

**Text:** Various

**Title:** Doctrine Unites

**Truth:** A rebuttal of the common phrase “Doctrine Divides”

**Date/Location:** Saturday July 11, 2026 and Sunday 8/30/2026 at FBC

---

## Introduction

There is a common mantra held by some Christians, churches, and organizations. It is this: “doctrine divides.”

What exactly do they mean? In practice, it means that if you hold to a view they disagree with, or they think you should not hold, then they will (ironically) not fellowship with you. This is not mere speculation or empty assertion: it actually happened in the life of our local church. It means that they have a short doctrinal statement with the hopes of attracting the most people. It means they hope to avoid division, yet this approach *creates* division.

But what is the statement “doctrine divides” but a doctrine itself? Is that doctrine found in Scripture? Doctrine simply means “that which is taught” or “a teaching.” The teaching that doctrine divides is a doctrine. And when this doctrine is applied against a conservative Christian by a more broad-minded Christian, the latter sometimes divides from the former! In this case, their doctrine that doctrine divides has caused them to divide! What an ironic situation!

Of course, the more conservative person may divide, but it is not usually because they love division or that they have a strange belief about “doctrine.” They simply believe that there are some things that are wrong and ought not be held as true by God’s people. I will give some examples later in these notes.

The common meaning of “doctrine divides” is a false teaching. False teachings are not only doctrines like “salvation by works” or “Christ is not God’s Son.” It can be teachings like these:

- “our doctrine is that doctrine is not important” or
- “our doctrine is that we do not take a stand on things like that” or
- “our doctrine is that doctrine divides” or

- “our doctrine is that it is fine to believe many different teachings on a variety of theological questions” or
- “our doctrine is love and unity” or
- “our doctrine is that science and human reason are greater authorities than the Bible.”

Those are doctrines, even though they would probably not be expressed in those terms by those who hold them. But those are wrong and sometimes dangerous doctrines.

If those things were true, why would God tell us to give close attention to sound doctrine (1 Timothy 1:10; 2 Timothy 4:3; Titus 1:9, 2:1)?

## I. Good Division and Bad Division

Some division is good. Some division is bad.

A. Some division is bad and has a bad effect. 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 3:1-4.

B. Some division is good and has a good effect. 1 Corinthians 11:18-19. “Doctrine divides” overlooks the good kind of division and focuses overmuch on division as a bad thing. Some people seem to treat all division as if it were bad, when it is not.

Here are some examples of doctrines that are very much worth dividing over, and in fact it is explicitly commanded to do so in several of these cases.

1. Another gospel. Galatians 1:6-9. “We are saved by Jesus Christ after all that we can do” is an oft-repeated Mormon doctrine and it is worthy of good division because we are saved by Jesus Christ *apart* from all that we can do.
2. Unorthodox teaching about Jesus. For example, some hold the doctrine that Jesus is Michael the archangel. Jehovah’s Witnesses believe this. 2 John 9-10.
3. Jesus is not God’s Son, or that God has no Son (Islam). John 5:23, 2 John 3.
4. That Jesus did not come in the flesh. 1 John 4:2-3, 2 John 7.

5. Those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to sound doctrine. Romans 16:17-18.
6. The doctrine of Balaam. Rev. 2:14.
7. The doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which Jesus hates. Rev. 2:15.
8. “Strange doctrines.” Heb. 13:9.
9. Not consenting to wholesome words and the doctrine which is in agreement with godliness. 1 Tim. 6:3.
10. The doctrines of demons. 1 Tim. 4:1.
11. The opposite of sound doctrine, including behaviors such as fornication, sodomy, kidnappers, lying, etc. 1 Tim. 1:10.
12. The commandments of men. Mark 7:7.
13. Teach no other doctrine. 1 Tim. 1:3.

## **II. Why is “Doctrine Divides” as Commonly Understood a False Teaching?**

- A. Because proponents practically assume most division is wrong (see above) while the Scripture presents ample evidence that separation from false doctrine is a basic aspect of the Christian faith. This is so because of God’s holiness. Doctrines that do not agree with God’s word are not holy.
- B. Because proponents over-emphasize unity at the expense of truth. Unity is important, but unity around the truth is what God desires, not unity for unity’s sake with error mixed in. We are called to be one as the Father and the Son are one, John 17:11, 22. They are and always have been and always will be perfectly agreed with one another, of the same mind, of one accord. “As” means we are to be unified in the same manner—not just unified in any way.
- C. Because proponents downplay genuinely important doctrines that are critical for developing a Biblical, Christian worldview. Matters such as the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, the historicity of the creation account, the historicity of the flood account, God’s irrevocable promises to Abraham, and many others are critical to a Biblical worldview. They are *doctrines* and they are interwoven into

all of Biblical revelation. Taking them out undercuts much of Scripture. They cannot be simply set aside for unity's sake.

