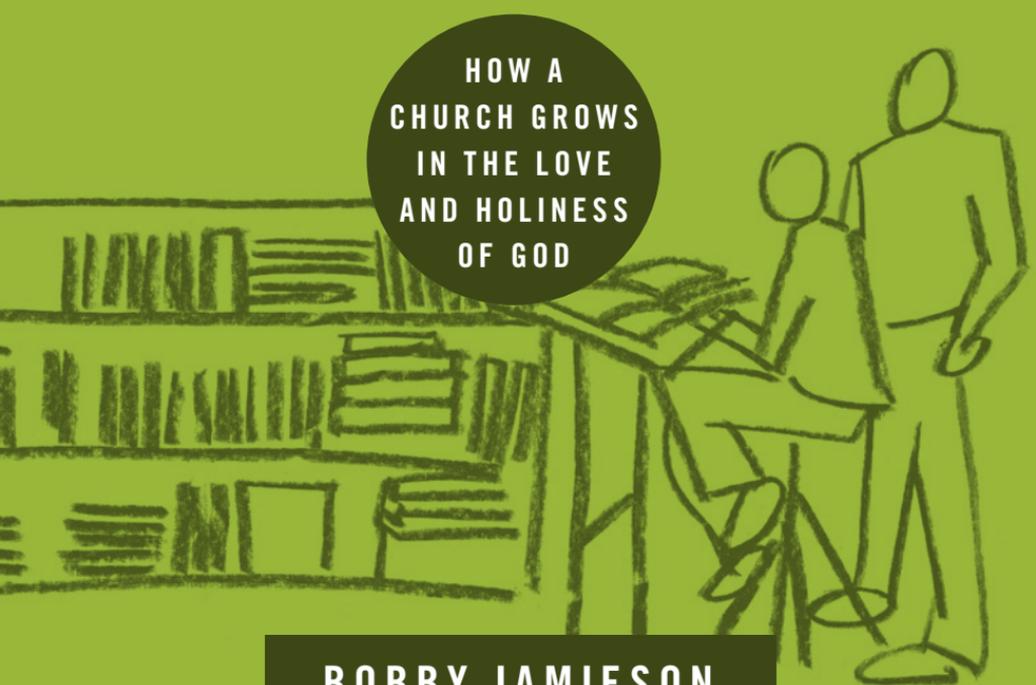


**IX** **9Marks** BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

# SOUND DOCTRINE

HOW A  
CHURCH GROWS  
IN THE LOVE  
AND HOLINESS  
OF GOD



**BOBBY JAMIESON**

“Scripture is for sound doctrine, sound doctrine is for real life, and real life is for real church growth. So says Jamieson, and he hits the nail on the head brilliantly every time.”

**J. I. Packer**, Board of Governors, Professor of Theology, Regent College

“‘Pay heed to your doctrine.’ That imperative for faithful Christianity sounds to many Christians altogether abstract and remote from the life of the church. Bobby Jamieson believes otherwise, and *Sound Doctrine* is a masterful argument for doctrine that is not only deeply rooted in the church, but also produces a church that demonstrates both the grace and glory of God.”

**R. Albert Mohler Jr.**, President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“A true Christian experience involves more than sound doctrine, but it is nothing without it. Bobby helps us see how sound doctrine not only shapes but also empowers all ministries in the local church, from effective outreach to authentic small groups. This book could serve as a starting point for thinking through a philosophy of ministry.”

**J. D. Greear**, Lead Pastor, The Summit Church, Durham, North Carolina; author, *Stop Asking Jesus into Your Heart: How to Know for Sure You Are Saved*

“Truth is for life. Teaching is for living. Sound doctrine is for love, unity, worship, witness, and joy. That is what this book is all about. Christians need to understand how sound biblical teaching—doctrine that is based on and drawn from the Holy Scriptures—informs every aspect of Christian life and experience. Bobby Jamieson makes that case in *Sound Doctrine*. The argument is brief, biblical, interesting, and compelling. The book won’t take you long to read, but its contents will pay dividends to Christians and churches for a long time to come.”

**J. Ligon Duncan**, Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi; John E. Richards Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary

“Do you think doctrine is at least impractical—at worst, loveless? Give this author a few minutes to help you reconsider this. Well-written, precise, provocative, and practical—Jamieson has produced a jewel.”

**Mark Dever**, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church,  
Washington, DC

“I sit next to Bobby Jamieson in a seminary class, so I can tell you that he is a very smart guy, a genuine nerd, theologically discerning, and—surprisingly—an avid surfer. Prior to my conversion, I sat next to smart guys like Bobby in order to cheat, but now I do it to learn—and there’s a lot to learn from Bobby! If you don’t understand why sound doctrine is important, or realize the difference it can make, then Bobby has something to teach you. In this book you’ll learn that sound doctrine is as delightful as it is practical—for everyday life and for the church. Come sit next to Bobby with me.”

**C. J. Mahaney**, Sovereign Grace Ministries

“Doctrine that is biblically faithful and practically relevant is essential to the health and life of the church. Without it, churches will become anemic and eventually die. *Sound Doctrine* is a short primer on the key doctrines of holiness, love, unity, worship, and witness. In a careful and well-written treatise, Bobby Jamieson walks us through these crucial doctrines, revealing their importance to our mind and heart—to our individual lives and the community of faith.”

**Daniel L. Akin**, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“If ever you’ve been tempted to think that doctrine is boring, divisive, or just plain pointless, this is a book for you. Bobby Jamieson shows that sound doctrine is beautiful, life imparting, and deeply desirable. I hope this message goes far and wide.”

**Michael Reeves**, Head of Theology, UCCF (UK); author, *Delighting in the Trinity* and *The Unquenchable Flame*

*Sound Doctrine: How a Church Grows in the Love and Holiness of God*

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For what use is it to know the truth in words,  
only to defile the body and perform evil deeds?  
Or what profit indeed can come from holiness of body,  
if truth is not in the soul? For these rejoice together  
and join forces to lead man to the presence of God.

