

Doctrine or Opinion? Learning to Discern God's Will

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A few weeks ago, I preached a sermon about the difference between doctrine and opinion. Afterward, I was asked if I could put those thoughts into an article. I was glad for the suggestion because this is a distinction every Christian needs to understand. We must know the difference between what God has required and what He has left to human judgment.

We live in a time when certainty is often viewed with suspicion. “That’s just your interpretation” has become a common response to biblical teaching. Sometimes people even suggest that claiming to know the truth is arrogant. Yet Jesus said, “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

Our confidence is not in our own wisdom. It is in the fact that God has spoken and has given us His Word.

This matters because there are dangers on both sides. If we treat God's commands as optional, we can disobey Him while dismissing the matter as personal opinion. But if we elevate our preferences to the level of divine law, we bind requirements God never gave. Faithfulness requires us to avoid both errors.

Paul told Timothy, “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 2:15). Handling Scripture correctly requires diligence. We cannot begin with what we want to believe and then search for verses to support it. We must allow God's Word to determine our conclusions.

The first principle is simple: truth is knowable because God has revealed it. Proverbs 23:23 says, “Buy the truth, and do not sell it, also wisdom and instruction and understanding.” Truth is valuable enough to seek and precious enough to keep. We should never trade it for convenience, popularity, tradition, or comfort.

Knowing that truth can be known does not mean every passage is equally easy to understand. Peter acknowledged that some things in Paul's writings are “hard to understand” and warned that some twisted the Scriptures (2 Peter 3:16). Difficult passages require careful study, but difficulty does not make truth unknowable.

That study must consider everything Scripture teaches about a subject. The Bereans provide an excellent example. They “received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11). They listened carefully, but they also examined what they heard against God's Word.

We should do the same. Rather than building a doctrine upon one verse removed from its context, we should ask what the passage says, why it was written, and how it fits with everything else Scripture reveals about the subject. Paul described his message as “words of truth and reason” (Acts 26:25). Biblical faith does not ask us to stop thinking. It calls us to reason carefully from what God has revealed.

Yet a good method alone is not enough. We also need the right heart.

Ezra provides a beautiful pattern: “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel” (Ezra 7:10). Notice the order. Ezra prepared his heart, sought God's law, practiced it, and then taught it.

That order matters. We sometimes approach Scripture already knowing the conclusion we want. Instead of asking what God has said, we look for passages that confirm what we already believe. Honest Bible study requires something more difficult: a willingness to be corrected.

Apollos demonstrated that humility. Acts 18 describes him as eloquent and “mighty in the Scriptures,” yet his understanding was incomplete. Aquila and Priscilla “took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26). Apollos was knowledgeable enough to teach, but humble enough to be taught.

We need that same spirit. The question is not merely, “Can I defend what I believe?” We should also ask, “Am I willing to change what I believe if Scripture shows that I am wrong?”

This brings us to the practical distinction between doctrine and opinion. Doctrine concerns what God has required. Opinion concerns matters God has left within the realm of lawful human judgment.

Consider the Lord's Supper. Acts 20:7 tells us, “Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread.” The church did not invent the Lord's Supper, and we are not free to replace it with something of our choosing. Yet Scripture does not specify whether the Lord's Supper must occur before or after the sermon. That arrangement is a matter of judgment.

The same is true of many practical decisions. Scripture does not tell us what time on Sunday a congregation must assemble, how long the sermon must be, or whether a Christian must wear a suit and tie to worship. Wisdom may guide such decisions, but we must not turn wisdom or preference into divine law.

At the same time, we cannot move something God has revealed into the category of opinion merely because it is unpopular or inconvenient. Baptism is one example. Jesus said, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16). Peter told convicted sinners, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). Ananias told Saul, “Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16).

Those passages are not matters of personal preference. They are part of God's revealed teaching concerning salvation. We do not have the authority to treat what God has said as though He had not said it.

This is why distinguishing doctrine from opinion requires both conviction and humility. Conviction says, “If God has spoken, I will stand upon what He has said.” Humility says, “If God has not spoken, I will not pretend that my preference carries His authority.”

Both are necessary.

Jesus said, “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). We do not need freedom from doctrine. We need the freedom that comes from truth. May we have hearts humble enough to listen, minds diligent enough to study, and faith strong enough to obey what God has revealed.