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The Bible, Truth, and Evangelism

Outreach Advancement Team Concept Sheet

What we believe directly impacts what we do...

Our understanding of biblical teaching shapes our outreach...

A weak view of the Bible and truth will, with time,
undermine our ministry of evangelism...

For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. (2 Timothy 4:3)

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." (John 14:6-7)

John 14:6 presents a comprehensive case for the uniqueness of Christ. As the Way He is unique, because only through Him and His work can we find salvation. As the Truth He is unique, because He alone is absolute truth. Although other ideologies may have many truths, Jesus is absolute truth. As the Life He opens the way for us to experience life to the full. This is what God made us for, and it is the only completely fulfilling life.

- Ajith Fernando, Sharing the Truth in Love

Doctrine Matters

People in some Christian circles seem to think we can't know truth. They find doctrine old-fashioned and confining. They are more comfortable re-imagining or re-painting the Christian faith. Rather than look to God's Word and discovering eternal truth that can shape and guide our lives, they seem more interested in dissecting, debunking, and questioning everything that has been embraced by Christians for the past two millennia.

Core teachings and doctrines of the Christian faith are being treated like they are a garnish on the side of a plate at a fancy restaurant. Some are suggesting we toss these beliefs out like a sprig of parsley that serves nothing but a decorative purpose.

What these "innovative" and "revolutionary" thinkers fail to recognize is that they are tossing out core, foundational, and fundamental beliefs that define the Christian faith. Without these truths intact, we become a social club and are no longer the Church of Jesus Christ. We become do-gooders, but we are no longer embracing or sharing the truth of the Christian faith. What we believe actually matters. The core of the Christian faith has always been, and will always be, the teaching of the Bible...God's Word.

Our beliefs matter to God because he is the one who breathed the words of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16). Our doctrine matters to us as followers of Jesus because what we believe sets the course of how we live, love, and reach out to the world. The core beliefs of Christians also matter to those who are not yet believers in Jesus Christ. They are looking on and wondering if we really believe what we say we believe.

Thom Rainer, when he was the Dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth, wrote a book called, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*. He is a brilliant researcher on topics of faith and evangelism and based his book on interviews and conversations with unchurched people. One key insight that might surprise many people is that doctrine matters to most spiritual seekers. It is important to note that his research was not done in the 60s or 70s, but after the turn of the new millennium. This is current data that flies in the face of the Post-Modern prognosticators.

In a day and age when some Christians are avoiding the topic of truth and discussion about doctrine, unchurched people actually care about what we believe. They want to know if we actually have convictions about our faith. Rainer reports that, "Because almost nine out of ten formally unchurched people told us that doctrine was the major factor in their choosing a church, we delved further into this issue. 'Why,' we

asked, 'is doctrine so important to you?' The most frequent response was their desire to know truth or absolutes."

Many "experts" on postmodernism parrot the party line that people today don't believe in truth and absolutes. They even recommend developing an approach to faith that stands in a place of "**humble uncertainty**" about...everything. The problem is that this approach to life and faith undermines the teachings of the one who is the Truth. Jesus taught that we should be **humbly certain** about him, the truth, and the faith passed down from those who have gone before us.

People in the world are looking at you and me and they are wondering, do we believe what we say we believe? Are we confident in the book that establishes all we say is true? It is time for followers of Jesus to take a posture of certainty and confidence. Humble? Yes! But also confident that the Word of God is true and our faith will stand up under any and all scrutiny.

The Love of God Revealed in the Sacrifice of Jesus

If we take the Bible seriously there are a number of things that become sobering realities. First, God's passionate love is greater than we can possibly comprehend. The price the Father paid to purchase our forgiveness involved the greatest sacrifice in the history of the world...the life and blood of his only Son, Jesus Christ. God's amazing grace, discussed in the last chapter, is clearly taught in Scripture. We can never compromise or toss this aside. To forfeit this belief and conviction is to lose the heart of biblical faith.

In recent years some people in the church have started teaching that believing in the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is barbaric. Some have actually called the doctrine of the cross a form of divine child abuse. Rather than seeing the Calvary as a picture of God's loving redemption, they suggest that this belief, embraced by the church for two thousand years and taught clearly in the Bible, is no longer needed. It makes them uncomfortable. They don't like it. So, they sweep it under the carpet and try to re-write the clear teaching of God's Word.