**IRENAEUS OF LYONS,  
*ON THE APOSTOLIC PREACHING*<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup>Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 40.

# INTRODUCTION

What do you think about doctrine? Does it only cause fights and divisions between Christians? Does it distract us from the real work of evangelism? Is it important for pastors but not really anybody else?

Maybe you have a more positive attitude toward doctrine. Maybe you love learning about God, but sometimes it seems that your head is growing much faster than your heart.

Whatever your stance toward doctrine, the goal of this book is to convince you that sound doctrine is essential for living godly lives and building healthy churches. Why? Because sound doctrine is for life—the life of the church.

There are two main ideas that run through this book. The first is that sound doctrine is for life. That is, it's practical. It's not a set of abstract facts, but a road map that shows us who we are, where we are, and where we're going. Therefore, sound doctrine is essential for living lives and building churches that bring glory to God.

The second main idea of this book is that sound doctrine is for the life *of the church*. That is, sound doctrine produces lives that are shaped like a healthy local church. The fruits which sound doctrine nourishes are not merely individual, but corporate. Therefore, sound doctrine is essential for every aspect of the corporate lives of our churches.

## *Introduction*

This means that as we as individual Christians study sound doctrine, we should constantly apply what we learn in our local churches. And it means that pastors should faithfully nourish their flocks with sound doctrine, and should shape every aspect of their churches around sound doctrine. Doctrine isn't just for a statement of faith that's hidden away on a back page of a church website; it's for sermons, small groups, personal conversations, prayers, songs, and more. Sound doctrine should course through our churches' veins and nourish every aspect of our lives together.

This book has its roots in a Bible study I wrote called *The Whole Truth about God: Biblical Theology*.<sup>1</sup> The contents have grown and evolved, but if you want to explore some of this material in a Sunday school or small-group context, you can check out that study.

We'll begin in chapter 1 by establishing that sound doctrine is for life—the life of the church. Chapter 2 focuses on how sound doctrine shapes how we read and teach the Bible, both as individuals and in the church. The rest of the book examines five fruits in the life of the church that sound doctrine feeds and nourishes: holiness, love, unity, worship, and witness.

Are you ready? Good. Me too.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Whole Truth about God: Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012). This Bible study is part of a ten-volume set called the 9Marks Healthy Church Study Guides, all published by Crossway.

# SOUND DOCTRINE IS FOR LIFE—THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

I've always had a thing for maps. When I was a little kid and my family went on a road trip, I'd monitor our progress from the back seat, eagerly poring over the easel-sized *Rand McNally Road Atlas* that sprawled over my lap. Call me a nerd if you like, but it sure beat asking, "Are we there yet?" every five minutes.

Of course, the lines-on-paper variety aren't the only useful kind of maps. We all make mental maps that help us do the things we need to do—like pick up groceries, run to Target, and drop off library books, all before the little one's nap time—or do the things we love.

I love surfing (even though I currently live an appalling distance from the coast—in Kentucky!), and surfing is all about catching good waves. But finding good waves can be tricky. They are the product of a delicate interplay between swell direction, size, period (the distance between waves), tide, wind, shifting sandbars, and more. So a dedicated surfer

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constantly refines a mental map of where he or she will find the best and least crowded waves. For the region I grew up surfing in Northern California, the mental map readings sound something like this: A 10-foot northwest swell that's washing out a northern pointbreak will be perfect for the inside section of a certain spot in town once the tide drops. And a negative low tide will drain the life out of the points on the east side, but it will awaken that fluky little reef around the corner. The payoff, of course, is good surf. Though the hunt is part of the fun, too.

Maps serve a very practical purpose: they help you get where you want to go. In fact, if you've got a good map and a sense of direction, you will basically never get lost. As I'll occasionally remind my wife when a minor uncertainty arises concerning driving directions, I may not know what to do next, but I'm not lost—I know exactly where I am. (The Jamieson men are renowned, at least among ourselves, for our sense of direction.)

That's one reason why I stubbornly refuse to use a GPS. It's a useful tool in its place, but it's no substitute for a map and a sense of direction. A map gives you the whole picture. It enables you to see far beyond the next freeway exit. And the very act of using a map helps you to make sense of where you are. But when you rely on a GPS, you're wholly at the mercy of some disembodied voice named Stella telling you in her pseudo-British accent that, because of that last turn you just missed, she will now spend the next several minutes "recalculating" while you barrel blindly down the freeway. A

map, on the other hand, tells you not just where to go, but where you are.

## **SOUND DOCTRINE IS GOD'S ROAD MAP FOR THE CHRISTIAN LIFE**

Now the point in what I am saying is this: God has given us a road map for living the Christian life, and that map is sound doctrine.

In an ultimate sense, the Bible itself is our map—and the lamp for our feet and light for our path (Ps. 119:105). But sound doctrine simply sums up the message of the Bible. It synthesizes whatever Scripture has to say about any given topic, whether that topic arises from Scripture or from life in the world. It's like what English teachers sometimes say about new vocabulary words: you don't know what a word means unless you can define it in your own words. You cannot just define a word with the same word. Doctrine is like this—it's putting the Bible's teaching on a particular topic in our own words. And doctrine is *sound* whenever our own words summarize the content of the Bible rightly or faithfully, like getting an A+ on a vocabulary quiz. In English class, you get an A+ whenever your words rightly or soundly reproduce the meaning of the vocabulary words.

So how exactly should we define "sound doctrine"? Here's a working definition: *Sound doctrine is a summary of the Bible's teaching that is both faithful to the Bible and useful for life.* Doctrine should not consist of imposing our ideas on the Bible. Rather, it should be nothing more or less than a summary of what the Bible says on a topic. It presents the teaching of

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Scripture as a coherent though complex unity, which is why I have called it a map. It relates the whole to the parts and the parts to the whole.

Like any good map, then, sound doctrine serves a very useful and practical purpose: sound doctrine is for life. Instruction is for action. We listen to the teaching of God's Word for the purpose of living it out. Sound doctrine isn't an information archive that serves only to present facts. Rather, it's a road map for our pilgrimage from this world to the world to come.

