

# “THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

## The Gospel/Doctrine Distinction as a Basis of a Broadened Fellowship

By Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

In the late forties and early fifties, Carl Ketcherside, Leroy Garrett and company opposed an evangelist locating with a church and preaching the gospel to it. They made a distinction between teaching and preaching. One could preach (herald the good news) to the world, but not to the church who already had the news. Thus, the gospel was to be preached to the world and doctrine was to be taught to the church. About a year or so before I began preaching, brother Garrett spoke at the congregation where I attended. I don't remember whether he claimed to be preaching or teaching as he spoke, but this was my first experience with anyone who made the gospel/doctrine distinction.

In the Wallace-Ketcherside debate near Paragould, Arkansas, June 30-July 4, 1952, brother Ketcherside argued for this distinction repeatedly in his defense of the first proposition of the debate dealing with the located preacher issue. Brother Wallace challenged brother Ketcherside several times to teach five minutes and preach five minutes and show the audience the difference. According to their position, if he taught it would be doctrine and if he preached it would be gospel. Ketcherside and Garrett effectively narrowed their circle of fellowship by making this distinction in those days. Years later, after these fellows decided that nearly everyone was saved, they appealed to the gospel/doctrine distinction to broaden their fellowship.

### Distinction Becoming More Popular

Over the years, this distinction has become more and more popular with some brethren as a basis of broadening fellowship. The basic idea being that the gospel is the real basis of fellowship and not doctrine. One might be cursed for preaching a different gospel (Gal. 1:8, 9) but not for teaching another doctrine. So more and more brethren are calling for us to overlook our “doctrinal” differences, not only with those professing to be in churches of Christ but with all who profess to believe in Christ, and unite on the “*gospel*.” Though there may be some disagreement as to what constitutes the “core” gospel, it is usually narrowed to the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Some are willing to fellowship any who believe in the Christ based on these basic facts of the gospel. Others extend it a bit further and are not willing to fellowship those who merely believe these facts of the gospel, but insist that they must have “*obeyed the gospel*.” The idea is, while we should not tolerate a different gospel, we should and even must tolerate a different doctrine for the sake of unity.

Even if we could establish that a doctrine/gospel distinction is clearly taught in the New Testament, it would be rather arbitrary for us to decide which one should be the sole basis for fellowship. Where would we find the passage that clearly links fellowship to one and not the other? But, is there such a clear line of distinction found in the New Testament writings?

### Gospel — Doctrine — Faith — Truth

We propose to show in the balance of this article that, not only is there no distinction between gospel and doctrine, there are four terms frequently used to refer to the same system. They are “*the gospel*,” “*the doctrine*,” “*the truth*” and “*the faith*.” Each term refers to the whole Christian system. They are all used interchangeably by the New Testament writers.

The Colossians, in the same verse, were admonished to continue in “*the faith*” and not be moved away from the hope of “*the gospel*” (Col. 1:23). Paul tells Timothy about things contrary to “*sound doctrine according the glorious gospel of the blessed God*” (1 Tim. 1:10, 11). Paul wrote of “*the truth of the gospel*” (Gal. 2:5, 14).

Each term just emphasizes a different feature of the same New Testament system of Christ. Gospel emphasizes it

as a system of good news. Gospel and evangelist are translated from the same root word meaning good news or glad tidings. The gospel is the good news and an evangelist is the bearer of that good news. Our English word, gospel, is a contraction of two Middle English words: god (with a long “o,” pronounced “good”) and spell (a story). The “d” was dropped from god and the last “l” from spell and the two combined became gospel — good story. The faith emphasizes it as a system of belief (in the Christ). The doctrine (meaning that which is taught) emphasizes it as a system of teaching. Anyone who causes divisions and offenses contrary the doctrine are to be marked and avoided — disfellowshipped (Rom. 16:17, 18). The truth emphasizes it as the system of spiritual truth as opposed to the false systems in the world. Any other system is a lie (2 Thess. 2:10-12).

Obedience is demanded no matter which term is used. The gospel must be obeyed (2 Thess. 1:8). The form of doctrine must be obeyed (Rom. 6:17). One must be obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7; Rom. 1:5; 16:26). One must obey the truth (1 Pet. 1:22).

Each term refers to the whole of Christianity and not a separate department of the system. Each term embraces instructions for becoming Christians and living as Christians.

**“The gospel”** includes the news of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ and the salvation that this brings to mankind (1 Cor. 15:1-4). It also includes walking uprightly as a Christian (Gal. 2:14). Paul proposed **“to preach the gospel to you that are in Rome”** (Rom. 1:15), with the **“you”** being those **“beloved of God, called to be saints”** (v. 7).

**“The doctrine”** includes the form of doctrine one initially obeys to become free of sin (Rom. 6:17, 18). It also includes various duties in the lives of Christians (Tit. 2:1-10). Notice that in verse one Titus was told to speak **“things which become sound doctrine,”** then a list of things follow that have to do with duties as Christians.

**“The truth”** includes what is obeyed to become a Christian (1 Pet. 1:22). It also includes what is obeyed as Christians (Gal. 1:3; 5:7).

**“The faith”** includes what we sometime call the fundamentals (Acts 6:7), but it also includes even a Christian’s duties such as domestic responsibilities (1 Tim. 5:8). Each term includes all the points included in any of the other terms.

The consequences of departing from or disobeying the system is the same whether it is spoken of as **“the gospel,” “the doctrine,” “the faith,”** or **“the truth.”** The Lord will take vengeance upon those who **“obey not the gospel”** (2 Thess. 1:8). Those who abide not in **“the doctrine of Christ”** and follow **“another doctrine”** do not have God (2 Jn. 9-11; cf. 1 Tim. 1:3). Indignation and wrath await those who **“do not obey the truth”** (Rom. 2:8). Paul said one must be obedient to the faith (Rom. 1:5) and tied his assurance of eternal salvation to his having kept **“the faith”** (2 Tim. 4:7-8).

## Conclusion

So, one needs to be very careful about trying to isolate any one of these descriptions of the system into a separate entity and making it the sole basis for fellowship. Whether the system is spoken of as **“gospel,” “doctrine,” “truth,”** or **“faith,”** it must be taught or preached, obeyed, and continued in to please God. Anyone who teaches or acts contrary to it, regardless of which term is used to describe it, should not be received into fellowship. Anyone already in our fellowship, but departs from the faith/doctrine/truth/gospel, either in teaching or practice, should not be retained in fellowship after all proper steps have been taken to restore him have failed (see Tit. 3:10-11; Rom. 16:17, 18).

So, the gospel/doctrine distinction has no basis in Scripture. It is an artificial distinction invented by men to serve whatever agenda they might have at the time. — *Truth Magazine* Vol. XLIV:19, p. 6, October 5, 2000. 

**“For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine; According to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust” - 1 Timothy 1:10, 11**

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