

What is Doctrine?

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Biblical doctrine carries the weighty connotations of absolute certainty and salvific necessity. As a result, Christians typically define doctrine in light of its usual contrast with opinion; however, this oversimplifies the term and confuses its biblical meaning, even though the English words “doctrinaire” and “indoctrinate” do carry these overtones. Some contrast gospel with doctrine, driving a wedge between two concepts married in scripture. Others refer to “doctrinal matters” to distinguish from “moral matters.” But doctrine essentially means “the contents of instruction.” Doctrine, then, includes anything taught and, in reference to scripture, anything that the scriptures insist should be taught. However, the scriptures themselves describe doctrine as something far more than generic instruction; instead, they portray doctrine in light of its purpose, its content, and its communication. And all these combine to produce the moral responsibility for both those in the pulpit and those in the pew to honor God’s inspired message from page to pulpit to practical application.

Therefore, at its core, doctrine should be educational in nature. This means simply that it requires a prepared teacher delivering a specific message to a willing pupil (Isa. 29:24). The Bible provides so much for us to learn—so much so that revisiting a passage, when conducted with diligence, always provides the opportunity for deeper insight and greater application. But this implies that we are willing to learn. Instruction in the ways of God does not consist of spiritual osmosis but rather requires deliberate effort and focus with attention to detail so that the message conveyed in God’s Word becomes not only familiar to us but a living part of us (Jas. 1:21). Spiritual instruction builds on the whole of God’s Word until the complete picture of God’s plan in every conceivable element comes to light (Heb. 6:2; Psa. 119:105). This implies the necessity of studying and teaching with direction and purpose rather than randomly and subjectively. Doctrine means that we need more than a few verses on our pet subjects always near at hand; it means we need knowledge of the whole.

However, for that to be of lasting value, doctrine must be divine in origin. The value of any doctrine depends entirely on its origin. The doctrines of men have only the value that men can provide (Matt. 16:12), and thus good doctrine comes only from following what God has revealed (Prov. 4:2). Anything else, in the spiritual realm, is worthless (Jer. 10:8). Jesus Himself said, “My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me” (John 7:16). Therefore, the only doctrine of value for the church is the doctrine delivered by Jesus to the apostles to us through inspiration (Acts 2:42). When our doctrine is divine, it provides an internal motivation like no other to teach (Acts 5:28), to live (Titus 2:10), and to protect (1 Tim. 6:1). God therefore dictates the content of doctrine, leaving any addition, subtraction, or alteration the object of divine censure (Rev. 2:14-15, 24). God Himself dictated the curriculum of study for His people. Only this doctrine can accomplish the purpose God intended, and that only when delivered faithfully.

Doctrine therefore should be distinctive in message, honoring God’s holiness rather than adapting to man’s unlawfulness. Divine doctrine carries a distinct form and distinct responsibilities (Rom. 6:17). It has an unchanging character (Rom. 16:17; Eph. 4:14) that demands loyalty (1 Tim. 1:3) and develops a distinct following (1 Tim. 4:6). The latter does not simply reflect a checklist of ideas but rather a specific manner of living, because the purpose of distinct doctrine is to produce a distinctive lifestyle that matches the words of Scripture and the character of God (1 Tim. 6:3). This doctrine is no mystery, nor is it so ambiguous that it cannot be recognized. To the contrary, doctrine lays out a specific path and a code of conduct that

people may follow without question or reservation (2 Tim. 3:10). This distinctive message, presented in the volume of scripture, provides the basis for fellowship with God, the foundation for faithfulness to Him, and the responsibility for all followers to discern so as to accept nothing except what came from Him (2 John 9-10). Therefore, anything God's people teach should be completely distinct from doctrine that is false, erroneous, and unhealthy in any way.

It therefore follows that doctrine must be sound in quality. While most are familiar with this wording, few appreciate its real meaning. Soundness refers to spiritual health—not just doctrinal correctness. Sound doctrine instructs people in sound living and therefore challenges spiritually unhealthy practices (1 Tim. 1:10). Sound doctrine addresses people's needs rather than appealing to people's lusts (2 Tim. 4:2-4). Sound doctrine holds to the truth of God's Word faithfully not only to challenge false doctrine (Titus 1:9) but also to build healthy lives and relationships in Christ (Titus 2:1-10). Doctrine—instruction—therefore addresses far more than what we should believe; it addresses how we ought to live.

To this point we have focused on the content of doctrine; however, the scriptures' focus on doctrine include one more essential characteristic. Doctrine should be incorruptible in delivery. If doctrine is instruction, then this implies that is something taught, and this in turn implies a teacher. But, as James pointed out, teaching doctrine carries great responsibilities (Jas. 3:1). Therefore, anyone who steps forward to teach what God has delivered has the responsibility to prepare for that task diligently (1 Tim. 4:13). This means applying the lesson to self first (1 Tim. 4:16a), seeking the salvation of others second (1 Tim. 4:16b), laboring to point of exhaustion to help others learn (1 Tim. 5:17), and living with integrity the lessons learned and taught (Titus. 2:7).

Doctrine is therefore different than dogma. It is not necessarily what you are accustomed to hearing; it should be exactly what God says and therefore what you need to hear—even if that is news to you (Mark 1:27; Acts 17:19). And we should approach learning such with an eagerness motivated by the joy of salvation and the hope of heaven. The foundation of doctrine should be Scripture, for it alone offers the instruction needed by every man to the profit of his soul (2 Tim. 3:16). Christians thus have an obligation to God to teach what God wants taught with unmistakable clarity for the purpose of maturing people spiritually and with a purity in heart that signals a motivation of selfless love. This is the principle, the power, and the purpose of doctrine.