Doctors have to make complicated decisions on short notice with a lot at stake. What enables a good physician to make wise choices is an extensive knowledge of the human body. You can't know if a kidney's failing unless you know what a kidney is and how it should work. That's why doctors spend many years studying human anatomy and physiology so that they can make accurate diagnoses and prescribe appropriate remedies—sometimes with life-saving consequences.

In some ways, the Christian life isn't all that different. We have to make complicated decisions in real time, sometimes with a lot at stake. And, as in practicing medicine, there is no easy formula for some of those decisions, so we need wisdom. The foundations for that wisdom, like the foundations of a doctor's good judgment, lie in a bedrock of knowledge—knowledge of the things God has revealed in his Word. In Scripture, God tells us about who he is, who we are, where we've come from, what's wrong with this world, how God is fixing it, and more. If we're going to live lives that please God, these are the things we most need to know.

Scripture is not exhaustive—there are plenty of true things Scripture *doesn't* say. But it is sufficient. In his Word, God tells us everything we need to know to be saved and to live a life that is pleasing to him (2 Pet. 1:3). Scripture doesn't tell us how to perform heart surgery, but it does lay bare the desires and deceits of all human hearts (Heb. 4:12–13). Scripture doesn't tell us how to get from London to Tokyo, but it does tell us how to walk wisely in the way of the Lord and avoid the snares of the devil (Col. 4:5; 2 Tim. 2:26).

Scripture itself teaches us that sound doctrine is for life. In Titus 2:1, Paul instructs his colaborer, “But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.” Then in the next nine verses he describes how different groups of people in the church should live and relate to each other:

- Older men should be sober-minded, self-controlled, sound in faith (v. 2).
- Older women must be reverent, not slanderers or drunkards, and they must teach younger women to be faithful wives and mothers (vv. 3–5).
- Younger men should be self-controlled (v. 6).
- Slaves or workers should submit to their masters and have integrity in their work “so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior” (vv. 9–10).

Note that in verse 1 Paul doesn't command Titus to teach “sound doctrine,” though he does insist on that elsewhere in the letter (Titus 1:11; 2:7–8). Instead, Paul commands Titus to teach what “accords with” sound doctrine—what fits with it and flows from it. Titus is to teach the church in Crete to

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walk in the path that sound doctrine marks out. Their lives are to color in the outlines that sound doctrine provides.

Similarly, in 1 Timothy 1:3–5 Paul writes,

As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

Paul left Timothy in Ephesus so that Timothy would refute those who were preaching false doctrine (v. 3). These false teachings were promoting speculations rather than the stewardship—a rightly ordered life—from God that is by faith (v. 4). For what purpose did Paul give Timothy this charge? So that the Christians in Ephesus would embody the love that flows from a pure heart, good conscience, and sincere faith (v. 5). Sound doctrine leads to sound faith, sound hearts, and sound consciences. And these become the fountain from which flows an entire life that is pleasing to God. The aim of sound doctrine is sound living. As one Christian put it over four hundred years ago, “Theology is the science of living blessedly forever.”<sup>1</sup>

Sound doctrine is God’s road map for living faithfully in the world. Sound doctrine tells you not just where you are, but who you are, and who God is, and how God has saved us from

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<sup>1</sup>William Perkins, *The Golden Chain* (1592), in *The Work of William Perkins*, ed. Ian Beward (Appleford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1990), 177.

sin and enabled us to live lives that are pleasing to him. Sound doctrine is essential equipment for navigating the twisting city streets of our lives. So don't leave home without it.

## **SOUND DOCTRINE IS FOR LIFE—LIFE /N THE CHURCH**

When I was a kid, I played basketball, baseball, and soccer for several years. I enjoyed them all well enough, even though I was thoroughly mediocre at each. My favorite sport, if you can call it that, should come as no surprise: surfing.

Surfing is great fun to share with others, especially friends and family, but the act itself is fundamentally individual. A person sits on a board, paddles into a wave, stands up, rides it toward the shore, and then repeats that sequence for as long as one's arms can hold out. Seeing others catch good waves—or, dearer to the heart of most surfers, having others see you—certainly adds to the experience. But that hardly makes it a team sport.

Sports like basketball or football, on the other hand, are inherently corporate. Money and adulation might be lavished on a favorite shooting guard or star quarterback, but the game is played together. It's won or lost together. There's no such thing as a one-man team.

I bring this up because I think most American Christians treat their Christianity more like surfing than like football. We think of our walk with the Lord as something fundamentally individual: I pray. I read the Bible. I attend a worship service to experience God and grow in knowledge of Scripture. I love my neighbor. I share the gospel with others. Sure, it helps to go to church and have Christian friends. But what struc-

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tures our priorities, what defines the shape of our discipleship, what serves as our decision-making grid is, most often, just me and Jesus.

But Scripture teaches that Christianity is much more like a team sport. It is true that each of us must turn from sin and trust in Christ in order to be saved (Rom. 10:9–10). Each of us will give an account of ourselves to God (Rom. 14:10). Each of us is responsible for what we do (Gal. 6:5). However, unlike surfing, the very nature of the Christian life is corporate.

- To become a Christian is to be added to the church (Acts 2:41).
- To get baptized is to be baptized into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13).
- To come to faith in Christ is to be brought near, not just to God, but to God's people (Eph. 2:17–22).
- To call on and obey God as Father is to have Christians for your brothers and sisters (Matt. 12:46–50).

And growth as a Christian is consistently defined in corporate terms. How many of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23) can you practice alone on a desert island?

Consider how Paul describes Christian growth in Ephesians 4:11–16. Christ gives gifts of leaders to his church to equip the saints for the work of ministry (vv. 11–12) “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood” (v. 13). We speak the truth in love to one another (v. 15) so that we grow up into Christ “from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is

working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (v. 16).

