

DOCTRINE AND DISCERNMENT

The Christ Behind the Doctrine

On a graphic that makes you choose between theology and love

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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A graphic came across my feed this week, white letters on a red field, the kind that gets three hundred shares before lunch:

If our theology makes us better at judging others rather than loving them, we have learned religion without learning Jesus.

It was posted in a Lutheran debate group, which is worth noticing, and I will come back to it.

I want to grant the sentence its due before I take it apart, because it is not aimed at nothing. There is a way of holding doctrine that turns it into a scoreboard. There are men who can name every error in the room and console no one in it. If you have spent any time in confessional circles online, you have met the type, and if you are honest you have been the type, at least on your worse days. The graphic is aimed at something real.

But it does its aiming with a trick, and the trick costs more than the correction is worth.

The word doing all the work

The sentence turns on “judging,” and “judging” is being asked to mean two different things at once.

There is the judging our Lord forbids in Matthew 7: “Do not judge so that you will not be judged” (Matt 7:1). The man with a beam in his own eye performing surgery on his neighbor’s speck — “Why do you see the speck in your brother’s eye, but fail to see the beam of wood in your own?” (Matt 7:3) — the sinner who has appointed himself to a bench he was never given. That is condemned, and it is condemned precisely because the man doing it has forgotten that he stands under the same verdict.

But notice how the Lord ends that passage. He does not call off the surgery. He orders it: “First remove the beam from your own eye, and then you can see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Matt 7:5). The speck still comes out. The man removing it has simply been to the mirror first.

Then there is the judging our Lord commands seven chapters into John, where He tells the crowd, “Do not judge according to external appearance, but judge with proper judgment” (John 7:24). It is the same verb. It is not the same act.

And the apostles do not treat that second kind as an unfortunate necessity. They command it, constantly and without embarrassment. John tells his dear friends, “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to determine if they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). Luke commends the Bereans, and the thing he commends them for is that they went home and checked Paul’s preaching against the Scriptures — “examining the scriptures carefully every day to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). Paul tells Titus that an overseer “must hold firmly to the

faithful message as it has been taught, so that he will be able to give exhortation in such healthy teaching and correct those who speak against it,” and then, a few lines later, says such men “must be silenced because they mislead whole families by teaching for dishonest gain what ought not to be taught” (Titus 1:9, 11). Paul tells the Romans “to watch out for those who create dissensions and obstacles contrary to the teaching that you learned. Avoid them!” (Rom 16:17).

You cannot obey any of those commands without evaluating a teaching and reaching a conclusion about it. That is judging. It is judging in the sense the graphic has just made unsayable.

And this is not a command imported from some sterner corner of the canon to embarrass a tender one. It is in the same chapter the slogan is quarrying. Before the sermon ends, it says, “Watch out for false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are voracious wolves. You will recognize them by their fruit” (Matt 7:15-16). Matthew 7 forbids one kind of judgment and commands another, within a page of itself. Any reading that cannot hold both has not understood either.

So the sentence borrows the moral weight of Matthew 7 and spends it on 1 John 4. It sounds like Jesus while quietly forbidding what Jesus and His apostles required. That is not a small sleight of hand, because of who pays for it.

Who pays

Slogans like this one always sound as though the cost falls on the theologian, the guy with the systematics volumes and the strong opinions. He is the one being scolded, and he can take it.

He is not the one who pays. The person in the pew pays.

A woman is dying, and she wants to know whether the body of her Lord is actually given into her mouth or whether the congregation is performing a fond memory. That is a doctrinal question. It has a right answer and a wrong one, and the difference between them is the difference between a Savior who has come all the way down to her and a Savior who is somewhere else being thought about. If her pastor answers it precisely, he has judged. Some teachings are excluded by his answer, and their teachers with them.

A man is three years into the same sin he confessed last month and the month before that. He needs to know whether the absolution he heard on Sunday is God’s own word to him or a kind gesture the congregation makes on its way to the offering. That is a doctrinal question. The answer determines whether he leaves church forgiven or merely encouraged.

A mother carries her infant to the font and wants to know whether anything has actually happened to her child. That is a doctrinal question, and the people who answer it differently are not all saying the same thing in different accents.

Every one of those answers is an act of discernment that rules something out. Under the graphic's logic, the pastor who gives them straight has become "better at judging than loving." But what he has actually done is love the only way a pastor can love: by telling a frightened person the truth about where Christ is and what He has promised. Paul does not put truth and love in different columns. He puts them in the same phrase — "practicing the truth in love" — and the result is that "we will in all things grow up into Christ, who is the head" (Eph 4:15).

