

## **“THE BIG PICTURE: WHY DOCTRINE MATTERS.”**

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**First Christian Reformed Church**

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**Sermon Texts: Exodus 24:15-18; 32-1-5**

**Belgic Confession**

### **Introduction.**

Last month the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom heard a case involving religion. Britain's Lord Toulson, a Justice of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom, wrote in their ruling, “Religion should not be confined to religions which recognize a supreme deity” (website, Reuters, December 11, 2013).

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Ronald Dworkin in his book, *Religion Without God*, writes:

“... religion is deeper than God. ... A belief in a god is only one possible manifestation or consequence of that worldview.”

R.C. Sproul in his book, *Grace Unknown*, talks about the difference between religion and theology. If I were to ask you the difference between religion and theology you might be left scratching your head. You might be tempted to say they're the same thing, but actually there's a huge difference.

**Religion** is a human activity. If you go to a university you will find the religion department grouped with the anthropology, sociology and psychology departments. All of those sciences have to do with human behavior. Religion is a certain kind of human behavior that can be studied and researched and observed.

When we study religion the subject matter is man. You don't need a Bible to study religion. And you can have a religion without a god. Secular humanism is a religion without God.

**Theology**, on the other hand, is the study of God. Theology is God-centered. This is why the Bible is so important to the proper study of theology. Christianity is a revelation, meaning that what we know about God doesn't come from us or from observation. It comes to us from the mind of God.

The Bible is from God and the Bible is about God. The study of God and what God says is theology.

Before return to our study of the *Belgic Confession* and Article 23, I want to take time this evening to remind us of why we do this, why we read and preach through our creeds and confessions.

Some people say that doctrine is dry, dusty and boring. Others say that doctrine divides. Others say that just believing in Jesus is enough and we don't need to concern ourselves with all the other details.

Why do we talk about theology and doctrine? Simply stated understanding theology and doctrine keeps our faith from becoming just another man-made religion.

### **Exodus 24 and 32.**

Let me illustrate this from our text in Exodus 24 and 32. You know the story well. Moses led the people of God out of Egypt through the wilderness to Mt. Sinai where God meets them.

God calls Moses up on the mountain in the midst of His glory and splendor. The scene is full of thunder and lightning, fire and smoke. He spends 40 days in the presence of God. What is going on during those 40 days? *It's pure theology*, it's utterly God-centered. God is revealing Himself and His will and His ways to Moses. God gave to Moses the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments written on them with the finger of God.

But meanwhile back at the ranch. What's happening down in the valley?

The people got impatient and said to Aaron, make us gods for ourselves that we can worship and bow down to. *This is religion*. The people making their own god in the image of a creature. In this case the image was a bull which happened to be the sacred image of the religion of Egypt.

The people had a religion of their own making, they could control it, change it, do with it as they pleased. This god required no specific obedience. This god was deaf, dumb, blind and impotent. In essence it's a religion without a god. There was ritual and practices but no substance or reality. There was no true theology. And they could have their pleasures also.

*What happens when we shift from theology to religion?* What happens when theology is abandoned and we turn to man-centered ideologies?

Life gets more fun right? Eat, drink and be merry. Wine, women and song. We can cut loose from all those old fashion traditions and rules. When you take God out of the picture anything goes, you can do as you please because you are the only one you are trying to please.

But the universe doesn't work that way for long. God created the universe and He created us in His image and He created us to know Him and worship Him. He built into us a conscience that tells us when we have turned away from Him and His ways. We experience guilt and shame and eventually death. The wages of sin is death. Life doesn't get better, it gets worse.

The American experiment is a clear picture. The more we abandon God and truth the further we fall into immorality and decadence and apostasy. In the church in America, the further we get from the Biblical center, the worship becomes more self-oriented, more psychological, more feel good, more pragmatic, how-to oriented, in a word, man-centered.

The modern church in America, including both the mainline denominations and evangelical protestant churches, has lost its theological center and core. The house is still standing but the foundation is rotting away. The tree still has leaves but the trunk is hollowed out from the inside.

The scene with the golden calf highlights how much the people were in error and how dangerous that error was and how necessary it was to know the truth of God and to obey the truth of God.

We must return to the firm foundations of the Word of God and look deep into those ancient wells, wells called Creeds and Confession.

Reflection or meditation on truth is what makes theology come alive and become practical in our lives. We are rational beings who are created to wrestle with understanding what it means that God has revealed Himself to us and for what purpose.

Scripture says that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. Similarly the knowledge of God is the beginning of wisdom. Once we understand and confess the truth, that truth leads to practical application in life and in culture. Once the foundation is laid, we can start building something, we can start doing things. But the order has to be right.

Without a foundation in the truth as reveal by God in Scripture people go looking for a foundation somewhere else. Eastern spirituality, radical feminism, earth centered environmentalism, social justice, politics or pleasures.

Without a foundation in the truth pastors become managers, psychologists, and chaplains, rather than shepherds, teachers, and theologians.

Without a foundation in the truth there is no Christian faith.

The church today is wavering between two opinions, and many in the church are not absolutely convinced that the Bible is absolutely true.

The passion for truth is being lost today. We have a set of beliefs but no great conviction about them. What we are passionate about is self.