Do you see how closely Paul intertwines the individual Christian’s growth and the church’s growth? The primary way that we mature as Christians is through the life of the church. The members help the body grow, which means helping each other grow. We are built up as we build others up. Christian growth is a team effort. But Christians are far more than a team—we’re members of the same body.

Another passage that unpacks the church’s life as a body is 1 Corinthians 12.

- As members of the same body, we can’t separate ourselves from the body, as if the body doesn’t need us: “If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body” (v. 15).
- As members of the same body, we can’t live autonomously, independent of the other members: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’” (v. 21).
- As members of the same body, we must care for all the other members: “But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another” (vv. 24–25).
- As members of the same body, our lives are tightly interwoven. We rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep: “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (v. 26).

While the “body” metaphor also applies to the universal

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church, what Paul has in mind here is Christians' participation in a specific local assembly. This is where we suffer or rejoice together, show honor to one another, and interact with members who are radically different from us. This is where we show God's wisdom in composing the body not of one member, but of many (1 Cor. 12:14).

As a member of the body of Christ, your life in a local church should structure your priorities, define the shape of your discipleship, and serve as one of the main grids through which you make many decisions. What it looks like for you to live as a Christian day in and day out should be defined in large part by the life of your local church.<sup>2</sup>

This means that the godly life which flows from sound doctrine is not merely an individual matter. Rather, sound doctrine is for life in the church.

We see this clearly in Romans 12, where Paul appeals to us “by the mercies of God” to live new lives in light of the gospel. After spending eleven chapters expounding the gospel and the doctrines that surround it (“the mercies of God”), Paul shows us that the gospel he preaches has nearly infinite implications for daily living.

What are some of them? First, the gospel and the doctrines that connect to it lead us to devote our lives totally to God, and to be transformed by the ongoing renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:1–2). The gospel calls us to be conformed to God's mind, will, and ways—not the world's. But immediately

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<sup>2</sup>If you'd like to think more about why it is important for every Christian to be a member of a local church, check out Jonathan Leeman's book *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), also in the 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches series.

after this, Paul tells us not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought (v. 3), but instead to use our gifts to build up the body (vv. 4–8). The gospel teaches us to put others before ourselves, and to use the strengths God has given us to edify our fellow church members—both of which are impossible to do in blissful solitude. Then, in verses 9 through 13, Paul fleshes out more specifics about how we are to love one another, honor one another, and care for each other's needs. When Paul specifies what it means to live in view of God's mercies, he turns immediately to life in the body of Christ.

How can you live in view of God's mercies? By loving and building up the body of Christ. The life that sound doctrine lays out for you is shaped like your local church.

Sound doctrine is for life—life in the church.

## **SOUND DOCTRINE IS FOR LIFE—THE LIFE *OF* THE CHURCH**

If sound doctrine is for life in the church, it's also for the life *of* the church.

Think about the life of a family. What kinds of things would you look at in order to describe it? Here's what you wouldn't do: you wouldn't simply record what each individual family member does throughout the day and then slice and dice your observations into a composite whole. Instead, you'd look at what the family does together. Do they eat together? What do they talk about? Who does the talking? When do they spend time together? What do they do? What are the rules, traditions, customs, and so on that shape how they live together?

The life of a church is similar: what a church does together

## SOUND DOCTRINE

defines the life of a church. And a church's way of teaching and worshiping and praying and so on deeply impacts every member of the church—just like the culture of a family indelibly stamps every member of the family.

The life of the church is displayed most fully in its corporate worship gatherings. But it's also useful to think about other times members of the church come together. Church members gather outside the main weekly gathering for things like additional teaching, outreach, accountability, and meals in each other's homes.

One of the main arguments I'll be making throughout this book is this: just as sound doctrine is crucial for life, and specifically life in the church, so it is also essential for the life of the church. Like a good map, sound doctrine is eminently useful, so churches should use it.

So in chapters 3 through 6, we'll see how sound doctrine should flow through the whole life of a church and nourish holiness, love, unity, worship, and witness. First, though, we'll look at the fountain itself: how does sound doctrine impact reading and teaching the Bible?

# SOUND DOCTRINE IS FOR READING AND TEACHING THE BIBLE

“You gotta go to this concert tonight. The greatest saxophonist in the world is playing!” So said my saxophone teacher about an upcoming Michael Brecker concert at Cal State Hayward.

I was in sixth grade and had just begun playing the saxophone the year before. I was quickly developing a love for jazz music through listening to some of my dad’s old tapes and CDs of greats like John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, and Dexter Gordon, but I had never been to a live jazz concert. This would be my first.

“Greatest” is often a disputable title, but Brecker certainly was the premier jazz saxophone virtuoso of his generation. (In 2007, at only fifty-seven years old, Brecker died of leukemia.) That night, rotating between fronting a big band, leading a smaller combo, and playing solo, Michael Brecker transported me into another realm.

While Brecker played, his vintage Selmer Mark VI saxophone seemed less an inanimate hunk of metal than a wiz-

## SOUND DOCTRINE

ard's wand, able to conjure up any sound he wanted. He could summon a flood of notes out of thin air and cast them perfectly into place faster than any listener could follow. Hearing him improvise was like watching a Rembrandt painting materialize out of thin air: all that perfectly shaded light and dark, all those delicate, invisible brushstrokes, made up as he went, with not a note out of place. But his playing wasn't mere pyrotechnics—it pulsed with focused, fluid emotion as he ranged freely between laughs and cries, laments and lullabies.

It seemed impossible to do what he did with a saxophone, and all the more so because he was making it up as he went. The only word for it was “magic.” Indeed, all good improvisation has something magical about it. It's seemingly effortless yet dizzyingly complex. It's spontaneous to its core, yet every note sounds inevitable.

No merely technical description can capture the magic of a live performance by Michael Brecker or any other jazz master, but that doesn't mean there is no technical work going on behind the curtain. On the contrary, Michael Brecker, like virtually every other jazz great, was a relentless practitioner. He relished his breaks from the road so that he could spend upwards of eight hours a day working on his technique and vocabulary. In order to be a great jazz improviser, you have to attain a kind of effortless mastery over a wide range of terrain: your instrument's sound and technical demands, the complex logic of jazz harmony, hundreds of tunes and chord progressions, a number of styles and their hybrid offspring, the riffs, clichés, inflections, intonations, and more, which constitute jazz's vocabulary—and the list goes on.

