I never met George R. Brunk I, but I wish I had.
I’ve wished that ever since I came across his little 1935 booklet entitled Rightly Dividing the Scriptures. It’s his discussion of the doctrine of salvation, and about halfway through the book he launches a memorably colorful assessment of imputed guilt, a doctrine he strongly rejects: “This horrible theory taught by Calvinistic, fractional-fundamentalist, false-security Darbyites, when followed to its logical conclusions results in the doctrine of the eternal security of wicked ‘believers,’ and in the doctrine of a wicked and damned Christ, the first of which is heresy and the last blasphemous.”

I don’t intend here even to comment on the doctrine of imputed guilt, important as that discussion may be. What fascinates me, even as I recoil from the approach, is the simple fact that a prominent leader of the Mennonite church during the first half of the twentieth century chose to frame his theological convictions in such polemical terms. It’s anything but an invitation to thoughtful dialogue. (What would you say in response!) It’s a clear assertion of what Brunk believes the Bible teaches. And doesn’t teach. And while I’m not proposing that we all start talking or writing that way—I haven’t and don’t plan to—I can’t help but admire the clarity and strength of his conviction. And I’m curious what sort of person he must have been. That’s why I wish I could have met him.

Brunk is hardly the first to use dramatic language to engage theological controversy. During the eighteenth century Charles Wesley, the great hymn-writer of the English revival, used hymns not only as expressions of worship but also as theological arguments. The Calvinist revivalist George Whitefield complained to Charles Wesley’s brother, John, about some of Charles’ new poetry: “Dear Brother Charles is more and more rash. He has lately printed some very bad hymns.” One of the hymns he likely had in mind was a seventeen-verse poem on God’s everlasting love in which Wesley offered a summary of the Calvinist doctrine of salvation. He went on to evaluate that doctrine with these lyrics:

15. How long, Thou jealous God! How long
    Shall impious worms Thy word disprove,
    Thy justice stain, Thy mercy wrong,
    Deny Thy faithfulness and love?

16. Still shall the hellish doctrine stand,
    And Thee for its dire author claim?
    No: let it sink at Thy command
    Down to the pit from whence it came.

No wonder Whitefield reacted, though, to be fair, the rhetoric was heated going both directions. Do you get a feel for just how intense the controversy must have been? And how strongly Wesley held his point of view?

I don’t intend to pursue the Wesleyan/Calvinist debate here either, but again, I’m intrigued with the willingness of leaders like Wesley to state his convictions so forcefully. What Wesley shared with Brunk was the belief that ideas have consequences and that some doctrines are worth arguing about in the strongest of terms.

Contrast this with the description of the recent national convention of the U.S. Mennonite Brethren. This past July they revised the article from their confession of faith addressing nonresistance. The earlier version had stated that “in times of national conscription or war, we believe we are called to give alternative service where possible.” The new one simply notes that “As in other peace churches, many of us choose not to participate in the military.” That’s a dramatic shift!
But far from being dominated by heated argument, the discussion at the convention apparently proceeded calmly even with a serious decision at stake. The MB’s magazine, Christian Leader, reported that “delegates with a variety of viewpoints spoke courteously during the morning floor discussion as well as the afternoon workshop.”

I’m not planning to discuss the MB’s confession of faith, and whether or not changing it was a good thing, important though that question is. Rather, I’m intrigued that, in this case, with regard to an issue of great importance to this group historically, they’re able to discuss it politely as they share conflicting perspectives. And when it came to a vote they approved a new article that essentially says, “many of us believe one thing about this and many of us believe something completely different.”

Which brings us finally to the question behind this meandering introduction: how do we decide whether to argue forcefully for a particular doctrinal perspective or to agree amicably to affirm opposing views? Or more importantly, how should we decide?

Or to put it yet another way, does doctrine matter? The Apostle Paul thought it was important. He encouraged Titus to “teach what is appropriate to sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). He urged Timothy to “watch [his] life and doctrine closely” (I Tim. 4:16). He warned believers in Ephesus not to be tossed around by “every wind of teaching” (Eph. 4:14).

Though not everyone seems convinced. You’ve likely heard someone say that “doctrine divides,” implying that since discussions about doctrine so often lead to division, we’re better off avoiding them. Of course doctrine divides! But that doesn’t, in itself, mean that it’s a bad thing. Without any doctrinal definition we end up in an interfaith dialogue, with multiple ways to God, taking turns describing what works for us. And yet we recognize that not all doctrinal questions are of equal importance. Some are clearly central to historic Christian faith: is Jesus the only way to God? Others seem, to most people, not important at all: should we use buttons or hooks and eyes? If we read the new CMC history—Together in the Work of the Lord—we find our own stories of passionate church conflicts involving issues like clothing styles and whether or not to use new technology.

How do we decide which doctrines are important and which ones aren’t? Or, to return to the MB example, on which ones we take a clear stand and with which ones we affirm a diversity of perspectives? That’s a critically important question, but it will have to wait for another time and place.

For now, a few comments about why it matters and where we should be talking about it.

Doctrine is important because we live in an era inclined to celebrate whatever works. I was recently in a conversation with a group of pastors discussing a teacher whose ministry has grown to be large and influential. Someone asked whether the teacher’s doctrine was sound, and another pastor quickly responded, “I don’t know anything about him, but if his church is growing, I’m in!” I’m confident that, if pushed, he would have qualified the quick endorsement, since there are groups somewhere whose teaching, though “successful,” he’d nonetheless not embrace. But he gave voice to a powerful impulse that we all feel: we’re drawn to success. And I can’t think of a way to discern which groups are which without talking about doctrine.

So where and how should we discuss and teach doctrine? Let me propose three contexts.

**Doctrine should be discussed and taught in congregations.** Sunday morning sermons, Sunday school classes, youth group Bible studies, and mid-week small group gatherings all provide opportunities to teach and think carefully about what we believe and why. CMC’s new curriculum, Kingdom Come, is a marvelous resource that could be useful in any of those contexts.

**Doctrine should be discussed and taught in CMC pastors’ gatherings.** Pastors gather for fellowship, as they should. They gather for encouragement, as they should. They gather to share how God is working, as they should. But pastors also should reflect deliberately and systematically on the understandings of Scripture they share and hope to nurture in their congregations.

**Doctrine should be discussed and taught at places like RBC.** One important role that RBC has played from its beginning has been to teach Bible and doctrine systematically. That was one of the reasons the school was created. While the majority of people attending CMC churches has not attended RBC, a significant percentage of CMC pastors has. And that has shaped the conference.

Doctrine matters. Ideas have consequences. We may never adopt the combative style of Brunk or Wesley, but we would be wise to think deliberately and collectively about what we believe and why.

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