The pastor at the church where I grew up told a story once about the Captain of a ship who would start every day by opening a drawer, looking into it for a moment, and then closing it again. His First officer often saw him do that, but he never asked about it. And then the day came when the Captain stepped down, and handed over command of the ship to the First Officer. The Captain took him over to the drawer, opened it up, and inside was a piece of paper that had four words written on it: ‘Port = Left, Starboard = Right’. The Captain had started every day of his career off by making sure that he remembered the very basics of sailing a ship.

And that’s exactly what we’re going to be doing over the next several weeks, making sure we have the basics right, making sure what we believe is really the truth, that it really lines up with what the Bible has to say. Now here’s my warning to you: we’re going to be talking about what we believe, and sometimes people check out when you do that. We’re going to be talking about things like theology and right doctrine and the core values of Agape Christian Church. And I don’t want you to get overwhelmed as we talk about those things.

Sometimes people just hear the word theology and they check out. I was teaching a Sunday School class once, and I started talking about the way that a certain passage of Scripture that we were working with affected our theology. One lady in the class spoke up and said, “I think any time we start talking about theology, we’re getting off track.” She didn’t even think it was worth talking about what we believe, and just wanted to avoid the headache of thinking through all these things. And you’ll find that a lot of people have that same kind of attitude, that same kind of aversion to talking about theology and what we believe.

But here’s why this is so important and why I want to encourage you to stick with us through this series. Because in reality, everyone is a theologian. Rod and I are not the only theologians in the building, every one of us here today is a theologian. Every one of us here today is a theologian, whether you have ever thought about it or not. And that’s because the word theology simply means what we think about God. And everyone has thoughts about God. Even people who don’t believe God exists are theologians because they think something about God, they think he doesn’t exist, but they still have thoughts and beliefs about God.

The word doctrine, simply means the beliefs that we hold. So when we talk about right doctrine, it just means beliefs that line up with the truth of what the Bible says. So really, what we’re going to be doing in this series is making sure that what we believe and what we hold to be true, lines up with what the Bible tells us is true. And that is one of the core fundamental values of Agape Christian Church, that the Bible is our rule and our guide, that it is the inspired word of God. The Bible is the standard that we hold to, what it says about God and what he has done is the foundation upon which all our beliefs about God are built. We’ll talk more about the importance of Scripture in a couple of weeks. But one of the most important things we can do is to make sure that what we hold to be true in our lives lines up with the absolute truth of Scripture. That’s what we’re going to be driving at in this series, that’s what Agape Christian Church is all about, and if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, that should be a priority in your life as well.

That’s important for a lot of reasons. First, we need to make sure that what we believe lines up with what the Bible says because as Christians, it is our job, our mandate to go out and share the Gospel with the world around us. But what happens if the things that we share about the Gospel and the things we share about the Bible are a little bit off? What happens if they are really off? Well, then we will be spreading wrong beliefs about the Bible, and about God with people who need to hear the truth.

If you ask people why they don’t share the Gospel with the people around them, one of the main reasons you’ll hear is that they don’t share their faith and their beliefs with other people is because they are afraid they might do it wrong. They are afraid they might mess up. They are afraid they might mislead people with what they say. They are afraid they don’t have all the right answers, that they aren’t equipped to go out and share their faith with other people. So, a part of what we want to do is give you some of those answers, so that you will be equipped to share your faith. Not knowing what to do or what to say is a legitimate concern.

When I was in Boy Scouts, we went on a trip into Canada to go canoeing in Quetico Provincial Park in Ontario. And our group was really eclectic in religious terms. I came from a Christian Church background, there was kid there from a Baptist Church, two guys were from the Catholic Church, and there was one kid there who was not a believer at all. We were all pretty close friends, and one night while we were about to go to bed, our friend who was not a believer started to ask questions about what we all believed and why. My Catholic buddies didn’t have much to say, so the other guy who was a Baptist and I started to talk about what we believed about Jesus. And we agreed on a lot of the things we told him, but then we started to disagree about a few things, and looking back on it now, the things we argued about were things that didn’t really matter in the long run, and they were things neither one of us really understood to begin with as kids. And so instead of having a chance to show our unbelieving friend a picture of the Gospel and give him real reasons why he needed to meet Jesus. Instead we showed him that Christians are a bunch of people who can’t agree, and who argue with each other instead of witnessing to their friends.

And you know what, the same thing happened in the early church. Within the first four hundred years or so, the church was divided several times by people who came in and started teaching something that was contrary to the true Gospel of Jesus. There was a group called the Gnostics in the first century, and some of the New Testament actually deals specifically with this group, especially the writings of John. They believed that everything spiritual was good, and everything physical was evil, and that God would deposit a special knowledge, or gnosis, in the people he wanted to know about him. And since they believed that physical things like our bodies were evil, they also believed that Jesus was not actually fully human. Because in their minds, if Jesus was human, it would have tainted him with evil. Their teaching was really attractive, it sounded good, and it attracted a lot of people in the first century, but the problem was that it wasn’t true. So the church had to make sure that people knew the truth, and they knew the true Gospel of Jesus.

