

LESSON TWO

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

What is "doctrine"?

"Doctrine" is the formal teaching of the Church, from the Latin word docere, "to teach." The Anglican Church has no special or private doctrine. The teaching of our Church is the teaching of the ancient undivided Church of Jesus Christ, as found in the Holy Scriptures.¹

Is doctrine important?

Yes, because doctrine is the expression of the Church's Faith in teaching, just as her services are the expression of her Faith in worship. And Faith is necessary for salvation:

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The Church's doctrine is not of human devising, but it is the human expression of the divine revelation given perfectly and once-for-all-time in the inspired Holy Scriptures and in the person of Jesus Christ our Lord (see 2 Peter 1:16; Jude 3-4). The Holy Scriptures remain the one absolute test of all doctrine because the Holy Scriptures are the work of God himself, and not just of the inspired human writers (Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:21).

Furthermore, the Bible itself lays down this rule: "no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20). The human element can fail or err in the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, but God cannot. God abides in his Church; and in the context of the Church's life, which is the life of the Body of his Son, God leads his Church by the Holy Spirit into the fullness of the Truth he has revealed about himself (see John 16:13-15).

The Anglican Church, as did all the undivided Church, has committed itself to Scriptural doctrine only. See especially the VIth Article of Religion, "On the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation" (BCP 603); and Article XX, "Of the Authority of the Church," where we read that "the Church [is] a witness and keeper of Holy Writ" (BCP 607).²

What is "dogma"?

"Dogma" is the most basic or fundamental set of principles (doctrines) taught by the authority of the Church, as the necessary beliefs for salvation.³ The Nicene Creed is an example of dogma. "Dogma" is a Greek word that means "decree, ordinance, decision, command." It comes from another Greek word (dokein) that means "think, believe, or consider." "Creed" comes from the Latin equivalent of this word (credo: "I believe").

A faithful Christian may have honest difficulty understanding or explaining a dogma of

the Church, just as an honest physics student might have difficulties with the periodic table of elements. But just as our physics student would cease to be a student of physics the moment he dismissed the periodic table out of hand, a person who dismisses the dogma of the Church can no longer claim to be studying or trying to understand the Christian Faith.

One of the classic attacks on Christianity is called "relativism": the false belief that there are no absolute truths, even if God himself provides them. Relativism is, of course, an attack on God himself.⁴ Relativists have given dogma a bad name, but if it is wrong to be dogmatic when one does not have the truth, it is far worse to refuse to be dogmatic when one does possess the truth. Christians are only entitled to be humble about themselves, and not about God.⁵

What is the doctrine of God and where do we find it?

The doctrine of God is the Church's teaching about God himself. The source of the Church's teaching about God is the Bible, where God reveals himself to us by his Word and by the record of his actions in history (Deuteronomy 29:29; Romans 1:16-17; Hebrews 1:1-2).

If God did not reveal himself to us, we would know nothing about him with any degree of certainty (Isaiah 55:6-9; 1 Corinthians 2:6-16). Our knowledge is limited to our experience in this world, but God exists outside of this world. Our intellect and imagination are limited by our human frailties and sins, but God is not bound by our weaknesses or sin. God made the world around us, but we cannot work backwards from the world to God, since the world cannot contain God and the world itself is fallen.⁶

At best, we are like people staring up into the sky who see an airplane flying overhead. We think it's a 747. We're fairly certain that someone made the plane, or even a group of someones. We ask ourselves if the dents and bumps on the plane were there from the beginning, or if they were added later. And then we begin to speculate on the character and personality of the maker (or makers) of the plane.

Some people have used this difficulty in knowing about God on our own as an excuse for saying that revelation and religion are irrational: not of the intellect at all, but only of

the emotions. But what if the builder of the airplane took the time to introduce himself to us and to explain his work and his design? Once he provided the information that we couldn't get on our own, we could know a great deal about him intellectually (in terms of analyzing the information) and

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emotionally (as we decided how much we trust him in his self-testimony).

Revelation is God's introduction of himself and his design for the world to the human race. God provides the information we could not get on our own, for us to study with our reason and to evaluate with our hearts. Thus, Faith is a cooperative effort between the intellect and the emotions, between God and man. Faith is a gift (as we saw in the quotation from Ephesians above) because what we need to know and believe had to be given to us by God in the first place.⁷

How do we summarize the doctrine of God?

The Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds summarize the teaching of the Scriptures about God (BCP 15). These Creeds were agreed to by the undivided Church as teaching exactly what the Bible teaches.

