

THE ALEPH COURSE.

8 : DOCTRINE.

doctrine, *n.* That which is taught; the principles, tenets, or dogmas of any church

dogma, *n.* An established principle, tenet, or system of doctrines put forward to be received on authority, esp. that of a Church, as opposed to one deduced from experience or reasoning ...

So now you know. You will also gather that doctrine is precisely what I don't want - a bundle of assumptions which you have to accept.

But there's a lot of it about. Much is unstated so far as the ordinary Christian is concerned - which is fair enough in principle, by analogy with most motorists' comparative ignorance of how a car works.

That analogy can reasonably be pushed further, because the doctrine, like the design of the car, is worked out by experts using technical arguments, often expressed in technical jargon, and not readily accessible to the non-expert. Also, in both cases, the whole process is open to inspection; Christianity is not an arcane religion with secrets reserved for an inner circle (and neither is car design, though one might sometimes wonder).

But in practice people haven't time or opportunity to follow it all through, and are just told to believe.

I want to talk about it a bit to explain why I want to manage without.

WHERE DOES DOCTRINE COME FROM ?

My unholy (well, let's say questionable) trinity - Bible, church, theology.

Doctrine differs between denominations - that's why there are denominations. Each has some basic statement of doctrine which you're expected to accept.

- Anglicans have the *Thirty Nine Articles* of religion, some of which I find it difficult to take seriously. (There are bits specifically directed against Roman Catholic practices and assumptions, and bits clearly designed to make sure that the English legal system and its armies would not be inconvenienced by people who wished to love their enemies or avoid taking oaths.) The Articles commend three creeds - the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.
- Creeds, of which there are several, are statements of basic faith, typically presenting assertions about God and the Christian gospel. Many of the older creeds are accepted across denominations.

Those are in some sense the basics so far as the running of the church is concerned, and are intended to be taken as statements by authority. (For the *Thirty Nine Articles*, the authority in question is that of Queen Elizabeth I, "the Archbishops and Bishops of the Upper-house", and "the whole Clergy of the Nether-House in their Convocation", in 1571.)

All this material is the result of at least centuries of deliberation, argument, reasoning, and other scholarly activities, starting from the scriptural records, the traditions of the church, and such other sources as seemed appropriate.

WHAT DOES DOCTRINE LOOK LIKE ?

Here are some examples, not all universally accepted, but all accepted somewhere :

- God is a *Trinity* of three "Persons" (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), wonderfully embodied in a SINGLE God. (See the Athanasian Creed if you're confused - or if you're not, but you want to be.)
- Jesus was born of His mother Mary, who was a *virgin*.
- After Jesus's death came His *resurrection*, when He was restored to life. We too can look forward to resurrection after our death.
- After resurrection we will be *judged*, with good souls "going to" heaven (nice) and bad souls "going to" hell (nasty).

- We are all subject to *sin*.
- Jesus's death by crucifixion in some sense *atoned* for our sins, so that God can forgive us.

SO WHAT'S WRONG WITH THAT ?

The INTENTION of all this industry is entirely laudable : to work out details of the divine order so that we can more effectively worship God, and avoid sin.

The EFFECT is all too often less elevated. If not everyone agrees on the proposed doctrine, then we fight about it, and a disgruntled faction leaves the church to start a new church which alone has the TRUE doctrine.

It seems to be impossible for the parties to accept that there might be some doubt on the subject, whatever it is. As there is no empirical test we can apply to distinguish between the rival propositions, all typically depends on different interpretations of passages of scripture, or something equally untestable.

Perhaps the classic case is the discussion on the nature of the Holy Spirit (one of the Persons of the Trinity) which was at least a contributory factor in the split between Catholic and Orthodox churches.

The question is whether the Holy Spirit "proceeds" from the Father and the Son, or only from the Father.

This is a question about the internal machinery of God. (Something of a combination of theology and car design ?)

It seems to me, in my crass and unspiritual way, that anyone really believing to be able to make dogmatic statements on God's anatomical processes (and if the Holy Spirit proceeds at all, it *is* a process) must be out of his tree.

But that's just my opinion, and doubtless the best you could expect from a rude mechanical.

By no stretch of the imagination can one reconcile this effect with Jesus's clear desire that Christians should "love one another".

That's what's wrong with it. I don't suggest that there's anything amiss with people exploring and speculating and using the available sources; I do suggest that there's a lot amiss with insisting on the results.

