

discipleship essentials

Essentials for Spiritual Leadership
Leader's Guide

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

LESSON 1: WHY DO WE NEED TO KNOW DOCTRINE?

INTRODUCTION

This lesson is part of a Discipleship Essentials module titled Christian Doctrine. This series of lessons examines doctrines which are foundational to our faith, with an emphasis on how incorrect doctrine can negatively impact true faith. Doctrine is the set of beliefs that determine how we practise our faith. It is critical that Christians understand correct doctrine about the nature of God and salvation, especially if they are engaged in teaching and discipling. This module examines scriptures related to a number of core doctrines of the Christian Church, and also some of the areas of confusion and error associated with each doctrine.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

The intended audience for these lessons is Christians who are maturing in their faith and desiring to serve God sincerely. The lessons will also benefit church leaders who wish to encourage people in their Christian service, and identify spiritual gifts in those they are discipling.

The Leader's Guide is intended to help you as a leader in your preparation. These lesson outlines may be used in conjunction with other Discipleship Essentials materials found online at www.discipleshipessentials.org.

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CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

LESSON 1: WHY DO WE NEED TO KNOW DOCTRINE?

PURPOSE

This lesson looks at the importance of doctrine to the Christian faith, and how errors can cause devastating results.

LEADER'S NOTE

Doctrine may sound like a field of study only for the most advanced Christians. However, in reality it is something every believer should understand, regardless of where they are in their faith journey! Your participants will come with various levels of knowledge on this topic. These lessons will help them discover the foundation and most essential beliefs of their faith in order that they may teach them to others. Participants will evaluate their own beliefs, and assess whether they are in error. We know that right beliefs lead to right actions, so the study of doctrine is very practical. False belief will lead to error and even insecurity in our salvation. Help your participants get excited about this study by displaying your enthusiasm!

INTRODUCTION

Select two or three of the following questions to ask the group.

- ❖ Why is it important to know not only what you believe, but also why you believe it?
- ❖ Where do your beliefs come from? Who taught them to you, and how do you know they are correct?
- ❖ What comes to mind when you hear the word 'doctrine'? Do you believe doctrine is something every believer should study and know, or is it only for those who lead others in their faith?
- ❖ What would cause you to re-evaluate your beliefs, or doubt that you held the correct position on some aspect of your Christian faith?
- ❖ Have you studied any particular doctrines? Have you ever questioned whether what you have been taught is what the Bible intended? When so many people disagree about some aspects of Christianity, how can you be sure your beliefs are right?



STUDY

Instruct the group on the following points.

TEACH

- ❖ **What Is Doctrine?** Every Christian is engaged in doctrine, whether they know it or not. Some may think doctrine is a specialized course of study, or a practice for those who look at religion from an intellectual point of view. However, *every person* has a set of beliefs (doctrine), and it is therefore an important study for all of us.
 - **Doctrine is the set of truths we have been taught and teach to others.** It is the set of foundational statements commonly held by a church, group or organization.
 - Every person has a set of beliefs about the nature of the world, themselves, and God. Therefore, everyone believes a doctrine, even if they say they don't believe in anything.
 - For Christians, our doctrine is derived from God's Word, the Bible. Those beliefs are taught in the context of the Church and lived out by individual believers. Christianity does not exist without its doctrine. Christianity is the practice of faith in God through Jesus Christ, and our faith comes from hearing and believing in the truth of God's Word.
 - **Doctrine is a Biblical Word.** While some of the theological terms used by the Church today are man-made to describe a God-given concept, doctrine is a Biblical word. In the New Testament, the original Greek word is *didaskalia* which means the teaching. Jesus, in His teachings, distinguishes between the sound doctrine of God and the deceitful doctrine of men.
 - Jesus condemned the doctrine of the Pharisees because they taught the commandments of men as though they were the doctrines of God (Mark 7:7-9), and rejected the clear teaching in God's Word.
 - The writers of many New Testament epistles admonish believers to understand correct doctrine (that is, what God's Word clearly teaches and the church upholds as true), so that they will be able to discern true doctrine from false (Titus 1:9, Titus 2:1, 1 Timothy 4:6, Ephesians 4:14).
 - God's Word teaches that we should watch out for doctrine that is contrary to what we have been taught, and also what is upheld by the creeds of the church, so that we are not deceived (Romans 16:17).
 - **Doctrine and the Church:** Some people avoid the discussion of doctrine, thinking that it will only divide and weaken the Church. It is true that disagreements about doctrine can divide people; however, true doctrine should unify all believers.
 - While faith and worship practices may differ between groups of believers, there can still be unity through adhering to common doctrines. There are two categories of doctrine – essential doctrine and peripheral doctrine.