A guy named Marcion came along about a hundred years later and convinced a lot of people that the Jesus of the New Testament and the God of the Old Testament could not be the same God. And he, like the Gnostics, believed that Jesus was not really human, that he was really only a spiritual being who seemed human to those he interacted with. These people, and other groups that believed different things, really caused a lot of division in the church.

And what we see is that the writers of the New Testament are adamant that we get the Gospel right, that we teach the true Gospel, and that we don’t distort it, add to it, or take away from it, in any way. John dealt a lot with the Gnostic ideas because he was living in an area where people really got sucked into those ideas. Throughout Paul’s letters, we see Paul really go after the Judaizers. That’s what we call people who were Jewish by heritage, and became followers of Jesus, but they also believed that Christians still needed to follow Jewish law and Jewish practices and traditions. That’s exactly the issue that was going on in the church in Galatia, when Paul wrote to them, and this is what he says:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

Galatians 1:6-8 ESV

Paul is adamant that we stick to the true Gospel, that we don’t deviate from it, and that we don’t add anything to it, or take anything away from it. Because he knew that there would be dire consequences for the church if we started to teach something contrary to the Gospel of Jesus.

So even though I don’t want you to be afraid to tell the Gospel to people for fear of messing it up somehow. You do need to know what the Bible teaches about so that you can share that message with other people and get it right. If you don’t feel equipped to share the Gospel with people, then make that a priority in your life. Devote yourself to studying and really understanding what you believe so that you will be ready to share your beliefs with other people.

That’s what we’re doing with this series, making sure that our beliefs line up with the truth of Scripture, and giving you the tools you need to be able to share your beliefs with others. In fact, that’s one of Rod and I’s primary responsibilities as ministers in the church. It’s not to do all the ministry ourselves, it’s to train and equip you, the people of Agape Christian Church to do ministry yourselves, and to be ready to share your faith with other people, to train and equip you to be Jesus in the world you live in. Because we want you to have a faith and beliefs that line up with the truth of Scripture. We want you to be equipped and ready to share your faith in whatever setting you’re in. But don’t just do this because it’s what Rod and I tell you to do. Again it goes back to Scripture. Do it because this is what God is calling you to do as a follower of Jesus. Peter tells us this in:

But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,

1 Peter 3:15 ESV

Peter is telling us here to be ready to give people a reason for why we believe what we believe, to let them know why it’s important to us, and why it matters, and why they need Jesus. The word for prepared or ready there is the word ‘hetoimazo’ and it means to stand at the ready, or to keep in readiness. This is the same word that Jesus uses in Matthew 24 and 25 when he talks about how important it is to be ready for his return, to make sure you are ready any time of the night or day.

The best way I know to illustrate this is through people who are first responders, police officers, fire fighters, and paramedics. Most people go through their day never thinking about what might go wrong and what they would do, but these people do. They are the ones who are always prepared, always ready no matter what happens.

A good friend of our family growing up was an EMT in the town that he lived in, and everywhere he went, he carried his kit. It was always in his truck no matter what. He was always ready no matter what might happen, and there were times he had to use it, times he had to jump into action because someone got hurt, or there was an accident, or he got a call over his radio. He was always prepared no matter what. We have people right here in this room today who serve as police officers, doctors, nurses. And you can be sure that if something happened right now, they would be the first ones to react, the first ones to protect and care for other people, because they are the ones who are standing at the ready.

That’s the same idea that Peter is getting at here, that we need to be standing at the ready, prepared for whatever questions, whatever challenges might come our way. We need to always be standing ready and prepared to give people an answer for why we do the things that we do, why we believe the things we believe, and why we have hope amidst a world that seems to have none.

When people ask you why you believe, or when they ask why you give up your Sunday mornings to go to church, it doesn’t do much good to answer, “I go to church because that’s what my parents always taught me” or, “I don’t know why I do it, I just feel like I should”. Because if you don’t have an answer for someone when they ask you about your faith, then you’ve just lost a big opportunity to introduce someone to Jesus.

Cassie said that one of the things they talked about on their mission trip to the reservation was that you might be the only Jesus that someone ever sees, and that’s true. What if you are the only Jesus that your coworkers ever see? What if you are the only Jesus your neighbors ever see? What if you have a chance to be Jesus to someone, to show them the love of Christ, and tell them about the Gospel, but you aren’t standing ready to give an answer for what you believe? And maybe worse, if you tell them something that is not biblical. Then you’ve just misled them when you had a chance to lead them to the true Gospel. That’s why it’s so important for us to make sure that we know right doctrine and biblical beliefs, so that we will be equipped to share them with others.

Another important reason to do this is because as Christians, we need to do everything that we can to make sure we have a biblical worldview. Maybe you’ve never heard the term worldview before, but if you go to Lincoln Christian University’s campus for any time at all, you will no doubt hear about this all over the place, and that’s because it’s important.