Set doctrine against love and you have not protected anyone. You have disarmed the only people who could say anything useful at a deathbed.

There is no Christ behind the doctrine

Now the second half of the sentence, which is the more serious problem: "we have learned religion without learning Jesus."

The line assumes there is a Jesus available somewhere apart from the content that teaches Him. Learn the religion and you might miss Him; learn Him and the religion becomes optional, or at least secondary. Doctrine is the wrapper. Jesus is the thing inside.

But there is no Christ behind the doctrine, or beside it, or underneath it. There is no Jesus you can meet in a way that bypasses the Word about Him. Paul asks the chain of questions — "How are they to call on one they have not believed in? And how are they to believe in one they have not heard of? And how are they to hear without someone preaching to them?" — and then closes the loop: "faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the preached word of Christ" (Rom 10:14, 17). That is not an endorsement of academic theology. It is a statement about the only door there is.

Our confessions are blunt about this. "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel" (AC V.1-2). The same article condemns those who teach that we receive the Spirit "without the external word of the gospel through our own preparation, thoughts, and works" (AC V.4). The Smalcald Articles go further and name the alternative: "In these matters, which concern the external, spoken Word, we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before" (SA III.viii.3). Luther calls the contrary opinion enthusiasm, and treats it not as a minor error but as the oldest one there is — "All this is the old devil and the old serpent who turned Adam and Eve into enthusiasts," a poison implanted "from the beginning" that is "the source, power, and strength of all heresy" (SA III.viii.5, 9).

Paul has his own phrase for this, and it is very nearly the graphic's. "But you did not learn about Christ like this," he tells the Ephesians, "if indeed you heard about him and were taught in him, just as the truth is in Jesus" (Eph 4:20-21). The English slips an "about" into the verse that the Greek does not have — Paul says the Ephesians learned Christ, with

Christ Himself as the direct object of the learning. And what did that learning consist of? Hearing, and being taught. Learning Christ, in the one place the New Testament puts it that way, is not the alternative to instruction. It is the instruction.

So “learning Jesus without learning religion” is enthusiasm with a friendly face. It relocates Christ from the pulpit, the font, and the altar into some inner region where He is approached directly and described vaguely. And a Christ described vaguely cannot be handed to anyone. He can only be admired. Doctrine is not the packaging Jesus arrives in, and it is not a report filed about Him afterward. It is how He is given: the words that carry Him to a person who was never standing in Galilee.

Law with no absolution

Here is the last thing, and it is why the posting location matters.

Read the sentence again and notice what it does to the reader. It accuses. It offers a diagnosis with no remedy: you thought you had Jesus, and it turns out you may only have religion. That is law. And it is law of the worst kind, aimed at everyone and no one, unfalsifiable, with no absolution attached and no way to know whether you are the one being described. Nobody can repent of it, because nobody can tell whether they have done it. They can only feel vaguely accused and resolve to be nicer.

And in a debate group, it does something else. It functions as a shield. Once the sentence is on the table, any correction offered to anyone can be answered by asking whether the corrector has learned Jesus. It is a conversation-ending move disguised as humility, which is a very old trick, and one you should be slower to admire when it is aimed at people you already disagree with.

I do not doubt that most of the people sharing it mean it kindly. They have watched doctrine used badly and they want the church to be gentler, and that is a decent thing to want. But the sentence they are passing along does not do what they want it to do. It brings itself under its own judgment: it is theology that has made someone better at judging than at loving, and the whole of its content is the accusation that other people are like that.

What is actually true here

Strip the sentence down and something worth keeping survives.

It is possible to know the right doctrine and use it as a weapon. Paul has a version of this and it is more devastating than the graphic’s: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor 8:1). And when Paul finds a brother caught in a sin, he does not tell the church to overlook it and he does not tell them to condemn him. “You who are spiritual restore such a person in a spirit of gentleness,” he says, and then adds the line that keeps the whole thing honest: “Pay close attention to yourselves, so that you are not tempted too” (Gal 6:1).

That is the actual alternative. Not less doctrine, but doctrine held by someone who knows he is standing under it. The man who says the words of institution accurately is not thereby exempt from needing them. The discernment Scripture commands is exercised by people who are themselves being carried, and if you forget that, you will indeed become the man in the graphic.

But the fix for that is not to stop judging teaching. It is to remember that the judgment which mattered has already fallen somewhere else. Christ was judged in your place. That verdict is delivered to you in specific words, at specific places, by a man authorized to say them, and the reason we care so much about getting the doctrine right is that the doctrine is how the verdict gets to you.

That is not religion instead of Jesus. That is the only address He gave.

Quotations from the Lutheran Confessions follow the Kolb-Wengert edition.

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