- o *Essential doctrines* are the core beliefs all Christians must share. They define Christianity. They unify us, and are dealt with in the next 10 lessons in this module.
- o *Peripheral doctrines* may differ among various groups of Christians while still remaining unified in their core doctrines. Peripheral doctrines may reference matters of Christian practice, styles of worship, or issues for which there are disagreements about Biblical clarity and historical precedent.
- o We should expect that doctrine will be challenged, and people will doubt the truth of God's teachings as it collides with popular culture and selfish desires. We are warned to expect this in 2 Timothy 4:3-4.
- o The role of the Church is to protect sound doctrine and pass on the truth from one generation of believers to the next. Diverging from historical doctrinal beliefs is a dangerous thing. Many hundreds of years of church history have been spent examining God's Word and discovering the doctrines to be sound. In the event of diversion from historically held belief, there may be division within the Church.

TASK:

Have the group write down 10-15 truths the Christians of your church or community believe. Discuss which beliefs are part of *essential doctrine*. Then identify some beliefs that might fall into the category of *peripheral doctrine*. List these on a chalkboard, chart paper or other visual media. Then ask participants to identify:

1. *Doctrines that unite all Christians*
2. *Doctrines about which there are different beliefs that may lead to division*

TEACH:

- ❖ **Doctrine Produces Healthy Faith:** The purpose of doctrine is to keep our faith healthy and vibrant; and it has always been of great importance to Christians. As the Church was forming in the early days of Christianity, the Apostles transmitted true doctrine, as taught to them by Jesus, to those who would in turn teach others. Early on in his ministry, the apostle Paul instructed his student, Timothy, to care for the church at Ephesus, encouraging him "*not to teach any different doctrine*" (1 Timothy 1:3). When realizing that he might not be able to make his way back to the church in Ephesus, Paul wrote to Timothy and instructed him how to refute false teaching and to care for those in the church he was serving (1 Timothy 1:3-7; 4:1-8; 6:3-5, 20-21).
- **Live Out True Doctrine:** Timothy was to encourage proper teaching in order to stop those whose teaching was contrary to the truth. Paul advised Timothy to not only avoid false doctrine, but to live out true doctrine. Likewise, these instructions are crucial for Christians today (1 Tim. 1:3, 10).
- **Healthy Faith:** Paul not only told Timothy that doctrine is vital, but that it must be "sound", using the Greek word meaning "healthy". The word denotes the opposite of sickness, indicating to Timothy that false and incorrect doctrine leads to spiritual sickness, destroying spiritual health. The gospel is only "good news" if it is healthy,



true and life-giving news. False doctrine robs the gospel of the fullness of its good news, and makes it neither good nor healthy to the hearer.

- **Understanding Doctrine leads to Spiritual Health:** Some of the most fundamental issues that Christians have are related to doctrine. Although we may not recognize them in those terms, we often fail to grasp the truth of the gospel, or we fail to connect it to our lives so that it produces “sound” spiritual health.
 - **Right Belief leads to Right Actions:** In his letter to the Philippian Christians, Paul tells them to “think” about the right things ([Philippians 4:8](#)). In other words, right thinking, Paul tells us, is the key to right doing.
 - **Growing in Understanding is Growing in our Faith:** The world tells us that the key to peace, health and happiness is to not think too much or too deeply about things. Christianity, on the other hand, tells us that we find freedom through growing in our understanding of the truth, and by studying and developing our knowledge of God's Word. Our sanctification (growth in holy living) comes from a deep understanding of truth ([John 17:17-19](#), [John 8:31-32](#), [John 14:16-17](#)).
 - For this reason, doctrine not only helps us to live spiritually healthy lives as believers, but it helps us understand exactly what we believe. Doctrine is the frame of the building that is Christianity. Remove parts of the frame and the building is not only weakened, but before too long, runs the danger of collapsing entirely.
- ❖ **Essential Doctrines:** So how can we maintain a “healthy” level of thinking when it comes to our faith, especially when there are disagreements about doctrines? How are we to sanctify ourselves through God's truth if there is disagreement about what that truth is?
- First, it is important to keep in mind that all truth is important. Secondly, it is vital to remember that not all truths are equally important. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians he talks about an issue that is of “first importance” ([1 Corinthians 15:3-4](#)), indicating that there are some issues that carry more weight when it comes to truth.
 - For this reason, as Christians who think about these things ([Philippians 4:8](#)), it is important to grow and mature in our ability to evaluate doctrines and correct teaching in order to grow more like Christ. For this purpose, we can identify three types of doctrines:

1. ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES FOR THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

These doctrines are what we can call “essential doctrines.” That is, without them there is no gospel message, no salvation, and ultimately, no Church. For example, Monotheism, Trinitarianism, the Divinity of Christ, and the Authority of Scripture, are some of the essential doctrines. Remove any of them and you no longer have the Christian Church.