Some are even suggesting that the whole sacrificial system of the Old Testament was a man-made effort to appease a deity that ancient people imagined was angry. Although the clear teaching of the Bible is that God established the sacrificial system and called the priests of the Old Testament era, and the people, to follow specific instructions in offering sacrifices, some feel free to re-write biblical history. In doing this they undercut the authority of God's Word. They also strip away the

powerful images in the sacrificial system that point to the ultimate offering of God's love for us, Jesus crucified for our sins.

The Word of God teaches, without reservation or apology, that the sacrifice of Jesus was for our sins and that he died in our place. This is a truth that followers of Jesus must cling to as if our lives depend on it... because they do! If we are going to be stirred to the work of outreach, a humble confidence in the finished work of Jesus is absolutely mandatory. When we rub shoulders with people who bear the name of Jesus, but blush at the idea that the Father allowed his son to die for our sins and in our place, we can pray for their eyes to be opened to the truth of God's Word.

People are Lost without Jesus

The Bible teaches that people are lost without Jesus. Many today have rejected the term "lost" and the idea that people need Jesus for salvation. There is a slow-creeping pluralism and universalism slipping into some quarters of the Church. The notion that all religions are equally valid and lead to salvation has no biblical support.

Some people argue that our modern world has so much religious diversity that we must embrace and accept that there are many pathways to God. These people have no sense of history or understanding of the world in the days of Jesus and the apostle Paul. There has always been a vast array of religious options available to human beings. In Paul's day there were so many religions that the people created temples for their countless "gods" and even shrines for "unknown gods" just in case they missed some. Paul did not live in a mono-religious world where Christianity was practiced unchallenged. The Christian faith was not born into a time and place with no religious rivals. On the contrary, the world has always offered a plethora of religious expressions. And, the Bible teaches, with no shame, that there is only one way to God.

In the Old Testament, the God of Israel was relentlessly committed to people worshipping him and him alone. That is why the first two of the Ten Commandments emphasize this call to fidelity in our worship... God alone! (Exodus 20:2-6) All through the Old Testament the people were taught that idolatry, of any kind, was abhorrent and intolerable. The times of Israel's greatest failing came when they forgot that they were to worship the Lord their God and serve only him. When their hearts wandered to idols and false gods, judgment always came.

The idea that people are lost without Jesus is as old as the Bible. But, there are those who dislike the term lost and the idea that people need Jesus. I bumped into this aversion to speaking of people as lost for the first time some years ago when I was in Amsterdam training a group

of church leaders in evangelism. I had used the term lost to refer to people who do not have a faith-based relationship with God through Jesus. About thirty minutes into the training a woman spoke up with real intensity and emotion in her voice, "I don't like that term!" I honestly had no idea what she meant, so, I asked her to say a little more. She clarified, "I don't like the term 'lost.'" I pressed her a little and she explained that it made her feel uncomfortable to think of people this way.

I assured her that it made me uncomfortable too. I went on to explain that a number of my close friends and family members are still lost. (And yes, I used the word) I went on to open my Bible to Luke 15 and remind the group that Jesus taught about a **lost** sheep, a **lost** coin, and a **lost** son. I also read Jesus' life mission statement: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was **lost**." (Luke 19:10) I let the whole group know that God wants us to understand and see people as lost without Jesus.

This does not mean we use this term when interacting with people who are still far from God. I have never met a spiritual seeker and said, "Hi, I'm Kevin and you're lost." It is not a term or designation that should be used when interacting with people who have not yet crossed the line of faith. But, it is entirely appropriate to see people as lost without Jesus. If this idea or term makes us uncomfortable...so be it. What we should be doing is getting our heart to beat with the heart of Jesus. And, the heart of Jesus is pounding for the lost.

When this biblical truth captures us, we will be moved to go out looking for lost sheep who are still wandering far from God. We will look past the facades and outward appearances and realize that every man, woman, and child on the face of this earth needs what only Jesus can offer. Until they are found by the Savior, they are lost. Jesus is already on a mission to find them and he invites us to come along.

Salvation Is Found in Jesus Alone

The Bible teaches, with staggering clarity, that salvation can be found in Jesus, and only in him. This has been accepted by Christians through the centuries. Yet, more and more people today claim to be followers of Jesus but want to embrace other religions as valid expressions of saving faith. This is taught nowhere in the Bible. As a matter of fact, the Bible communicates the exact opposite. Over and over the Bible teaches that faith in the one true God, alone, will save.

