

discipleship essentials

Essentials for Spiritual Leadership Study 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.

The Study Guide is intended for an individual to look deeper into a specific lesson on their own. The lessons can be used in conjunction with other Discipleship Essentials materials, such as the video and audio productions found on www.discipleshipessentials.org.



CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

LESSON 1: WHY DO WE NEED TO KNOW DOCTRINE?

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

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

JUST SO YOU KNOW...

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! You may already have some knowledge in doctrine, because you have probably been taught the most foundational beliefs of the Christian faith. This series of lessons will help you evaluate your own beliefs by looking into God's Word and becoming aware of any that need correction. 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. Read on to learn why doctrine is of vital importance for every believer!

GETTING STARTED

1. Where do your beliefs come from? Who taught them to you, and how do you know they are correct?

2. What would cause you to re-evaluate your beliefs, or doubt that you held the correct position on some aspect of your Christian faith?



STUDY

❖ **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.

- **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.

- Why did Jesus condemn the doctrine of the Pharisees? (Read Mark 7:7-9)

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- What do the following verses tell us about having correct doctrine?

Titus 1:9	
Titus 2:1	
1 Timothy 4:6	
Ephesians 4:14	



- o Read Romans 16:17 and 2 Timothy 4:3-4. What are we to watch out for, and why? Will people always want to hold to sound doctrine?

- **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.
 - o 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 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.

- Can you identify some essential doctrines and some peripheral doctrines that your local group of believers holds? List any you can think of on the following chart:

Essential Doctrines	Peripheral Doctrines

❖ **DOCTRINE PRODUCES HEALTHY FAITH:** The purpose of doctrine is to keep our faith healthy; 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.
- Can you think of any examples of heresy that 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?

- When the Apostles of Jesus first preached the Gospel to Jews who understood the Old Testament, their message sounded like heresy! How did the people of Berea respond to new teaching? ([Acts 17:10-15](#))

Because the new message was the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures, they could see that it was true. When we examine our beliefs, we must search God's Word (not outside sources) to confirm truth.

❖ **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).
- Read Ephesians 4:14-16: Why is it necessary that we work hard to learn and pass on correct doctrine?

SUMMARY

- ❖ 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.
- ❖ Doctrine is a Biblical word – we are admonished to seek sound doctrine, which leads to healthy faith.
- ❖ Christian doctrines are of two types. Essential doctrines are the core beliefs all Christians must share. Peripheral doctrines may differ among various groups of believers. However, they can still remain unified in their core doctrines.
- ❖ Having right doctrine leads to spiritual health. Misunderstanding of who God is, the nature of salvation, sin, or sanctification can keep us in bondage to sin and doubt.
- ❖ Heresy is teaching that falls outside of what the Church has carefully examined and decided upon historically.
- ❖ Doctrine is vital for every believer because our salvation, our obedience and our ministry are all based on the truth of God's Word.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1.

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?

2.

We are to love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength. How does the study of doctrine help us do that?

3.

Why is it important to consider historically held Christian beliefs when discerning true doctrine?