



Doc.bytes

Discussion starters offered by the National Working Group on Doctrine

Worksheet 2: Doctrine

Doctrine is the way the church corporately listens carefully to the past and grapples with faithful thinking and living now.

"Doctrine" (Latin *doctrina*) translates the New Testament (Greek) word *didaché/didaskaló*: "teaching, instruction".

The King James version of Mark 1:27 reads:

"And they were all amazed, inasmuch that they questioned among themselves saying, 'What new thing is this? What new doctrine is this?'"

Compare this with the New Revised Standard version, which reads:

"They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching ...!'"

(Also see NRSV: Matthew 15:9; Mark 7:7; Ephesians 4:14; 1 Timothy 1:3; 2 Timothy 4:3; Titus 1:9; Titus 2:1; Titus 2:10.)



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New times, new issues

The church has a long record of thinking and teaching. When the Gospel is preached in new times and cultures, new questions are posed. The process of Christian thinking began in the earliest days of the church. As the church spread throughout the Roman Empire, Christians had to speak the Christian faith in new environments, particularly in the world of Greek thought.

That required new thinking to clarify what faith in Jesus Christ requires of Christians in those situations.

The New Testament shows that in the church's earliest days when the community faced new mission challenges, church leaders gathered in council, seeking to come to a common mind. For example, in the Acts of the Apostles Christians together had to decide about such matters as:

- appointing deacons to care for the needy (chapter 6);
- how to regard non-Jewish people becoming Christian (chapters 11, 15);
- the commissioning of people for ministry (e.g. Barnabas and Saul are commissioned by the church in chapter 11).

Doctrine is never an abstract or theoretical matter. It is closely related to the life of the church, and gives guidance to it.

Doctrine is the thinking, deciding and teaching required to assist the Uniting Church in Australia to live faithfully today as part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. The Basis of Union guides us in this process.

Note

This sheet is part of a series on theology in the 21st century. It is offered by the National Assembly as a discussion starter for small groups, in congregations, faith communities or other settings. It may also be used for personal reflection. Low resolution copies of this sheet can be downloaded free of charge from the Assembly website.

Quotes

“Church doctrines are communally authoritative teachings regarding beliefs and practices that are considered essential to the identity or welfare of the group in question.”

(George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p.74)

“Theology is the business of all God’s people. It is not just the affair of the theological faculties, and not just the concern of the church’s colleges and seminaries. The faith of the whole body of Christians on earth seeks to know and understand. If it doesn’t, it isn’t Christian faith.”

(Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, p.11)

“ ... doctrines are like maps – they are theological geographies drawn to guide Christians as they struggle to understand their faith.”

(Serene Jones and Paul Lakelan, *Constructive Theology*, p.9)

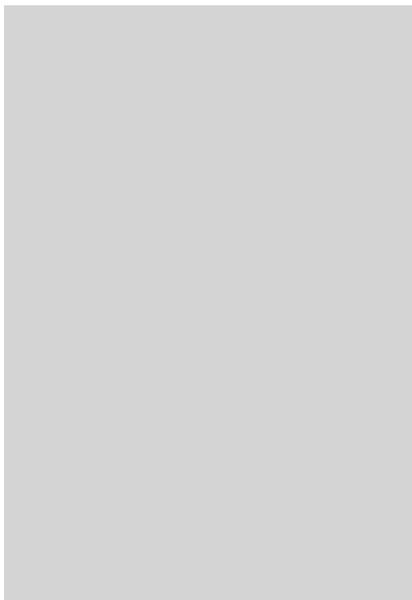


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Church Thinking



In the Uniting Church, the Assembly (the national council) is required to develop the understanding and practice of the Uniting Church in a systematic way, so it can live faithfully today. Paragraph 15 of the Basis of Union states:

“The Assembly ... has determining responsibility for matters of doctrine It makes the guiding decisions on the tasks and authority to be exercised by other councils.”

The Assembly has therefore resolved authoritatively on the Uniting Church’s understanding and practice of baptism, ordination and ministry.

Questions

- >> Some people hear the word “doctrine” negatively. What do you think and feel when you hear the word “doctrine”? Does the explanation here help?
- >> How does your congregation listen to the Scriptures and the teaching of the church now?
- >> In what way do you let yourself be instructed by the “doctrine” of the church?



Why does this matter?

The Uniting Church accepts that we receive authoritative guidance from the early church councils concerning Jesus Christ and God as Trinity (expressed in creeds of the early church), while also being committed to a process of constant reformation in the life of the church (finding new forms of church life and interpretation for today). See the Basis of Union, para. 9.

Books to read

Catherine Mowray LaCugna, *God For Us*, Harper, 1991.

Stanley Hauerwas, “*The Church as God’s New Language*”, in *Christian Existence Today*, Labyrinth, 1988.

Tyron Inbody, *The Faith of the Christian Church*, Eerdmans, 2005.

Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland (eds.), *Constructive Theology*, Fortress, 2005.