Some have even tried to reinterpret passages in the Bible that have been embraced by the church for centuries and redefine their meaning. Though the greatest scholars of the past two thousand years have agreed

on the clarity of these passages, some, are seeking to put a new “spin” on the teaching of the Bible.

Ajith Ferenando, a leader in the Church in Sri Lanka battles against this trend to embrace other ways to God. In his powerful book, *Sharing the Truth*, he writes, “...the Bible clearly teaches that Christ is the only way to salvation. It also teaches that the salvation Christ offers is appropriated through faith in him. When the Phillipian jailer asked Paul and Silas, ‘What must I do to be saved’ (Acts 16:30, 31). Acts 2:21 and Romans 10:13 summarize this teaching by proclaiming that ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”

One example of this effort to reinterpret two-thousand years of doctrine and biblical belief is what some are trying to do with John 14:6. Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.” This has always been held up as a clear teaching, from the lips of Jesus, that he is the only way to heaven and that the Christian faith contains the message of salvation found in Jesus alone.

Some authors and speakers are putting a new spin on this when they exposit these words of Jesus. They say things like, “Jesus was not making claims about one religion being better than all other religions. That completely misses the point, the depth and the truth. Rather, he was telling those who were following him that his way is the way to the depth of reality.” What they want to emphasize is that Jesus offers the best life possible. They focus on the call to live the “Jesus way” in this world.

I have no problem with the idea that Jesus offers us the best life possible but that is not what John 14:6 is saying. Jesus is in a conversation with his followers and they are talking about heaven, eternal life, and the hope of glory. To re-paint this biblical truth and teach that Jesus is not making any unique claim about himself or the truth of the Christian faith is irresponsible at the least and dangerous to the cause of evangelism at worst.

Biblical Christians embrace what the Bible teaches, even when it stretches our thinking or makes us comfortable. If we feel free to adjust, redefine, or alter clear biblical teaching on certain topics, then all biblical teaching is up for grabs. The truth is, we can’t fully understand the wisdom of God. We are limited. The call on our life is to embrace his truth even when our minds can’t get all the way around it. I don’t have to “get it” but if God’s truth “gets me” I will be moved to share the life-changing Good News of Jesus.

The Reality of Heaven and Hell

Another biblical teaching that impacts our passion and commitment to outreach is the reality of heaven and hell. C.S. Lewis once wrote, "You have never met a mere mortal." Every person we meet will live forever. The question is, will they dwell in the presence of a loving God who paid the price for their sins and invited them to come to him through the amazing grace of Jesus? Or, will they spend eternity separate from God in hell?

No one likes the doctrine of hell. But, the Bible teaches it and tossing it aside because it makes us feel uncomfortable is not an option for Christians who believe the Bible is God's Word. Also, declaring that hell does not exist, or taking an agnostic posture on this doctrine does not make hell any less of a reality. At the same time, living with a profound confidence that the doors of heaven have been opened for all who embrace Jesus by faith fills us with a zeal and fresh energy to serve, love, and share the message of Jesus.

In recent years two streams of thought have crept into the way some people understand the doctrines of heaven and hell. First, there are those who focus so much on this life, and making the world a better place, that they have all but done away with the hope of heaven. A growing number of pastors and writers are espousing the idea that thinking about heaven or being motivated by the hope of heaven creates apathy toward the needs we face in our world today. They would agree with the old adage that Christians can become so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good. I believe this is shallow and errant thinking.

When we hope for a city whose foundations were not built by men but by God, (Hebrews 11:10) we get a clearer focus on what we are to do in our cities and towns today. "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10) We can live with a healthy balance of confidence and hope in our heavenly home and also engage with passion in works here in this world. The hope of heaven does not snuff out a desire to see the kingdom of God break into human history. On the contrary, it gives us a vision of what could be and grows our desire to sacrifice, serve, and unleash the power of heaven in daily life. When we cling to heaven we can say with the apostle Paul, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." (Romans 8:18) With the hope of glory in our hearts, we can sacrifice, take risks, and lay ourselves down for the sake of those who are lost.

