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IF SALVATION IS BY FAITH, WHY DOCTRINE?

Adventist Christianity is viewed in many ways. For some it is a legal religion: obeying its commandments, returning a tithe faithfully, and attending church.

Others see its essence in socially correct living: giving to the poor, establishing schools, caring for the homeless, and healing the sick.

Yet others view it as the acquisition of knowledge: knowing the 28 Fundamental Beliefs, recognizing that Saturday is the true Sabbath, understanding the investigative

judgment, accepting the literal, visible soon return of Christ.

Adventist Christianity is not a check list of do's and don'ts. It cannot be reduced to meditation or a list of doctrines. It is not a human philosophy. Though each of these approaches plays an important role, what is at the heart of the Christian message?

The Essence of Christianity

Christ summarized the essence of Christianity: “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3).¹ The sum of Christianity is to come to a knowledge of God and Jesus Christ. The word *knowledge* used here does not refer to mere facts and figures, such as the distance between two cities. It involves the kind of knowledge that leads to a personal relationship with another individual. The goal of salvation is to enter into a full, rewarding, and mature fellowship with God and Jesus Christ that begins in the present and will last for eternity.

God created us for communion with Himself. He spent the very first evening after Creation in the garden in fellowship with Adam and Eve. He made us in His own image so we may fellowship with Him. When our character is in harmony with that of God, we can relate to Him with no barriers. The Lord desires such close fellowship with us that the Bible often uses the imagery of marriage to describe it (Jer. 3:14).

Unfortunately, sin shattered the original Edenic picture of life in harmony with God. Our sins have separated us from God and have hidden His face from us (Isa. 59:2). We are like a branch severed from the tree, a light bulb removed from its socket, a water faucet disconnected from its source.

Sin is the transgression of the character of God (1 John 3:4). When we violate the character of another individual, we distort or even break our relationship with that person. Thus we are not at peace with God because our characters are out of harmony with His. We have chosen to live independently of Him (Isa. 53:6).

The result is that we cannot rectify our situation with God by our works, knowledge, meditation, or any other human effort. There is nothing within us by which we can commend ourselves to Him.

The grace of God is that even while we were sinners—in fact, enemies—God reached down through His own Son Jesus Christ so that our fellowship with Him might be restored (Rom. 5:8-10). We can now be grafted into the vine; we can be adopted into God’s family.

The Role of Doctrine in Christianity

If the essence of Christianity is the restoration of our original relationship with God, why bother with doctrine?

To enter a relationship with another person, it is essential to know something about that person. The two parties can sit and stare at each other all day long, but without knowledge of each other, the relationship would have no substance.

In addition, when entering relationships, it is essential to under-

stand oneself. A lack of self-understanding can easily lead to misunderstandings, causing relationships to flounder.

It is also important to understand the parameters within which the relationship can flourish. For example, relationships vary, depending upon whether one is relating to a spouse, a son, a daughter, a boss, or a secretary. Each of these relationships functions with unique guidelines.

Doctrines are essential to our relationship with God, for they provide the information we need to enter into deeper communion with Him. They tell us about ourselves, and how we may appropriately relate to God. Just as there are various types of unique human relationships, so also there is a unique relationship appropriate with God.

A Systematic Whole

In addition to the vital connection between the doctrines and fellowship with God, there is also a relationship among the doctrines themselves. They form a systematic whole. Sometimes we approach doctrine as we do a cafeteria line: *I'll have a lot of righteousness by faith, a little works, some Sabbath, a little creation, and no judgment.* We may attempt to choose what suits us best. Since doctrine tells us about God, choosing only what is palatable is to develop a "designer God," a God who suits us, who fits our culture,

who can be sold in the contemporary marketplace.

But "the precious, golden links of truth are not separate, detached, disconnected doctrines; but link after link, form one string of golden truth, and constitute a complete whole, with Christ as its living center."²

Imagine a beautiful sandy beach. Majestic rocky cliffs tower on either end. Waves roll onto the beach and crash against the rocks along the cliffs. Clouds fleece the sky, painted red and orange by the setting sun. The rays of the sun glisten in the wet sand and sparkle in the splashing waves.

Now watch as the scene changes. You are sitting in the same place, looking at the same beach, but the sun has vanished. The sky is dark and gray. The sand does not glisten; no pink tints the sky. Although you have not moved, are you looking at the same picture?

All biblical doctrines comprise a beautiful mosaic and must be viewed as a whole. When we remove from it even one of the basic fundamental doctrines, it is as if we have erased the sun from the picture. We might be sitting in the same place, but the picture is not the same.

Illustrating the Role of Doctrine in Christian Life

A vital relationship exists between doctrine and Christian living. The Sabbath, for example, tells us

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that God is our Creator, our Redeemer, and the One who holds our future in His hands.

The Sabbath also assures us that God is personal. He is not the impersonal God of deism, who set processes in motion and then abandoned His creation. Nor did He return thousands of years after Creation to inform us that we were created for relationship with Him. Rather, He was there the very first day of Creation, to reveal Himself to us and to fellowship with us. Thus, the Sabbath assures us that God is not some impersonal object, force, or concept; rather, He is a personal God who created us for fellowship.