SOME MORE EXAMPLES.

A NON-THREATENING (now) SET : The heliocentric solar system, and evolution.

In both these cases, the accepted Christian doctrines were brought into question by the development of secular ideas.

In both these cases, part of the church insisted - in effect - that it was right because it was the church, and had inside information from God. (In an interesting inversion, we now find evolutionists insisting that they must be right because it's science, which is just as silly.)

The details are not very important; the reluctance of the church to consider that it might have got the doctrine wrong is VERY IMPORTANT INDEED. (- as is the reluctance of "rationalists" to consider that they might have missed something.)

DO WE LEARN ? - Not many of us, and not a lot.

WHAT SHOULD WE LEARN ? -

Specific things : the church can sometimes be wrong; you have to be careful in interpreting the Bible.

General things : humility.

A THREATENING (then) SET :

From the *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662 edition, preceding the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion :

HIS MAJESTY'S DECLARATION.

.... We have thought fit to make this Declaration following :

....

That the Articles of the Church of England contain the true Doctrine of the Church of England which We do therefore ratify and confirm, requiring all Our loving Subjects to continue in the uniform Profession thereof, and prohibiting the least difference from the said Articles

....

.... that no man hereafter shall either print, or preach, to draw the Article aside any way, but shall submit to it in the plain and full meaning thereof : and shall not put his own sense or comment to be the meaning of the Article, but shall take it in the literal and grammatical sense.

That if any publick Reader in either of Our Universities, or any Head or Master of a College, or any other person respectively in either of them, shall affix any new sense to any Article, or shall publickly read, determine, or hold any publick Disputation, or suffer any such to be held either way, in either the Universities or Colleges respectively; or if any Divine in the Universities shall preach or print anything either way, other than is already established in Convocation with Our Royal Assent; he, or they the Offenders, shall be liable to Our displeasure, and the Church's censure in Our Commission Ecclesiastical, as well as any other; And We will see there shall be due Execution upon them.

A THREATENING (now) SET : Homosexuality, women priests.

In both cases, we have a traditional camp basing their arguments on church traditions and Biblical references, and we have a liberal camp basing their arguments on current secular ideas.

WHAT DO WE DO ?

WHY DO WE HAVE DOCTRINE ?

Suggestions :

- 1 : Because we're like that. We're inquisitive, we probe, we like to find out how things work. But if that were all, perhaps we wouldn't get quite so worked up about the results.
- 2 : Because we're lazy, and we don't like working things out. Therefore we like rules which we can follow rather principles to apply. "Thou shalt not steal" is easier than "Love your neighbour" - but the rules can never be as complete as the principle. So we say "Follow these rules" rather than "Apply this principle" - and very soon we begin to think that the rules we've made are instructions straight from God.

No, I don't know where the Ten Commandments came from. I know of no reason why the account given in the book of Exodus cannot be literally true, though I admit to an element of scepticism about it. But I am ready to believe that Jesus did say that all the commandments depended on His two principles.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT DOCTRINE ?

It is somewhat presumptuous of me to suppose that I can do anything at all about doctrine, except insofar as it affects me - but we can all do that much, so perhaps it's worth continuing.

We could ACCEPT it. You will have gathered that I don't recommend that.

We could simply REJECT all doctrine. I think that would be silly. By and large, doctrinal statements embody a lot of effort by people who are really trying to work things out, and in many cases have the equipment to do so. There's likely to be quite a lot of sense in it, even if some bits are questionable.

We could regard it as a WORKING HYPOTHESIS. Doctrine, for the most part, is of human construction, and we can be wrong. If it turns out to conflict with reality or other sources of information, we can review it. That makes a lot more sense, but is unfortunately limited to the experts who know what the doctrine is and where it comes from.

I don't know what the "real" answer is. But I'm left with one question which I believe is significant :

Can we be right ? Is it possible in principle for us to be absolutely right about anything ? Humility will do us no harm.

I also suggest that being right is not our job. Our job is to seek what is right and what is good, but it's a lifelong job. We are called to love, not to be right.

Far too many Christians have been convinced that they, and they alone, are right. Perhaps not quite enough have been quite so diligent in loving those around them.

Am I right ? Of course, I'd like to think so. But though I try to tell "the truth" and "nothing but the truth", I cannot tell "the whole truth", because I don't know it.