There's more to the magic than the machinery behind the curtain, but without it, there's no magic.

## **THE “MAGIC” OF A MATURE CHRISTIAN AND THE MACHINERY BEHIND THE CURTAIN**

There's also something seemingly magic about the life of a mature Christian. While far from perfect, the life of a mature Christian commands respect and attention, even while similarly defying technical explanation. A mature Christian can bear afflictions with joy, can turn a person from sin with a few well-placed words, can create harmony where conflict abounds.

And, as with a great jazz improviser, there's a lot going on behind the curtain. Among other things, a mature Christian works on mastering—or better, being mastered by—the Bible. He knows how to put it together. He knows how to summarize it and put it in his own words. He knows, in other words, sound doctrine. Remember how we defined sound doctrine in the last chapter? It's a summary of the Bible's teaching that is both faithful to the Bible and useful for life. A godly person will know how to do this. Even if he wouldn't dream of teaching a class full of systematic theology students, a godly person knows what God says about himself and about us in the Bible.

This should come as no surprise, since Scripture itself teaches that it is able to equip us for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16–17). And it teaches that spiritual transformation comes through the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:1–2), which happens as we soak ourselves in Scripture.

So every Christian has a vested interest in learning to read

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and teach the Bible wisely. We do this through personal study, but also, perhaps more foundationally, through the church's public proclamation and teaching. This chapter is about how sound doctrine helps us to read and teach the Bible wisely, both personally and in the corporate life of the church.

### **SOUND DOCTRINE: THE PINS AND BUMPERS OF BIBLE READING**

Ultimately, the goal of reading and teaching Scripture is to love God and our neighbor better. And the way to love God more is to know God more. It's true that a person can learn theological facts about God without loving him. At the same time, you cannot love God without knowing him. And to know God, you have to know things *about* him. If you love your wife, you'll want to know about what she's like, what she loves and hates, her past, her plans for the future, and much more.<sup>1</sup> In the same way, we who profess to love God should learn all we can about him.

That's why sound doctrine is an important goal of Bible reading. Sound doctrine summarizes and synthesizes the Bible's teaching into a coherent whole. It tells us what God is like, what he loves and hates, what he's done in the past, and what his plans are for the future. Letting your knowledge of God be determined by one or two isolated passages would be like letting one or two isolated conversations determine your knowledge of your spouse.

Sound doctrine is also an important guardrail for Bible

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 13.

reading. It keeps us from wrongly inferring things about God from Scripture that are untrue. In order to interpret Scripture rightly, we need to bring to the table what we already know about God from Scripture—that is, sound doctrine.

To borrow an image from bowling, sound doctrine is both the pins our Bible reading aims at and the bumpers that keep us from rolling into the gutters of error. Sound doctrine helps to send our Scripture reading in the right direction, and it helps keep us rolling in that direction. Sound doctrine is for reading and teaching the Bible.

## **WHAT IS THE BIBLE? A STORY THAT PREACHES A MESSAGE**

In order to unpack in more detail how sound doctrine impacts reading and teaching the Bible, let's first consider what the Bible is.

Is the Bible a magic book you open at random for in-the-moment spiritual guidance? (Anyone for a game of Bible roulette?) Is it an archive of Hallmark cards that gives you an inspirational thought for every season of life? A set of prescriptions for moral self-improvement? An anthology of inspiring myths?

(1) *The Bible is revelation.* God reveals himself to us in his Word. Every single word of Scripture is breathed out by him (2 Tim. 3:16). The authors of Scripture were from different cultures and had different personalities, and they wrote in different genres at different times, but they were all carried along by the Holy Spirit so that they “spoke from God” (2 Pet. 1:21). They all wrote the very words of God.

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(2) *The Bible is a story that preaches a message.* From beginning to end, the Bible tells a single story of salvation. From creation, through our fall into sin, to Jesus's saving work on the cross and the eventual restoration of God's rule over all creation, the Bible tells a single epic narrative that spans Genesis to Revelation. It tells the story of how God is working out salvation for his people through his Son Jesus.

Yet this isn't just a story—it's a story that really happened. And it's the story in which we live. We Christians can and must plot our lives on the timeline of the Bible's story: we live after Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, and after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, but before Jesus's final return. The Bible's story explains where we've come from, where we are, who we are, and where we're going.

Notice how sound doctrine arises from this story and is an integral part of it.

- From creation we learn that God is powerful, and holy, and wise, and good (Psalm 104).
- From the fall we learn that God is perfectly just and his anger burns against sin, yet he is also merciful and patient with sinners, which all of us are (Genesis 3).
- In the life of Jesus we see God's holy and merciful character perfectly displayed (John 1:18; 14:9).
- In the death of Jesus we see God's justice and love working together to accomplish salvation (Rom. 3:21–26; 5:6–11).
- In Jesus's resurrection we see the victory over death that God promises to all his people (2 Cor. 4:14).
- In Jesus's promise to return and restore God's rule over all of creation we see God's faithfulness, his lavish generosity toward his people, and more (Rev. 22:12).

In other words, the Bible is a story that preaches a message. To borrow Michael Horton's phrase, it's a drama that gives rise to dogma. It's a narrative that's full of teaching. Sound doctrine arises from the Bible's grand story of salvation.<sup>2</sup>

(3) *The Bible is an instrument in God's hand to carry out his redeeming work.* When we read Scripture, we are confronted by the voice of the living God (Heb. 4:12–13). And God's Word is invincibly powerful—it never fails to accomplish his purposes (Isa. 55:10–11). Those purposes include saving sinners and sanctifying those who are in Christ (1 Pet. 1:23–25; John 17:17; 1 Thess. 2:13). So, when we come to Scripture, we should expect to be changed by it. We should expect it to push us further down the path of our pilgrimage. We should expect it to shape us more fully into the image of Christ.

