention. Why? One reason was that although the Regular Baptists deemed that the Convention’s vote against speaking-in-tongues was a “step in the right direction,” it still wasn’t unanimous. Wow, isn’t this enough to forget about doctrines! So what should we do who are caught between the paleo-fundamentalists who knit-pick over every doctrine, and the postmodernists who hardly care about it?

**Q:** Have you been in a situation where too much or too little emphasis was made on doctrines? Share it.

**A. In order to truly understand this study, we need a perspective.**

1. In 2 Sam. 6, we read about King David’s attempt to bring back the ark of God to Jerusalem.

However, the man who tried to keep it from falling from the cart that had stumbled was instantaneously killed. As a result, “David was angry” (2 Sam. 6:8) mainly because he couldn’t understand why his good intention was met with God’s searing judgment.

**Q1:** First, how was the ark carried (2 Sam. 6:3) and who brought it (2 Sam. 6:1-2)? Is that important?

**R:** The ark was carried on a new cart, accompanied by 30,000 chosen men of Israel. What a sight!

**Q2:** Why was God not content with the 1st attempt to bring the ark to Jerusalem (1 Chron. 15:13-15)?

**R:** While sulking in his palace, David came to realize that they “did not inquire of him about how to do it in the prescribed way.” In other words, he was ignorant of God’s doctrine with respect to how the ark ought to be transported. The 30,000 chosen men looked quite impressive but God wanted the Levites to carry it; the new cart was more efficient & faster but the LORD wanted them to carry it with the poles on their shoulders.

2. Meaning: When the doctrine of how the ark ought to be carried and who should carry it was violated, God did not turn relativistic and said, “It’s OK, whatever way will do?” No, the ark was not going anywhere until it was handled in the prescribed way! It was a non-negotiable.

**B. Read 17:1-13.** How did each person handle the doctrines of Torah, the first 5 books of the OT? They appear quite religious but looking closely we find that they were re-shaping the faith & doc-trine of Torah according to any way they saw fit. It’s like, *Gospel according to Me* where key doc-trines are reconfigured to please whatever I deem to be right! Let’s evaluate what each person did.

1. The elated mother, after recovering her silver, consecrated it to God (17:3)—that’s a good move.

**Q:** But what makes her next move a violation of an important doctrine of the OT (18:24, Ex. 20:4)?

**R:** She promptly used some of the silver to make an idol out it, which his son Micah referred to it as “the gods I made” (18:24). By doing so, she violated the 2nd Commandment (Ex. 20:4 *You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.)*

2. Observe what her son did (17:5); obviously, he was religious, having built a shrine in his home.

**Q:** But which doctrine/regulation did Micah break when he built his own shrine (Ex. 29:42-43), in-stalled his son, an Ephraimite as priest (Num. 1:50, Deut. 17:9), & made an ephod (Ex.39:1-2)?

**R:** First, by building his own shrine, he ignored the LORD’s regulation that He will meet with the Israelites only at the Tabernacle *(at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting . . . I’ll meet you and speak to you)*; second, by making his Ephraimite son a priest, Micah violated the LORD’s regulation that only Levites are to be priests (*Appoint the Levites to be in charge of the tabernacle”; “Go to the priests, who are Levites);* third, he made his own ephod to be worn by his son, which was strictly for the priests when ministering in the tabernacle (*They also made sacred garments for Aaron, the ephod of gold . . .).*

3. Chapter 17 ends with a wandering Levite who leaves his home to live elsewhere (17:7-13).

**Q:** What doctrine/regulation did this Levite break? Note that 48 cities with adjoining pastures were given to the Levites as their dwelling places (Jos. 21:1-42; Num. 1:50-53)

**R:** First, he broke the doctrine regarding the responsibility of the Levites, which was serving the LORD through handling the things associated with the Tabernacle. (Num. 1:50-54: *the Levites . . . are to carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings. . . . [51] Whenever the tabernacle is to move, the Levites are to take it down, and whenever the tabernacle is to be set up, the Levites shall do it.*). But this Levite, by becoming a personal priest of a family shrine, served men. Second, he abandoned the place of dwelling that the Levites inherited from the LORD and arbitrarily settled in area of Ephraim.

4. Micah, after breaking God’s doctrines & regulations, showed his spiritual obliviousness when he said: “Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest.”

**Q:** He really believed that God approved of what he was doing! What does this reveal? (Hos. 4:6)

**R:** These people displayed an amazing level of ignorance, having little or no idea what God was truly like. King David’s 1st attempt to bring the ark back to Jerusalem was no different! This truly is the case of, “My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge” (Hos. 4:6a).

5. How did the writer of Judges sum up this period? “Everyone did as he saw fit” (17:6b). This is to say, “Everyone questioned universalism and the belief in ‘objective reality,’” which is how one intellectual described postmodernity. Yes, postmodernity has gone right back to premodernity!

**Q1:** Would you like to live in a society where anything goes? Give some examples from today’s world of everyone doing what he sees fit? (i.e., it was never like that before but now it is).

**R:** In Mexico, the drug cartels are killing and decapitating anyone who stands in their way to selling more drugs to the US. Living in fear, it seems that everyone has installed tall gates made of bars to protect themselves. In the US, the latest entry to the long list of “anything goes” is an attempt to redefine the concept of marriage to include union between the members of same sex.