If you ask people today they will still say that they believe in God and in heaven and that Jesus died on the cross and that sin is still wrong and there is a judgment coming. They would say they are a Christian if you ask them. The difference is not so much in what they believe but in what they do. Christian practice has changed.

The world is hostile to truth and to those who hold on to absolutes. So now we have people who hold their beliefs but not in any way that shows them to be different from others.

So Christians sleep together before marriage, Christians divorce at about the same rate as non-Christians, Christians enjoy all the same pleasures as anyone else. Christians spend their money the same way. Christians don't think about holiness as much as they think about happiness.

Even seminaries don't focus on holiness, but on how to be a successful professional in a religious career. The biggest churches with the biggest salaries are run by CEO pastors who are managers, not shepherds and theologians.

### **Application and conclusion.**

What can we learn from Moses and Aaron, from Mt. Sinai and the golden calf?

*One lesson* is the importance of theological education and understanding Biblical doctrine. It is crucial to the future of the church to have men well trained in Biblical doctrine. As the seminary goes so goes the church a decade or two later. The massive shifts in a liberal direction in denominations over the past hundred years started in the seminaries.

We need men who have been to the mountain, who have spent time on the mountain learning the truth of God. They must be taught and trained by those who uphold the absolute authority and truthfulness of the whole council of God's Word and who are able to stand up to the pressures of culture and political correctness.

We need men who will not just say what the itching ears of the masses want to hear. We need men who can say no to the demands for something new and exciting, and therefore supposedly more relevant.

Aaron failed miserably in his first test of leadership. He caved into their desires, he feared man more than God. And how quickly did the people forget all their deliverances and blessings and disobeyed God's commands.

This is why new seminaries and schools for training pastors have to start. Harvard and Yale and Princeton all started as pastor training schools. They are godless now. Now the next generation of denominational seminaries are slowly becoming less and less orthodox, so newer non-denominational seminaries have started.

In the last twenty five years or so we are seeing larger churches starting their own pastors' colleges. Part of this new movement is the realization that theological training needs to be more hands on and experienced based, on the job training. The training shouldn't just be academic and removed from the realities of pastoral ministry.

This is the case of pastors' colleges like the one Brian Bunn is attending in Bloomington, IN. Brian is the exception as the only non-resident student with a full time job. The rest of his

classmates take all their classes in one day and the rest of the time is spent in ministry with a goal to planting new churches.

The church in America needs pastors trained in true Christian doctrine if it is going to survive and thrive. And the church in America needs church members who know their doctrine so they can rightly discern whether a new pastor is faithful to true Biblical doctrine. Search committees are way too naïve and assume way too much. You can't do that anymore in America.

If we don't wake up to these realities we will face as fearful a consequence as the people of Israel.

**A second lesson** from our text is a reminder that my task as a pastor is not to be new or original or creative in what I teach. My task is to open up our understanding of the ancient words, unchanging and ever true.

I am not interested in innovation, only in renovation or restoration, to repair the old foundations, to dig open the old wells.

Pastors are supposed to be like Paul and say:

**I Corinthians 15:3** For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Pastors are supposed to be like Jude and say:

**Jude 3** I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

Pastors are supposed to come to the end of their ministries and say as Paul did:

**Acts 20:25-27** And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. 26 Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, 27 for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

**A third lesson** from our text is that to not love the truth is suicidal, it's a death wish.

**II Thessalonians 2:9-10** The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, 10 and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, ***because they refused to love the truth*** and so be saved.

Indifference to the truth is a sure sign of spiritual death.

**II Thessalonians 2:12** all may be condemned *who did not believe the truth* but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Israel's religion of the golden calf was just that, indifference to the truth, and turning to pleasure in unrighteousness. And it was deadly.

*A fourth lesson* from our text is a clear call to stop wavering between the gods we love in the valley and to flee to the mountain to seek the God of glory who inhabits the heavens.

This is a call to push against all the temptations of worldly pleasures and pursuits and interests and seek the scary but holy God of all creation. This is a call to seek wisdom and knowledge and truth by seeking to know the one true God. This is a call to no longer think of theology and doctrine as dull, boring or old fashion, but rather to see it as life-giving and life-sustaining.

Truth is life. Truth is freedom. Truth is hope. Truth is peace of mind and security and rest.

The mountain is hard, the path is narrow, but the result is a vision of the splendor and majesty and glory of a holy and good God who loves us with an unquenchable love.

I'm not interested in preaching religion. In religion there is no lasting joy or peace.

I'm not interested in being a pastor of a religion. Religion is no help at the hospital or care home or county jail or at funerals.

I'm not interested in being a teacher of religion. It's too man centered, too low to the earth, not glorious enough, not wise enough, not relevant enough.

The only things that are truly relevant are things that are eternal and religion isn't eternal.

I want what made it possible for Paul to sing in prison. I want what made it possible for Daniel not to sweat in the lion's den. I want what made it possible for Stephen to say, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." I want what made Zacchaeus say joyfully he would give half of everything to the poor.

God is not honor or worship by falsehood or lies or deception. We love and worship God by loving the truth. If we care about the truth we show that we care about God. To love the truth and to speak the truth is to echo and imitate God. Loving truth is God-glorifying.

This is why we preach and teach the Creeds and Confession and why we should love them and know them.

Love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul, strength and mind.