Because the Bible is a story that preaches a message, we should pay attention to both the story and the message, even though we should never draw too hard a line between these two things. Let's consider each in turn.

## **HOW TO READ THE BIBLE AS A SINGLE STORY**

Scripture does tell a unified story from beginning to end, but putting that story together isn't as simple as reading straight through from Genesis to Revelation. (Just ask someone who has tried that and thrown in the towel once they hit Leviticus.) Therefore, it's important to develop the skill of discerning how any passage of Scripture fits into the larger story.

Here are several steps that should help toward that end:

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<sup>2</sup>If you want to think about this in more detail, see Michael Horton's discussion in *The Christian Faith*, 19, 27–30.

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(1) *Read through all of the Old Testament.* If you can, read whole books in a short span, in one sitting if possible. That helps you keep the big picture in view. Learn the overall history of Israel from the patriarchs to the return from exile. As you read, pay special attention to the covenants God makes with Noah (Gen. 8:20–9:17), Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:1–21), the nation of Israel (Exodus 19–24), and David (2 Sam. 7:1–17), and especially the new covenant God promises through Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31–34). Each covenant adds something to the unfolding of God’s purposes in creation and redemption.

(2) *Read and reread all four Gospels.* Each of the Gospels presents a rich theological portrait of Jesus as the fulfillment of all of God’s Old Testament promises. So pay attention to connections the Gospel authors make between Jesus and the Old Testament. Further, notice how the Gospels continue the Old Testament’s story of God’s saving acts by revealing the hinge of the entire story: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

(3) *Pay special attention whenever a New Testament author quotes or alludes to an Old Testament passage.* Jesus himself taught the apostles how to interpret the Old Testament rightly—that is, in light of his death and resurrection (Luke 24:27, 44–47). So let the apostles be your guides to connecting the dots between the Testaments.

(4) *Carefully study places where the biblical authors themselves put together pieces of the whole story of Scripture.* Stephen’s speech in Acts 7 is one place. Paul’s sermon in Acts 13:16–41 is another: here Paul unpacks how Jesus’s life,

death, and resurrection fulfill “what God promised to the fathers” (v. 32). In Galatians 3–4, Paul explains how the gospel both fulfills God’s promise to Abraham and ends the era of the law of Moses. In Hebrews, especially chapters 8–10, the author explains how Jesus’s death is a perfect, once-for-all fulfillment of the Old Testament’s sacrificial system. The result is that now, through the death of Christ, believers have forgiveness of sins, new hearts, and free access to God—and the old system is finished forever. Passages like these help us to make sense out of the Old Testament in the first place. They also show us how the work of Christ fulfills, completes, and sometimes does away with what has come before in the story of salvation.

The goal in all this is to understand the Bible’s single, unified story. Sometimes theologians call this kind of reading “biblical theology”—theology that traces out the development of the progressively unfolding revelation of God in Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

It’s important to learn to read Scripture this way in order to rightly interpret it and apply it to our lives. Understanding where a passage falls within the overall story goes a long way toward relating it to the place in the story that we occupy. Here are just a couple examples:

- As Christians, the purity regulations of Leviticus aren’t binding on us—Christ has fulfilled and thereby abolished them. But they still reveal God’s holiness to us, and his demand that we be holy (Lev. 19:2).

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<sup>3</sup> For more on biblical theology, see Michael Lawrence’s *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

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- Joshua's conquest of Canaan is neither a model for foreign policy nor an example of ancient barbarism. Instead, it was a divinely mandated act of judgment. In this specific instance, God's end-time judgment of sin was brought forward into the present (Gen. 15:16).

Viewing Scripture as a single story is one of the most important lenses for reading it rightly, and it brings some of the greatest rewards. It enables us to climb to the peaks of the revelation of God's saving acts and catch a view of the epic that stretches before us from eternity past into eternity future.

### HOW TO READ THE BIBLE FOR ITS MESSAGE

But Scripture is not merely a story, it's a story that preaches a message. That message is the good news that Jesus has died on the cross and risen from the grave in order to satisfy God's wrath and bring salvation to all those who turn from their sin and trust in him. But like a sprawling, aged tree that sends its roots out far and wide, the basic message of the gospel also connects with virtually every other topic the Bible addresses.

For example, God's character matters for how we live. When your life seems out of control, it matters that God is utterly sovereign (Eph. 1:11; Rom. 8:28; Amos 3:6). When you're going through a painful trial, it matters that God is good (Ps. 106:1). When you're burdened by sin, it matters that God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and that he promises to forgive our sin (Ex. 34:6; 1 John 1:9). Every facet of the Bible's teaching is relevant for how we live, whether that teaching is about the

character of God, the acts of God, the nature of humanity, the world we inhabit, God's plan for the future, or anything else.

So how do you read the Bible for its message?

(1) *Begin with the conviction that Scripture is the Word of God.* It is the revelation of God himself. Therefore, Scripture is our sole supreme authority concerning everything it speaks to. Because God is totally truthful (Titus 1:2), everything he says is trustworthy and true (Ps. 12:6). Because Scripture is a revelation of the mind of God, Scripture's teaching is coherent—it hangs together as a whole. This means that, properly interpreted, Scripture never contradicts itself, and it never misleads us in any way. Because Scripture is God's Word, it has a coherent message, and that message is authoritative for us.

(2) *Read and reread the whole story, carefully discerning the meaning that arises from the story itself.* Just as you should read a whole book before making definitive judgments about it, so you should always be engaging the Scriptures to learn more about what God has revealed of himself. And the better you understand the Scriptures themselves, the better you'll grasp the message they proclaim.

(3) *Allow Scripture to interpret Scripture.* Scripture doesn't contradict itself, so allow the clearer portions to aid you in interpreting the less clear. When something confusing comes up, search out other passages of Scripture that address the same issue and see if you can begin to make sense of the whole.