Your worldview is essentially who you are at your very core. A worldview is the way that you think about the world around you, the beliefs that you hold about the way things work and the reality of the world that we live in. That includes what we believe about God, what we believe about how the world came to be, what we believe about humanity, what we believe about what happens after death, and a whole host of other things that make us who we are. All of those things are a part of your worldview, and everybody’s worldview is slightly different from everybody else’s, because we have unique experiences and live in unique environments.

And the reason that your worldview is so important is because what you believe about those things, who you are at your core, filters down to everything else in your life. If you believe there is no God and that death is the end of everything, then it will fundamentally change the way that you live, and it will show in the way you mourn and grieve. If you believe in the hope and assurance of the eternal life that Jesus promises for those who believe in him, then you will still mourn and grieve, but it will look drastically different than those who have no hope. If you believe that we evolved from monkeys instead of being created in God’s image and likeness, then that will fundamentally change the way you treat other human beings. If you truly believe everything the Bible has to say, what is called a biblical worldview, then that will fundamentally change the way that you live your life. And the way that you live your life will be obviously different than the people around you who do not believe what you do.

George Barna did a study on whether people in the church have a biblical worldview or not. Whether people who are in the church right now really believe and look at the world the way that the Bible talks about. And what he found was that only 9% of adults in the church, people who claim to be Christians, have a biblical worldview. Only 2% of teenagers in the church have a biblical worldview. And in the age range of 18-25, right around college age, only half a percent have a biblical worldview. If you have ever wondered why kids in college drop out of church so much, it’s probably because only half a percent of those who came into college as Christians actually believe in what the Bible says and live by it.

That’s why this is so important. Because if we are going to follow Christ, we need to live our lives according to what the Bible says. We need to live our lives according to the beliefs and the doctrines that the Bible lays out for us. Because this is not just about having head knowledge, and trying to have all the right answers, it’s about living our lives as followers of Jesus.

So as we get started with this series, I’d like to ask you to keep an open mind. Because sometimes you might find that the things that you always thought were true, the things you grew up believing, or the things your friends and family tell you all the time, are not actually things that line up with the Bible at all. And when that happens, we cannot adjust the Bible to fit our beliefs.

Thomas Jefferson, one of our founding fathers, was a Deist, which means he believed that God created the world, set it into motion, and then just left it to run on its own without being involved at all. Because he didn’t believe God was involved in the world after Creation, he did not believe in anything miraculous or supernatural. So, he set about physically cutting all of those things from the pages of Scripture, and it came to be known as the Jefferson Bible. Instead of looking at the Bible as his authority and changing his life to fit what God says, Thomas Jefferson decided to cut out all the parts of the Bible he didn’t want to live by.

When we come up against things in our lives that don’t match what the Bible says, instead of taking scissors to the pages of the Bible, our proper response as Christians is to change our beliefs to match what the Bible says and what Jesus says. As you look around you in the world today, you’ll see people casting aside parts of the truth that they aren’t comfortable with, picking and choosing which parts of the Bible they want to follow, and which ones they don’t. You’ll even find Christians, pastors, and churches doing that as well. There are whole groups of Christianity that have decided that it’s better to fit in with society than follow what the Bible says.

The problem is that a church that no longer follows the standard of Scripture, is no longer the church. A church who proclaims a message that doesn’t match up with the true Gospel of Jesus, can no longer honestly call themselves a church of Jesus Christ. The leaders here at Agape Christian Church, including Rod, myself, and all of our elders, are committed to making sure that this church follows the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are committed to following Jesus, and we are committed to teaching and following the Bible.

Several years ago, the elders here at Agape adopted a statement of beliefs and wrote out several core values of our church that describe what we’re all about here at Agape. You should have an insert of those in your bulletin today, and they are also on our website. Keep those with you, especially through these next several weeks as we talk about those core values of Agape Christian Church and what we really believe, and how that lines up with Scripture.

And here’s my challenge to you: if you find that something you believe doesn’t match up with the Bible, don’t take my word for it, don’t take Rod’s word for it. Read your Bible, study it, and find out for yourself if what you believe is really the truth. Because our goal is not to just make a bunch of people who will repeat whatever we tell you from the pulpit. Our goal is that you will take the Bible seriously, that you will study it for yourselves, and that you will be people who know what you believe because you have thought about it and studied the pages of Scripture, and know what you believe is true because the Bible tells you so.

We’re going to have the worship team come back up now, and we’re going to have a time of invitation. We invite people to do three things during this time at Agape Christian Church. First of all, if you have never committed your life to Christ, and you want to do that today, we invite you to come forward during this time to do that. Maybe you believe in Jesus but you have never been baptized before. And we strongly believe that the Bible teaches that believers in Jesus should be baptized by immersion. And if that’s the case, we invite you to make the decision to be baptized today. Or maybe you are a believer who is looking for a new church home, a new place to worship with your brothers and sisters in Christ, and if that’s you today we would love to have you call Agape your new home, and we would invite you to come before this body and make it official. And if you’re too nervous to come in front of everyone, or if you just aren’t sure yet, come and talk to me, or to Rod, or to one of our elders and we’d be glad to help you through that.