- D. Because some proponents accuse those on the opposite side of possessing a schismatic spirit. If A accuses B of over-emphasizing doctrine and tells him that doctrine divides, person B may well respond that he has no desire to divide. He is just holding to what Scripture plainly teaches and wants to convince others to do the same. A schismatic person is much different than a person who has thought through a Biblical question and come to a specific answer. For example, believing that inerrancy is worth taking a strong stand is not schismatic. I would argue that departing from that standard and uncontroversial doctrine is what is schismatic.

### **III. Some Helpful Points**

- A. First, there are some doctrines that you cannot rightly divide over. Which doctrines fit into this category is a judgment call that will differ from person to person. In the following examples, I will assume charitable, well-informed, patient Christians are involved. I should be able to assume that, right?

Let's pick a doctrine that we experienced lately: head coverings for women in ministry. We were visiting some churches where a head covering was required of the ladies, particularly those ministering at the front of the church, so we purchased a hat / beret, and my wife wore it. It was not a big deal. What is not optional or debatable is that women must be in submission to their husbands, which we believe a head covering symbolized in the early church (Eph. 5:22, Col. 3:18, 1 Peter 3:1, 3:5, 1 Cor. 11:3-16). That symbolism has passed in many of our western churches so that a head covering does not have that meaning.

Here is another one: Whether Christ died only for the elect without any real reference to the non-elect, or he died to provide a salvation available to all but God only elected some to salvation. Some see these two views as insurmountably different. And they are different. But are they sufficient to cause a rift in fellowship, even church membership? Relatively speaking, they are in fact very similar views compared to a view that says personal election is

false (contrary to Matt 24:22, 31; Mark 13:27, Luke 18:7, 1 Thess. 1:4, Co. 3:12, Rom. 8:33, 11:7, 2 Tim. 2:10, Titus 1:1, 1 Peter 1:2, 2 John 1, 13). Or a view that says Christ's death was only partially sufficient for our salvation and we have to supply the remainder of the merit, or that Christ did not die at all!

Here is a third example: do you believe that the two witnesses of Revelation 11 are Moses and Elijah? Or are you unsure of that identification? There is no way that this question should cause a division between Christians.

- B. Separation and division is not the same thing as non-cooperation. I am not required to partner or cooperate with everyone or any particular person who claims to be a Christian. We do not partner with many churches, both near and far, simply because of distance, lack of familiarity, lack of time, etc. At the same time, we hold to a specific form of doctrine and invite people to fellowship with us on that doctrinal basis. But the point is that Scripture does not demand that I try to draw in the largest circle of fellowship I can simply for the sake of unity, or that I actually enact that circle of fellowship. Limited time and resources prevent it, among other things.

## IV. How Exactly does Doctrine Unite?

My main point is that you should not view doctrine as divisive.

Instead, we should view it as uniting. How does it unite? Following are several factors.

- A. The purpose of doctrine is to provide a common base upon which we can unite. To the extent that our teaching impacts our thinking, and our thinking is as close to God's thinking as it can be, this draws us closer to God as well as to one another. Shared doctrine knits us toward God and together with one another in a closer relationship.

Notice the connection of doctrine to the early church in Acts 2:42: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."

Ephesians 4:3-6 says, "endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup> *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you*

were called in one hope of your calling; <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism; <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who *is* above all, and through all, and in you all. There are seven “ones” here – including one faith and one hope and one baptism. There are not two faiths, two hopes, two baptisms, two possible futures, two different versions of Jesus, two different gospels, or three for that matter. These “ones” are the basis of unity in the church. The apostle Paul teaches that doctrine *does* unite us.

- B. The unifying feature of sound doctrine has a side effect or consequence of marking off those who are outside of its boundaries. It is akin to the difference between Jesus coming to save the world versus to condemn the world (John 3:17). His coming, which was salvation-oriented, is not *bad* because it has judgment as a side-effect for those who do not believe. They were already under judgment (John 3:18). The purpose of the incarnation and atonement is not condemnation but salvation. In a similar way, doctrine is not bad because it has a consequence that it shows someone to be wrong and outside of the boundaries of healthy teaching. Just because it happens (as a side-effect) to demonstrate a delineation between people who do not hold sound doctrine and those who do, does not mean that doctrine is bad. In itself, it is inherently a good and healthy thing.
- C. The Scripture repeatedly commands Christians to be “of one mind” (Romans 15:6, 2 Cor. 13:11, Phil. 1:27, 1 Peter 3:8). The doctrine that “doctrine divides” promotes a very broad approach that downplays doctrine and really encourages people to have a wide variety of views on various matters—often in practice it amounts to whatever suits their fancy. You cannot have “one mind” with others in the church if you actually have “several minds” in the church.