(4) *As you grow in true knowledge of God through Scripture, that knowledge becomes part of the lens through which you continue to read Scripture.* That's part of how you continually spi-

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ral into a deeper, richer, more accurate reading of the Bible. For example, Scripture declares beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man (John 1:1, 14). So, if you come to a passage that seems to call one of those doctrines into question, interpret that passage in light of what you have already been convinced of.

(5) *Continually draw connections between the parts and the whole.* Scripture doesn't reveal isolated doctrines to us; it reveals the very character of God. So consider how God's attributes fit together. His love and justice, his mercy and holiness—these don't contradict each other, but work together in harmony.

Because Scripture faithfully represents the mind of God, the teaching of Scripture can be put together into a coherent whole. We can sum up what Scripture as a whole says about its central concerns, such as the character of God, the state of creation, the nature and fallenness of man, the saving work of Christ, the life of the church, and the promise of the world to come. Working through these topics in an orderly progression is often called "systematic theology."

Although there's not a one-to-one correspondence, what we mean by "sound doctrine" throughout this book has a lot to do with systematic theology, as well as with biblical theology. It embraces both, with an accent on the former, since systematic theology is a way of reading the Bible that summarizes and synthesizes the teachings of Scripture and brings them to bear on our lives.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>If you're looking for a readable and devotional introduction to systematic theology, check out Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007).

(6) *Consider how Scripture speaks to whatever issues you're facing in life, such as marriage, or money, or work, or friendship.* When we read Scripture carefully and keep the whole story in mind, we can synthesize its teachings and apply them to situations beyond what the biblical authors experienced or envisioned. Obviously, none of these topics is the main point of the Bible, but Scripture speaks coherently and powerfully, if sometimes indirectly, to all of life. "What does this mean to me?" isn't the first question we should ask when we open up the Bible, but it is a question we should always arrive at. Systematic theology helps us to put together the teaching of the Bible as a whole, which is another crucial step in applying the Bible to our lives. Seeing how any given passage fits with other teachings of Scripture is an important part of rightly bringing the Bible to bear on our daily lives.

Scripture is a story that preaches a message. And the goal of reading and teaching Scripture is to be conformed to the image of Christ. Putting the story together and getting the message right are key components to the machinery behind the curtain of a godly Christian life.

## **BIG-PICTURE BENEFITS OF SOUND DOCTRINE**

With that in mind, let's think a little more about the benefits of sound doctrine for reading and teaching the Bible.

The first big-picture benefit of sound doctrine is that, well, it provides the big picture, and the big picture helps us understand all the details of Scripture. Imagine a small geographic area, no bigger than a few square miles, which contains an unusual concentration of large, vicious, predatory

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animals. This unusually populated region, it turns out, is very close to the heart of a major metropolitan center. Not only that, but the locals allow their children to roam freely inside this region—it's even considered a form of entertainment!

Now, if I told you that this “small geographic area” is the Louisville Zoo (if you guessed “a zoo,” go to the head of the class), all of those details would suddenly make sense—and you would see each of them in a very different light.

The point is that having the big picture up front helps you to see how all the details fit in. It helps to shine light on what could otherwise remain dark. And sound doctrine gives us the big picture: a wide-angle view of who God is, who we are, and how God is working out salvation for those who trust in Christ.

Another big-picture benefit of sound doctrine is that it acts like a minesweeper. A balanced diet of sound doctrine can expose and defuse our unbiblical thoughts and attitudes that would otherwise go undetected. Because of sin, we all have wrong ideas about God. Sometimes those wrong ideas can go unchallenged for years, even decades. But teaching that presents “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) revealed in Scripture prompts us to deal with those errors. It takes us by the hand and points out biblical passages that overthrow cherished convictions we've picked up not from Scripture but from our culture. Sound doctrine exposes the ways we've tried to make God in our own image, rather than heeding his gracious revelation about the way things really are.

Similarly, sound doctrine helps to expose our blind spots and correct our imbalances. Whether by culture, disposition,

church tradition, or other factors, we're all prone to emphasize certain aspects of the Bible's teaching to the neglect or even denial of others. The ballast of biblical doctrine helps set the ship right. It enables us to understand the Bible's teaching in its fullness and balance, rather than simply clutching at the parts we like best. Further, a full-orbed view of sound doctrine sensitizes us to the things we tend to screen out, or simply not notice, when we study Scripture. It helps to correct our vision, so that we can truly see what God has revealed of himself in his Word.

Further, sound doctrine helps us map the Bible onto our lives. Sound doctrine reminds us that God's story of salvation is the story we're actually living in. It gives us clear vision to see the world as it really is—that is, as God says it is. And so sound doctrine helps us to practically apply the Bible. Too often we have neat little divisions between “religion” and “real life.” We seal the Bible off from our daily lives, as if it somehow only applies to the things we do for an hour on Sunday morning. But sound doctrine gives us a cohesive, all-encompassing way of looking at the world. When we grasp this, the Bible is no longer merely a book of wisdom for specifically religious needs, but the lens through which we make sense of everything in our lives.

Finally, sound doctrine is a guard against false teaching. Not every so-called Bible teacher actually teaches the Bible. Many preachers grievously mishandle the Word of God. Scripture plainly says that false teachers will always be a threat to the church (Acts 20:29–31; Eph. 4:14). And the best way to

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discover a counterfeit is to know the genuine article like the back of your hand.

Sadly, false teachers will always gain a hearing because they say what we want to hear (2 Tim. 4:3–4). The best antidote to an appetite for false teaching is a steady diet of sound doctrine. The best way to prevent doctrinal disease is a regular regimen of the preventive medicine of scriptural theology.

### **SOUND DOCTRINE IS FOR READING AND TEACHING THE BIBLE IN THE CHURCH**

How then should sound doctrine influence how the Bible is read and taught in the church? Here I have four main points, all aimed at pastors, though they're the kind of thing that every Christian should be aware of.