The Anglican Church also teaches us about God through the Catechism, ; the Offices of Instruction, and the Articles of Religion, to be found in the Book ;| of Common Prayer along with the Creeds. Everything taught in the Prayer Book : is based on the Bible and the Creeds, and all other preaching and teaching are : held up to this same standard by the Church as a whole (see the question the bishop asks a priest at his ordination, at the top of page 542 in the Prayer Book).⁸

What is the Apostles' Creed?

The Apostles' Creed is the summary of faith recited at baptisms by the early Church. This Creed is so old that pious tradition says it was written by the Apostles themselves. Whether the Apostles wrote the Apostles' Creed themselves or not, however, we are sure that this Creed teaches what the Apostles taught.

What is the Nicene Creed?

The Nicene Creed is the product of the first four Ecumenical ("of the whole household

of Faith") or General Councils of the Christian Church. The Nicene Creed is the response of the early Church to questions about what the Church believes.

The Church prepared the Nicene Creed at and between the Councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451). We do not believe that the Creed is true simply because it was agreed to at these Councils by bishops and scholars from all parts of the Church, but because the Nicene Creed agrees with the Scriptures, with the even older Apostles' Creed, and with the Faith of the entire Church before it was divided (see Article VIII, BCP 604).

While the Church believed what is taught in the Creeds from the beginning, stating that belief more precisely was a difficult task. It took more than a century of the work of the best minds in the ancient Church to produce the Nicene Creed.⁹

Can we understand everything that is taught in the Creeds?

We might as well ask first, can we understand everything about another human being? Can we understand our husbands or wives, our parents, or our brothers and sisters completely?

It turns out that there are at least two kinds of knowledge: knowledge of things that are alive and knowledge of things that are dead. This is the difference, for example, between a history course and a chemistry course in school.

We can understand a machine or algebra, neither of which has been alive, in a way that we can never understand another person, or even our pet dog. We can dissect a corpse, but we can't take apart a living human being (at least not without killing him in the process and ending up studying a corpse after all).

Living beings are a "mystery" to us, from a technical Greek word that means "a truth that can only be known by revelation." The detective in a "mystery story" reveals the truth at the end, so that anyone can know it. We only know human beings as they reveal themselves to us in their actions and communications. When a wife says to her husband, "I love you," he can't prove her love like an algebraic theorem. He must trust her word and evaluate it on the basis of her behavior. If she stabs him with a knife, he might be inclined not to believe her.

When we say the Creeds, we are really saying that we believe that God is truthful and full of good will for us when he tells us about himself in revelation (see Exodus 34:6-7). We are saying that we trust God, and that our experience of him and the experience of the whole Church confirm our trust. We could study the Creeds all our lives and never understand everything in them, but our faith is in God, and not in our own intelligence or understanding.

So, what is the first doctrine of God?

The first fact we must know about God is that God is alive: "My soul longeth for, yea even fainteth for the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God" (Psalm 84:2; see also Jeremiah 10:10; Daniel 6:26; Matthew 16:16; Acts 14:15; Hebrews 10:31). Knowledge of God can only be gotten among the living, and not among the dead (Matthew 22:31-32). God can only be known as the Living God, and not as an idea or concept or philosophy. God's life, because it was not created, has no beginning or end (Isaiah 44:6).¹⁰

What is the second doctrine?

The second fact that we must know is that God is personal. There are no general persons," but only persons in particular. This particularity begins with God himself, who tells Moses from the burning bush, "I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you (Exodus 3:14). If we do not deal with God on a personal level, we are not dealing with God at all (see Exodus 6:1-2; Isaiah 52:6).

What is the third doctrine?

The third fact we must know is that God is unique. He alone is God: "For the Lord your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward" (Deuteronomy 10:17; see also Psalm 86:10; Isaiah 37:16). God has no God over him: no one to create him; no one to judge him; no one to command him:

O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, that dwellest between the cherubims, thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth: thou hast made heaven and earth (Isaiah

37:16). (See also, Psalm 50:6 and Psalm 75:7, for God as the source of judgment and righteousness.)

Everything that exists, except for God himself, exists solely at God's creative command (see Psalm 102:25-28; Isaiah 42:5; Acts 17:24-28). God is not limited to any place or time, because space and time are his creatures (see Deuteronomy 4:39; Psalm 139:1-16; Jeremiah 23:23-24). God is not limited by a body because God is pure Spirit (see John 4:21-24). God alone is perfect in and of himself (see Deuteronomy 32:4; 2 Samuel 22:31; Matthew 5:48; James 1:17-18). God alone knows all things because he knows himself and he knows his creation (see Psalm 44:21; Isaiah 40:28; Luke 16:15; Acts 15:18; 1 John 3:20).