As an example, if I believe in believer’s baptism and you believe in infant baptism for the infants of believing parents, we do not have the same mind. I would argue that difference is significant enough that we should properly separate into different churches. This is precisely why Presbyterian churches are not Baptist or Bible churches, and vice versa.

Another example of a doctrine that is almost always relegated to the third tier as a non-essential is the rapture. We believe the rapture is imminent—the next event in the divine plan. This is an encouragement to those who face trials today, or who have lost a loved one and are awaiting the resurrection. 1 Thess. 4:13-18 is a real comfort to those who grieve someone who has died. This shared comfort unites us in the Lord in a practical way, especially when we face times of grief and trial. Others believe that the church will pass through the Tribulation and only afterward will the Lord return. This does not offer the same kind of comfort as the view we hold. This is not merely discomfoting; it is dis-uniting because it is a contradiction. Both of these views cannot be correct.

(In other venues I have stated my belief that although there are doctrines which are not essential to believe for salvation, there are a good deal of those very doctrines are appropriate to delineate for church fellowship and sound worldview, and in order to avoid unnecessary disunity. Furthermore, while we may disagree on some doctrinal matter and thus not be of the same mind, we can do so charitably.)

E. Our viewpoint that doctrine unites encourages discernment and also demands discernment. *Discernment* is the ability to understand things that are not immediately obvious, along with the skill to differentiate between one viewpoint and another. It is a skill that helps us to select what matches Scripture and to reject what does not.

1. The idea that doctrine unites **encourages** discernment because **we want to know what is right and true**, and to know if a church properly holds Scriptural teaching. This allows us then the freedom to join that church and partner with that church in good conscience. Sound doctrine is the platform and foundation of discernment that allows us to be united. It helps us begin a relationship of unity.

Of course we are not expecting that everyone agrees on every detail. But what we are aiming for is that along the main lines of doctrine that there is agreement, not just on the bare minima

involved in the gospel. We ought to be able to discern that it is wrong to delete as many truths as possible from the “important list” to get down to a handful of statements regarding the gospel of Christ that must be believed. As Christians, we are not to be focused on believing a few facts. Instead, we are believing in a person and in what He believes.

2. The idea that doctrine unites **demands** discernment because you become displeasing to God if you unite yourself to those who are not the friends of God in some way. Sound doctrine is the foundation upon which discernment is built, in order to know if something is wrong. If it is wrong, we must separate from it or refrain from joining in close partnership with it—that is, to *not* unite with it. It helps us to avoid relationships that damage unity.

Someone who believes a different gospel or a different Christ or a different spirit (2 Cor. 11:4) is not a friend of God. They might be a “nice” person, but niceness does not save anyone or please the Lord. Without faith it is impossible to please Him. You ***must possess discernment in order to avoid partnering with error.***

- F. Doctrine unites us as a family in a practical way. It makes the church a retreat from the world where we can be together with people who share our values. We share a deeper relationship with others and knits us closer together. In every-day life, we stand in opposition to much of the philosophy, values, and entertainments that are embraced by the world, and this can wear us down. The church is a comfortable and “safe” place to be where people share our basic worldview.
- G. Doctrine unites us in prayer as well. If you have been in a false religion setting and heard a prayer from someone who believes very differently than you, it has likely caused you to question whether you can “pray along with” the person leading the prayer. With a common doctrinal basis, you are united in prayer with the person who is leading, because you believe alike with them.

## Conclusion

Maximizing unity for unity's sake is not a doctrine that we can find in Scripture. I do find a command to maintain the unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3). That is a task enough<sup>1</sup> in the life of a local church, one to which we should apply ourselves diligently.

Our doctrine unites us as one, as Eph. 4:4-6 teaches us. And that is my message: doctrine does not divide. True doctrine unites and gives us a solid foundation to serve the Lord.

MAP

---

<sup>1</sup> "Enough" reflects the notion that we do not need to be concerned that we are not trying to reach out and develop the broadest, biggest partnerships that we can. Maintain that unity in the church where you are, and a few limited other partnerships, and focus on faithfulness in those contexts.