The Sabbath also tells us about ourselves. In our fast-paced world, it is tempting to think that humankind is its own creator and sustainer. The Sabbath reminds us that we were created by the hand of God and that we are redeemed by His power. It assures us that our future is in His hands, and that we can rest our lives

in His care just as He rested and ceased His labors on the seventh day.

The Sabbath also describes our relationship with God. He is the Creator, and we are the created. Our existence cannot be credited to our intelligence or power. We are not autonomous. We are the creation of God. Thus the Sabbath is a reminder that God is God and we are human. We do not relate to God as equals. Our appropriate response to God is worship.

The Sabbath also reminds us that authority lies within God's self-revelation in His Word. As such, the Sabbath plays an eschatological role, demarcating those who are willing to rely on God's Word in spite of the dictates of our senses, reason, and human powers.

Thus, the Sabbath represents our entire relationship with God (Ex. 31:12-17). From creation to redemption, from sin to salvation, from self-centeredness to God- and other-centeredness, from self-re-

liance to reliance upon God's power and Word. The Sabbath is not simply a doctrine; its meaning is fulfilled when it initiates, defines, and provides the opportunity for restoration to fellowship with God.

The doctrine of God's self-revelation and the resultant authority of the Bible are also important to our relation to God. Imagine Adam and Eve waking from creation. Without God's revelation they would not have known about the dangers of the tree in the center of the garden, about the meaning or existence of the Sabbath, or about God as a personal, loving Being. Without the Bible, we are left with guesses about the existence and nature of God and about His relationship with us. It is through the Bible that we can know God, understand our own existence, and have the confidence to look forward with purpose in our lives.

The biblical doctrine of a recent, literal, six-day creation also illustrates the importance of doctrine for the development of our understanding and relationship with God. Theistic evolution, the popular alternate explanation for the existence of life on earth, leaves open many questions about the nature and relationship of God and humankind. Does God exist, and did He create life on earth? If so, is He really a personal God, or is He some kind of impersonal force or concept? If He is a God of love, why would He take hundreds of millions

of years of tooth and claw to create human beings?

And who are we, the distant result of a lightning strike that initiated life in a rich pre-biotic soup? Did we humans ascend through the chain of the animal kingdom and finally through our ancestors, the apes? If so, do we have a soul, and if we do, when, where and how did it originate? When did God decide to initiate fellowship with us? Why did it take millions of years to make that decision?

The acceptance of evolution for the origin of life raises many questions about the nature of God and humankind. We are left without a basis for knowledge of God and an understanding of ourselves.

The Results of Denying Essential Characteristics of God

Imagine you know someone who is extremely friendly and outgoing. She has excellent people skills. Now suppose that you deny her essential characteristic, namely, that she has a keen interest in people. How would this denial impact your relationship with her? She would doubtless respond by continuing to reach out to you. But your relationship would be impacted because you would begin to withdraw from her.

What happens when we deny essential characteristics of God? Suppose we say, "God, I don't believe that You created life on earth in six days; nor do I think that You created

Adam and Eve in your image. Furthermore, it is pagan to think that you sent Your Son to die in my place. Also, I can't imagine why You would send a prophet into this world just before Your second coming, and it makes no sense to me that You would conduct an investigative judgment in heaven as preparation for the Second Coming." Denying essential characteristics of God and His activities is just as detrimental to our relationship with God as is denying key elements in the personalities of our close friends.

In addition, it is the law of the mind and character that we will become like the individual, thing, or concept that we admire most in life. If we have placed God first in our lives and accept His self-revelation to guide our lives, He will send His Holy Spirit to transform us in harmony with His character—and the closer we can live in relationship with Him. On the other hand, if we accept false concepts of God and allow them to mold our lives, our character will be out of harmony with His, and our relationship with Him will be distorted if not eventually destroyed.

The apostle John tells us that eternal life comes from knowing the only "true" God (John 17:3) as He has revealed Himself to us in the living Word, Jesus Christ (1:18), and in His written Word, the Bible. The Bible "is the voice of God speaking

to us. The Bible opens to us the words of life; for it makes us acquainted with Christ who is our life. In order to have true, abiding faith in Christ, we must know Him as He is represented in the word."³

Christianity is not Christian if it attempts to find its basis in knowledge of doctrine, works, meditation, or any other human effort. These do provide the guidelines and the context within which our relationship with God can flourish.

But Christianity is fulfilled when we are restored to a right relationship with God through Christ. It means that Christ is the center of doctrine, not simply because the study of doctrine refers to His name, nor because His words are quoted when teaching doctrine, but because doctrine leads to knowledge of Him so that we might fellowship with Him.

The Adventist Theological Society is committed to Christ as our Savior and to the Bible as His Word and as our guide to life. Doctrine is important, not as an end in itself, but as a means of fuller understanding of and relationship with God. □

REFERENCES

¹ Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture references in this article are quoted from *The New King James Version* of the Bible.

² *Appeal and Suggestions to Conference Officers*, p. 26.

³ *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 433.