



## What is Doctrine?

2023/08/31

### Abstract

Doctrine is a collection of teachings (i.e. a body of knowledge) about a system of beliefs. Doctrine is maintained by a collection of people and, as such, is external to any one person. Doctrine tends to be established early during the development of the belief system and does not change much over time.

Christian Doctrine is a specific type of Doctrine that most conspicuously pertains to the work and being of Jesus Christ. The importance of Christian Doctrine is unique among peoples with a Doctrine. Specifically, by having Faith in Jesus Christ, a person can have a relationship with God that persists for eternity. Since Faith is based on Doctrine, it is critically important that Christian Doctrine be correct. Fortunately, Christian Doctrine is well established.

### Discussion

The term Doctrine<sup>[1]</sup> refers to a collection of teachings about a system of beliefs.

Doctrine is maintained by a collection of people. More specifically stated, Doctrine is external to any one person. As such, Doctrine contrasts sharply with Faith, which refers to beliefs that are specifically relative to any one person.

More broadly stated, Doctrine is a body of knowledge that accumulates over time. The core elements of Doctrine that are held to be incontrovertibly true are further classified as Dogma<sup>[2]</sup>. The elements of Doctrine that are considered Dogma tend to be established early on in the development of the system of beliefs and are not usually modified.

Teachings that align with the existing Doctrine are considered orthodox<sup>[3]</sup> ("right belief"). In contrast, teachings with contrast with existing Doctrine are considered heresy<sup>[4]</sup> (implies "wrong belief"). Teachings with neither align nor contrast with existing doctrine are considered heterodox<sup>[5]</sup> ("different belief").

These three terms absolutely include judgmental aspects which raises the important question of how such judgment is passed. When a system of beliefs is nascent, there may well be a small group of people associated with it and judgment can be made by the small group or one of its leaders. This fortuitous circumstance may well be the time at which the core elements (Dogma) are established.

However, as time goes on and the number of subscribers to the system of beliefs becomes large, conclusions regarding the rightness/wrongness/differentness of a given teaching are far less attainable. Some subscribers may hold a teaching as orthodox whereas others may hold it as heresy. When reconciliation becomes impossible, segments of subscribers may depart from the original collective and form one (or more) Denominational<sup>[6]</sup> segments.

Christian Doctrine is a specific type of Doctrine that most conspicuously pertains to the work and being of Jesus Christ. Of specific note, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ is what makes human relationships with God possible as humans are incapable of such work.



The foundation of Christian Doctrine is the revelation of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Bible. This includes direct quotations of Jesus Christ by witnesses present during the time when Jesus Christ was Incarnate (the time period from when Jesus was specifically born a human, grew up to minister among God's created beings, to when he was crucified).

As a secondary source of information, Christian Doctrine includes refined thoughts expressed by Christian Theologians over the time since Jesus' Incarnation. Early on, i.e. during the first few hundred years following Jesus' Incarnation, a coherent system of Christian Doctrine was established. Much of this established Doctrine has never been refuted and remains accepted as orthodox to this day.

Comparison with the process of scientific thought development may be helpful at this point. In the scientific community, anyone can express any thought at any point in time. Such thoughts are invariably accompanied by experimental observations and details about how the observations were made. Other members of the scientific community will test the claims by replicating the experimental observations. If the results replicate, the proposed thought gains acceptance. If the results do not replicate, the proposed thought is discarded.

In the Christian community, anyone can express any thought at any point in time. Such thoughts are accompanied by scripture citations and, perhaps, references to other established elements of Christian Doctrine. Other members of the Christian community will test the claims by reviewing scriptural references and Christian Doctrine. If the results cohere with established Christian Doctrine, the proposed thought gains acceptance. If the results conflict, the proposed thought is discarded.

In neither community, scientific or Christian, does the process become one of majority rule. Thoughts don't become accepted as part of the respective bodies of knowledge because many people accept them. Rather, they become accepted because many people have reviewed them and no one was able to effectively refute them. As Albert Einstein is credited with stating: "No amount of experimentation can ever prove me right; a single experiment can prove me wrong". The acceptance of any given thought is not based upon many acceptors; it is based upon a lack of refutations.

The importance of Christian Doctrine is, perhaps, unique among peoples with a Doctrine. The core of Christian Doctrine is that Faith in Jesus Christ is salvific. Specifically, by having Faith in Jesus Christ, a person can have a relationship with God that persists for eternity. Since Faith is based on Doctrine, it is critically important that Christian Doctrine be correct.

For contrary perspective, it is noted that classical Pagan religions did not have the notion of heresy. Instead, they have only had the notion of impiety, which is not being sufficiently religious; especially in practice. For example, Socrates was killed for impiety, not heresy<sup>[7]</sup>.

Fortunately, Christian Doctrine at this point in human history is very mature. The process of Christian thought has been ongoing for over two thousand years. As noted above, many of the core concepts were established in the first few hundred years following Jesus' Incarnation and they remain valid to this day.

There was a functional convenience available to the early church with regards to Christian Doctrine. Of note, as expressed by Vincent of Lérins (d 445 AD), Christian Doctrine is that which is what has been "believed everywhere, always, and by all"<sup>[8]</sup>. Alternatively stated, Christian Doctrine was established and accepted to such an extent that it was effectively universal.



It is a bit outside of the scope of this document and will need to be deferred to a later historical review, but it is suggested that there has rarely been a pressing need to add Christian Doctrine. Rather, there has only been instances in which human teachings have improperly found their way into becoming part of Christian Doctrine that needed to be pared away (ex: the Reformation).

### Conclusions

Doctrine is a collection of teachings (i.e. a body of knowledge) about a system of beliefs. Doctrine is maintained by a collection of people and, as such, is external to any one person. Doctrine tends to be established early during the development of the belief system and does not change much over time.

Christian Doctrine is a specific type of Doctrine that most conspicuously pertains to the work and being of Jesus Christ. The importance of Christian Doctrine is unique among peoples with a Doctrine. Specifically, by having Faith in Jesus Christ, a person can have a relationship with God that persists for eternity. Since Faith is based on Doctrine, it is critically important that Christian Doctrine be correct. Fortunately, Christian Doctrine is well established.

### References

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"Freely you have received; freely give" (Matthew 10:8, NIV)