The Living Person of God himself is the sole test of goodness, mercy, kindness, or justice. No other standard is possible: "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created" (Revelation 4:11; see also Numbers 23:19; Deuteronomy 7:9; Ecclesiastes 12:13-14; Matthew 19:17; Romans 12:2).

What is the fourth doctrine?

The fourth fact we must know is that God is sovereign. God has made all things, as we saw above, and he is both their Creator and Ruler. God is all-powerful ("almighty"). God is the source of all life and existence, and nothing exists without his permission (see Psalm 95, 96, 99, 100).

What is the fifth doctrine?

The fifth fact we must know is that God is free. God is not bound by anyone or anything but himself and his own free will. God's faithfulness to himself, and to his promises made to his human creatures, is an act of his free will (see Deuteronomy 7:6-11; 1 Corinthians 1:9). God cannot be forced or coerced to do anything.

The entirety of the Scriptures "adds up" to the summary given above (and more), but a convenient passage that gives us God's testimony about himself is Deuteronomy 32:39-40:

See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god with me: I kill, and I make alive;

I wound and I heal: neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand. For I lift up my hand to heaven, and say, I live forever.

But couldn't such a God be a tyrant?

Yes, he could indeed, but God also reveals that he is anything but a tyrant.

What is the sixth doctrine?

The sixth fact we must know is that God is One: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord" (Deuteronomy 6:4). God doesn't have any parts or passions (see Article I, BCP 603). God is not at war with himself, so he can call us to unity in our lives: "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (Deuteronomy 6:5).

What is the seventh doctrine?

The seventh fact we must know is that God is changeless: "I am the Lord, I change not" (Malachi 3:6); and "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever" (Hebrews 13:8). Because God is one and changeless, his will never changes. Whatever he is and whatever he promises are totally dependable.

What is the eighth doctrine?

The eighth fact we must know is that the Godhead ("god-hood," "the being or life of God") is made up of three Persons, called the Blessed Trinity. Jesus Christ commands that we baptize "in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:19; see also the Anglican rite for Baptism, BCP 275, 279). St. Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, blesses the Corinthians in these words: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:14).¹¹

It's an interesting question whether it is harder for us to understand how One God can be Three Persons or how Three Persons can be one united God, based on our experience of human personality. We know there aren't three Gods, since God tells us he is one. We know that the Three Persons aren't three parts of God, also because God is one. We know that the Three Persons can't simply be three ways of talking about God because One Person talks to another (for example, Jesus Christ prays) and because our Lord's commandment on baptism includes action by all three Persons. The closest we can come to an answer in this world, prior to the face-to-face knowledge we will have of God later on (see

1 Corinthians 13:12) is the ninth doctrine.

What is the ninth doctrine?

The ninth fact that we must know is found in 1 John 4:16: "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him."¹²

God's life, what God is as God, what God does to be God, is to love. Before God created anything, God was a perfect unity in love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. God is love for the pure sake of loving. The Blessed Trinity isn't a theological concept; the Blessed Trinity is a life: God's own life.

We know about love from our experience and from revelation: see 1 Corinthians 13. We know the power of love because love is the key gift we receive in our creation in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26): the power to love and to be loved. Even in this created world, love is so powerful that love can make a man and a woman one flesh (Genesis 2:24).

The perfection of God's love preserves totally and eternally the personhood of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, as it perfectly unites them beyond any seam or separation. It is God's love that calls man to himself, to unity with our Creator, so that what we call that reunion is "atonement" (at-one-ment; see Romans 5:8-11). Sin is the rejection of love and unity, so God's perfect love makes him sinless and morally perfect (beyond sin).

Thus, we can trust this God Who Is Love, because he is changeless in his loving, and his entire will is engaged in love. God cannot be a tyrant because true love is not tyrannical. To deny this One True God is to deny love and to embrace hate as a way of life. Sin is mankind's choice of hate over love, in imitation of that other fallen creature, the Devil (see Revelation 12:7-12).

The only cure for hate is to replace hate with love. This replacement is the work of God in the world since the fall of man into hate and sin. The perfect love and obedience of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is the undoing of the Fall. The inspiration to love is the special work of the Holy Ghost (or Holy Spirit). The forgiveness of love is the special work of the Father. We'll speak more of the work of God in the next lesson, when we will discuss

sin, salvation, and grace.