First, the main point of the church's weekly assembly is to edify believers (1 Cor. 14:12, 14, 26). Therefore, use that time to instruct your people in sound doctrine. Expository preaching—preaching that takes the main point of a biblical text, makes that the main point of the sermon, and applies it to the life of the church—should constitute the bulk of a church's preaching diet.<sup>5</sup> But your sermons shouldn't give the impression that each text exists in a vacuum. Rather, without turning every sermon into a doctrinal treatise, each sermon should in some way help your people connect the dots between the sermon text and the rest of Scripture. This doesn't mean you need to discuss lots of other Scripture pas-

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<sup>5</sup>For an explanation and defense of this idea, see chapter 5 of Jonathan Leeman's book *Reverberation: How God's Word Brings Light, Freedom, and Action to His People* (Chicago: Moody, 2011).

sages, but it does require you to preach with the big picture in view. Also, the rest of the service—singing, prayers, and more—should be shot through with sound doctrine. We'll think more about the other elements in corporate worship in chapters 3 and 6.

Second, treat the Sunday morning sermon like the main meal that it is, and not as a mere appetizer to entice people into what else the church has to offer. In other words, don't put your congregation on a low-doctrine diet. The Bible is a meaty book, and in order to grow, Christians need lots of calories worth of sound doctrine. So make your sermons doctrine-rich enough to satisfy the appetite of a growing Christian.

Third, if sound doctrine is for life, then theology is for application. Some preachers teach tons of theology with little application. There are worse ways to preach, but it's easy to see how that would lead to Christians who have a lot of knowledge but little know-how, or an abundance of doctrinal precision but a scarcity of love. However, much more common in evangelical preaching today is tons of application with little or no theology. In some ways, that's far worse. If your preaching is all application with no theology, then you simply aren't preaching the gospel. So ground your application in the text and in the theology that arises from the text. Show your people how the indicatives of the gospel lead directly to the imperatives of the Christian life. In your sermons, model for them the glorious truth that the Christian life is a response to what God has already done for us in Christ.

Finally, feed your church a steady diet of sound doctrine in Sunday school classes and other teaching contexts. Use

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opportunities outside the Sunday service to delve deeper into specific doctrinal subjects than you can profitably manage in a sermon.

We grow as Christians by applying truth to life. So cultivate in your people a hunger for good theology. Give them a regular diet of it and patiently wait as their appetites catch up.

### **SOUND DOCTRINE IS FOR DOING THEOLOGY IN COMMUNITY**

Finally, how should all this filter into every Christian's personal discipleship to Christ?

First, realize that your church's teaching is the primary means God uses to grow your knowledge of him. This doesn't mean that personal study is unimportant. But it does mean that the corporate teaching of the church is most important.

You may be reading Jonah in your quiet times and profiting greatly from it. Personal Bible reading is important, and I don't want to downplay it at all. But if your pastor is preaching through Luke, there are dozens or even hundreds of people in your church being exposed to Luke every week. So take advantage of that. Prepare for sermons by meditating on the text ahead of time. Use the shared teaching you're receiving to fuel conversations with other church members throughout the week. Do theology in community by exploring the sermon's theological and practical repercussions with other church members, and by putting the truth into practice together.

Don't just view the sermon as a one-off event each week. Rather, view it as a fountain that sends a stream of biblical truth into the life of the church. That stream can be directed into a thousand channels that bring biblical and doctrinal

nourishment where it's needed—and some of that channeling work should be done by every single member of the church.

Sound doctrine is for reading and teaching the Bible in the church. So allow your church's teaching to drive your growth as a theologian and as a Christian. Take your efforts to grow and disciple others and hitch them to the engine that's driving the whole church: the teaching and preaching of the Word.

### **THE GOAL OF SOUND DOCTRINE—DRIVEN READING AND TEACHING: MASTERFUL IMPROVISATION**

Sound doctrine helps us to read and teach the Bible wisely. When we learn to map the storyline of salvation and tease out the message of Scripture as a whole, we gain essential machinery for progressing in the Christian life. Mastering the Bible is necessary for Christian growth, and sound doctrine is a starting point, guardrail, and goal of reading Scripture rightly.

Of course, the goal in all this is not mere knowledge, but growth in godliness. The purpose of working on our technique as theologians is that we would be able to masterfully improvise in the real-life performance that is the Christian life. In doing theology we're not ultimately seeking facts, but fellowship with God and the fruit of godly lives and healthy churches.

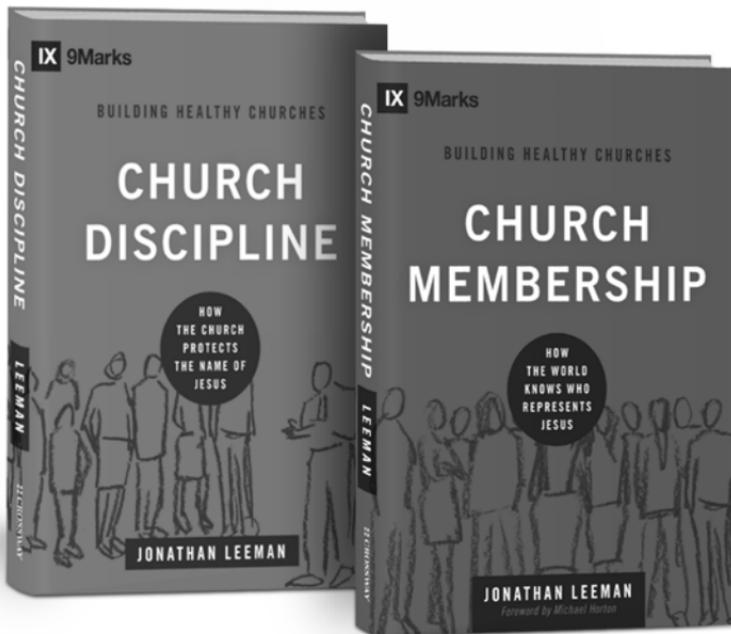
In each of the remaining chapters we're going to explore one of the fruits that sound doctrine causes to grow in the life of the church. First up is one that in some sense encompasses all the rest: holiness.



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CHURCH DOCTRINE