2. PERIPHERAL DOCTRINES FOR THE HEALTH OF THE CHURCH



These doctrines are important for the individual believer; they encourage Christian growth and development. For example, baptism, communion, and tithing. They are different from the essential doctrines (above) in that, if a Christian is misguided on these doctrines, they don't cease being in the Christian Church, but their ability to be spiritually healthy Christians may be diminished.

3. PERIPHERAL DOCTRINES FOR THE WORK OF THE CHURCH

These doctrines are important for practical agreement and unity. For example, speaking in tongues, worship styles, and outreach methods. While many Christians differ in these areas, they would not consider another believer unsaved or unhealthy because of their viewpoint. While differences may cause contention, it is important to understand that unity does not always mean uniformity.

- By identifying which category doctrines fall under, we can better understand the importance and significance of what we believe. Likewise, once these doctrines are categorized, the believer must determine why they believe what they teach. Some may not believe in an important doctrine because they have never heard of it, or they don't understand it. Failing to support or believe in a doctrine because of misunderstanding is not the same as outright denial of it, but likewise, may have further negative implications on one's faith.

❖ **What is Heresy?** Failure to understand or outright denial of a key doctrine may lead to heresy. The word heresy may hold a negative meaning, but in reality it simply means a teaching about a Christian doctrine that falls outside of what the Church has carefully examined and decided upon historically.

- The concept of heresy can be understood as a fence, one that marks off what we don't mean when we talk about the deeper Biblical issues related to what we believe as Christians. Anything that falls outside of the fence can be understood as heretical, that is, it contains ideas and thinking that falls outside of the belief that the Church has always held.

ASK:

Can you think of examples of a heresy you or those in your church have encountered?

What should the response of the Church be when encountering 'new' teaching that contradicts what has been passed down within the Church?

TEACH:

- ❖ **Why is Doctrine Important for Every Believer?** We all have a set of beliefs, but some of us may never have thought it critical to examine them. But nowhere does God tell us to accept any teaching on faith without thought and careful examination! Learning about doctrine will help us see clearly what we believe as Christians, and why. Understanding doctrine is important for every believer for many reasons:



- **Our salvation is based on God's truth:** There is one name given to us by which we must be saved, and one means of salvation that God has provided (Acts 4:12). Faith in any person or thing other than Jesus will not lead to life but to destruction. Putting our faith in the truth of God as revealed in His Word leads to repentance, regeneration and eternal life. Putting our faith in falsehoods does not benefit us in any way; instead it distracts us from the life-giving truth and can lead to our own destruction and the destruction of others (2 Peter 2:1, Ephesians 2:8-9).
 - **Our obedience is based on God's truth:** The way you think about God will affect how you relate to Him. Your ability to love God, trust God and serve God is dependent on what you believe about Him. Our beliefs about our own sinful nature, our dependency on God, or what God expects of us should translate into obedience on our part. This obedience is necessary for growth (Proverbs 4:23, 1 John 4:1-3).
 - **Our ministry is based on God's truth:** We must know what to say to unbelievers when they ask us what we believe. We must also be convinced that the things we were taught are based on the Word of God so that we can teach them accurately to others. The health of the Church requires us to be able to faithfully transmit the teachings of the Christian faith to others (1 Peter 3:15, 2 Timothy 2:15).
- ❖ **Conclusion:** This module will focus on the essential doctrines (those of major importance for the life and growth of the church). While the other two categories are important, the essential doctrines primarily concern our salvation and what it means to be a Christian. Discipleship involves growing and maturing as a believer, and these doctrines are vital for understanding and growing in one's Christian faith. We are all encouraged to mature ". . . so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." (Ephesians 4:14-16).



DISCUSSION

- ❖ What would you say to someone who did not want to engage in discussions of doctrine because they 'feel' saved, believe in Jesus sincerely, and that is enough for them? Is knowing what we believe and why we believe it essential for every Christian?
- ❖ We are to love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength. How does the study of doctrine help us do that?
- ❖ Have you ever encountered someone who preached a different Gospel, or who disagreed on essential doctrines of the Christian faith, and yet called themselves a Christian? What was your response? What should our response be to such individuals?
- ❖ Why is it important to consider historically held Christian beliefs when discerning true doctrine?
- ❖ Can you think of reasons (other than those already discussed in this lesson) why it is important to know what you believe and to be assured that it is true?

PRAYER

Close the lesson in prayer. Pray that your participants would eagerly seek the truth of God to avoid error in their beliefs. Help them to be clear minded and to think hard about where the truths of God come from, so they will not be easily swayed by deceptive talk or false Gospels.