On the other end of the continuum there are people who are fine with the idea of heaven, but they are very uncomfortable with the biblical teaching on hell. They have tried to dance around this doctrine and do away with it. One approach is to undermine Scripture and build an argument that the Bible does not really teach with clarity on this topic.

This weak-minded explanation undercuts the authority of the whole Bible. Every time people try to explain away the dozens of references to hell, they weaken the authority of the very book that speaks the words of life and hope.

In the book, *Why We're Not Emergent* (By Two Guys Who Should Be), Kevin DeYoung writes, "The avoidance of hell is not just a 'liberal' problem. Evangelicals in recent decades have soft-peddled the doctrine as well, opting instead for a therapeutic God who encourages our self-esteem. Likewise, some missiologists argue that the missionary enterprise should no longer be seen as a venture to save people from hell, but only as an effort to bring God's kingdom of justice and shalom to all people." Believing in the doctrine of hell and knowing that people are lost without Jesus is certainly not the only doctrine of the Christian faith. But, it is an important one. Hell is real and real people will spend eternity there. Just because we don't like the idea or declare it "barbaric" or see it as "unloving" does not make it any less true.

There are also a growing number of Christians who are seeking to explain away hell who don't even bother to address Scripture. Instead they say things like, "I can't believe in a God who would send people to a place of eternal torment." These people say that the whole idea of hell bothers them so much that they choose to disbelieve it. This kind of sophomoric theology could lead people to toss out any biblical teaching or doctrine they don't like. By the same token it will encourage them to add new doctrines that are not supported by the teaching of the Bible. Sadly, this is the path some people, churches, and entire denominations are taking and the results are consistently tragic.

It is not our prerogative to "do away" with a biblical teaching just because it makes us uneasy or our mind can't fully grasp it. As we prepare the soil of our hearts for the work of outreach, we can confidently and joyfully take hold of the teachings of the Bible. Floyd Schneider, in *The Complete Evangelism Handbook* writes, "The Holy Spirit wields the Scriptures like a knight uses a sword. The sword slices through the thoughts and intents of the heart, revealing to the unbeliever his problem of sin deep within the soul. It wakes him up to the fact that he is spiritually dead to God." The truth of God's word has empowered Christians to press forward with the Gospel for two thousand years. We can trust the Word of God to instruct and teach us in this generation with as much impact as it has in every one before ours.

Organic Activity...I Can Do That!

- **Watching Jesus**– Take time in the coming days to learn about how Jesus interacted with lost people. Note his attitude, love, patience, what he said, and what he did. Do this by studying the Gospel of John. In particular, you might want to look at the following accounts (Nicodemus in chapter three; the Samaritan woman in chapter four; the man by the pool in chapter five; the woman caught in adultery in chapter eight; the man born blind in chapter nine; and Pilate in chapter eighteen). You might want to keep a journal with a collection of your insights.
- **Open My Eyes**– For the next week, before you open your eyes each morning, say this prayer: Let my eyes see lost people as you do. Give me vision that pierces through the facades and masks so I can see the depth of people’s lostness. As my eyes see, allow my heart to feel what you feel as you look at a world filled with people who are desperately in need of your love and grace.

Personal Reflection

- How can I live with a deeper awareness of the goodness and blessings of heaven that await all those who have come to the Father through faith in Jesus Christ?
- How can I grow in my awareness that real people will spend eternity separate from God in hell if they refuse to accept the free gift of forgiveness that is found in Jesus Christ alone?
- When non-Christians get to know me, do they have a confidence that I really believe what I say I believe about my faith? What can I do to articulate my faith with greater confidence?

Group Reflection

- Where are you seeing Christians compromise their faith or question core beliefs that have been held by the church throughout its history? Why do you think it is becoming more popular and acceptable to question what the Bible teaches? What are some of the possible problems and consequences of this trend to “question everything”?
- What has helped you to love and grow in your knowledge of the Bible? How can your group members inspire and encourage each other to grow in their commitment to know and follow the truth revealed in the Bible?

Prayer Direction

God of wisdom, your ways are beyond my comprehension. I will never fully grasp all you are and the mystery of your truth. Grant me humility to embrace what your Word teaches even when your revelation spills beyond the boundaries of my understanding. Grant me confidence in your Word and the truth you have revealed through the teachings of the Bible. In this world of confusion and uncertainty, let your truth capture my heart and overflow freely to others. Amen.