**Q2:** Can you think of any other examples? (Then say, *Let’s look at what’s going on in the church*.)

**C. 1st: We need to discuss what are the negotiables & non-negotiables of the Christian doctrines?**

1. Example of a negotiable doctrine: In the church in Rome, a dispute arose between those Jewish Christians who wanted to keep the Jewish festive days (e.g., Feast of Tabernacles) and kosher law (e.g., no pork) and those who did not because of the freedom they now had in Jesus.

**Q:** It was a delicate matter but let’s see how Apostle Paul handled it? (Rom. 14:1-6)

**R:** In short, he handled it as a negotiable matter, saying that he who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and he who considers one day more sacred than another should not look down on the person who considers everyday alike. In summation, Paul said, “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” These matters are important but are not essential.

2. Example of a non-negotiable doctrine: 1 John was written at the end of the 1st century to combat *Docetics* (meaning *appear* in Greek) who taught that while Jesus appeared to have come in the flesh, he was all spirit in reality. Its full-blown version was known in the 2nd cent. as *Gnosticism*

**Q1:** Was this OK with John? How did he respond to this way of thinking (1 Jn. 4:3, 6)?

**R:** It certainly wasn’t, for he wrote: “This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard it coming and even now is already in the world” (*Spirit* of *falsehood*).

**Q2:** If this issue didn’t affect the matter of salvation, would John have an issue of it (Gal. 1:6-7)?

**R:** Of course not. In Gal. 1:6-7, Paul said, “Different gospel—which is really no gospel at all” with respect to a teaching that added circumcision to the gospel as a prerequisite to salvation. Paul declared that those who teach it ought to be eternally condemned (Gal. 1:9). Yes, there’re non- negotiable doctrines precisely because any deviation from their clear teaching in the Bible corrupts the gospel, which then loses the power to save.

**Q3.** In what sense does 1 Tim. 4:16 hold up the importance of keeping the non-negotiable doctrines?

**R:** It says, “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save yourself and your hearers.” Basically, an error made with respect to essential doctrines will affect your salvation! Does this mean you can lose it? That discussion is for another time, but a defective doctrine can affect the quality of our spiritual life.

3. An example of a non-negotiable doctrine being negotiated: We may not understand the Trinity

very well but it is clearly an essential doctrine of the Bible. We believe that there are 3 persons (i.e., God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit) in one God-head. However, the famed Fuller seminary professor (now retired) Peter Wagner said the following in 2004 book *Changing church:* “The wording of the doctrine of the Trinity—which states that the Godhead is made up of 3 Persons—needlessly excludes Oneness Pentecostals [who deny the Trinity] and prevents many Muslims and Jews from converting to Christianity.”

**Q1**: Why is Wagner trying to redefine Trinity?

**R:** Well, he means well since his reason for negotiating the Trinity is to win the Muslims and Jews.

**Q2:** Why would his effort be futile? Should the change be made to the doctrine of Trinity, is that sufficient to bridge the theological gap among Christians, Muslims, and the Jews?

**R:** Of course not, since there’re other gaps that need to be negotiated. For instance, the Muslims deny that Jesus is the Son of God and that He died at all and certainly not on the cross. The Jews do not consider Jesus the Messiah. Wagner will then need to further negotiate to include everyone under the tent of God’s love. That is love without knowledge!

4. What does this mean? With respect to negotiable doctrines such as the rapture and spiritual gifts, the Bible believing Christians ought to show tolerance and liberty. But with respect to non-negotiable doctrines, the church must show unity in her assertion of the biblical truth.

**D. What is going on in the church today?**

1. It was said earlier that the dreaded “D” word among Christians is doctrine!

**Q1:** Why do you think doctrine is not popular in the church today?

**R:** It starts with a tendency to shy away from preaching it from the pulpit due to its perceived lack of relevance in attracting unbelievers to the church and/or fear that it would offend & divide the people. Another reason (as stated in the introduction) is that many Christians use it to judge, knit-pick, and reject other brother over minute differences; thus, it becomes a great “turnoff.”

**Q2**. What is the most dangerous thing that can happen when doctrine is rarely taught in the church?

Before responding, consider the 2005 Time Magazine survey in which evangelical Christians were asked, “Can a good person who does share your religious beliefs attain salvation or go to heaven?” 68% of them said yes, which was only 5% higher than what non-Christian said.

**R:** It can be summed up as “love without knowledge,” which is as dangerous as “knowledge without love.” Love without knowledge makes it possible for those who don’t really believe in the gospel to think that they are on their way to heaven. Nothing is worse than that!

2. Practical suggestion: If this study made any sense, then start reading the Bible seriously, starting with the most significant theological book in the Bible: Romans then read John and Galatians.

**E. Some key essential doctrines of the Christian faith are** (as the writer sees it):

The Trinity (and all that this doctrine entails such as the nature of God and the HS), the deity & humanity of Christ (Virgin birth implied), the resurrection of Christ, his physical return to earth; salvation by grace through faith in Jesus as the only redemptive sacrifice for men, the sinfulness of men, the reliability of the inspired Scripture, the reality of a literal heaven and hell, etc.