

## Sermon Series – Church History

### Week 1 – Church History, A Brief Overview

Preached June 6, 2018 by Reverend Joylynn Graham

#### **Introduction**

Is church doctrine a good thing?

Is it even necessary?

What is “doctrine,” anyway, and where does it come from?

These are legitimate questions that Christians have every right to ask.

And they’re good questions; because these days it seems like doctrines do more to divide us than anything else.

It is my belief that one of the most important things we can do as Christians is to learn as much as we can about our faith –

To ask questions about how we got from ancient biblical times to where we are today.

Because everything we do as a faith community is characterized and influenced and shaped by everything that went before us.

Our liturgy, our rituals, our traditions, our sacraments, our songs, our mission and work in the world, our meetings, and yes, even our amazing potlucks – every single thing that is us – as a faith community – is characterized and influenced and shaped by our history.

And not just our faith community, but all faith communities – from the Vatican, to the Temple of Saint Sava in the Balkans, to the Hope Baptist Church in Toledo...

All of these beautiful expressions of faith are characterized, influenced and shaped by history.

A common history that we all share, connecting us to our ancestors in faith.

But have you ever noticed when you zoom in closer, how things start to become more diverse and specific?

For instance, in Chiapas Mexico, most people are of the Mayan descent. So in that context, Christianity is largely influenced by the Mayan culture.

But it wouldn't make sense for our community to incorporate Mayan practices. It's not part of our culture – or our history.

And while *we* might celebrate and welcome everyone *here*, there are other faith communities that are a little more exclusive –

Depending on their history...

The bible is one of the core elements of the Christian faith. It describes the origins of our faith, and it gives us a sense of connection and continuity with our ancestors in faith.

But there are quite literally an infinite number of understandings as to what it means – because what we read gets filtered through what we know and experience.

So our history, our culture, and all of our experiences influence how we understand and practice our faith.

Yet despite all of our diversity, we still manage to come together as one body – the Body of Christ – Christ's Church.

It's amazing isn't it?

How did that happen? And how do we hold together?

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Prior to the fourth century there really wasn't any church doctrine.

Up until that point the main preoccupation of the Christian was to fly under the radar and stay out of the lion's den.

It didn't matter if there was no unified understanding Christianity, or if it did, it was of low priority.

But early in the fourth century all of that changed. Almost overnight, this renegade religion went from rags to riches as it became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

And just as suddenly, Christians were required to “get their act together,” so to speak.

What the empire needed was a unified religion that could hold up under scrutiny. One that could explain its beliefs; and if Christians could pull it together quickly enough, then Christianity would be that religion.

So there were some really big meetings with a lot of deep theological conversation, which led to a consensus on certain Christian beliefs. And that led to official proclamations and declarations, also known as doctrines.

The word “doctrine” simply means “teaching” or “instruction.”

Biblical doctrine defines the parameters of Christian teaching on a given topic, such as God, sin, salvation, etc.

And church doctrine, it is the official teaching that gives the church its shape, coherence, and distinction.

At the time of Constantine, the church *needed* doctrines.

But in our time, doctrine gets very tricky – very quickly; because even the word “church” has many different levels of meaning.

In our time, “Church” means the Lutheran church, the Methodist Church, the Catholic Church, the Cowboy Church, and the United Church of Christ. It means the Pentecost Church, the Mormon Church, and the Church of the Redeemer...

Just to name a few...

In our time “Church” represents an entire body of believers throughout all the ages and throughout all the world – not a fledgling religion trying to find its footing.

And in our time, and at every level, there are indeed doctrines –

Conflicting doctrines –

That have all emerged out of historical, cultural, and experiential need.

So it might surprise you to learn that despite an overwhelming number of doctrines, there are actually very few that are considered to be official tenets of the entire Christian faith.

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Some of the most basic beliefs of Christianity were declared doctrine through those early council meetings – and I’m just going to say right now that if you think Plymouth council meetings are long, let me assure you they are nothing compared to those meetings.

The First Council of Nicaea – held in the year 325 – lasted two months and twelve days.

Present were 318 Bishops and the Emperor Constantine.

And what came out of that First Council of Nicaea was a definition of the true divinity of the son of God, as well as an official date for Easter.

But most doctrines are not the result of long meetings and official declarations. Most doctrines, actually evolve through consensus and what the church has already experienced and declared in its worship.

The church worshiped Christ as God long before the first debates emerged as to what this meant.

The church had been reading the gospels in worship long before anyone declared them to be the Word of God.

The church had been baptizing and sharing in communion long before any doctrines were developed as to the meaning of baptism or the presence of Christ in communion.

Doctrines are reflections of the church through all the ages, as it has sought to clarify what it heard from God, regarding both God’s nature and God’s will for creation.

And doctrines can be very useful. They provide guidelines – kind of like the foul lines on a baseball field or a football field.

Foul lines determine the official limits of the playing field.

You can cross the foul line, but if you do or if your ball does, then you are no longer on the playing field. And if you happen to be playing baseball or football, then that is a good thing to know.

It's the same thing with Christian doctrine. If I am practicing Christianity then I want to know the official limits of the field.

I want to know where the capital "C" Church draws the line –

I might cross that line and go exploring on my own –

But I want to know where that the line is.

And that's a pretty good standard for good Christian doctrine. Something to let us know the parameters of our faith, but not hold us like a prison cell.

Jesus gave us that. He gave us guidelines and parameters, but he didn't lock us up with them.

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The journey of the Christian faith is not a solo journey. It is one that is walked in community, and healthy doctrine is the collective wisdom of all who have gone before us, to light our way.

And it's biblical...

In 2 Timothy the author says:

"You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well."

Now of course we all know that doctrine can and has been manipulated in some pretty unhealthy ways.

And we've all seen instances where doctrine gets mistaken for God.

That's nothing new. Scripture tells us that the earliest expressions of human sin was the wish to control God, and the Old Testament is full of stories about people trying to do that very thing.

So when Christians insist that doctrines are fixed, infallible, descriptions of God that must be believed in a particular way if one is to be saved, then it is pretty obvious what they are trying to do – control God – and through God – other people.

But that doesn't mean we dump all of our doctrines. Far from it.

You see, each generation has the responsibility of making the church ours to the point where we are able to serve AND to criticize it as necessary.

And today, WE are the church. It's our turn.

And as the church moves through space and time, our faith should be in continual evolution, always looking back at previous versions of ourselves and realizing how much we didn't know then.

At the heart of our Christian faith is movement, growth, learning and change, which means that tradition, dogma, and doctrine are all fair game, because they all pass through the hands of a flawed humanity, and they are all equally vulnerable to the prejudices, fears, and biases of those who have touched them.

So this summer we are going to take a good look at church doctrine.

We are going to study many of the larger doctrinal topics of the church.

We are going to try and flesh out the origin and evolution of these topics.

And, we are going to study the questions you asked, last month in that survey that wanted to know what you wanted to know.

You all had a lot of really thoughtful and wonderful questions, and it was out of those questions that this series arose because they were all questions that were rooted in doctrine.

Now let me just say upfront, this series is not intended to sway your thinking or influence your beliefs about anything.

The purpose is to give you history, background and theological insight, so that you can decide for yourselves what you think and what you believe.

You're free to do that.

In the United Church of Christ in general, and here at Plymouth in particular, faith is a transformative journey, and we are all at different stages of our journey.

There is nothing you have to believe in order to justify your presence here.

Here in this space, there is room for all beliefs – AND – all disbeliefs.

So let's do this thing. This series will cover a nine week period of time, and that is a very long series by any standard, but when I tried to contain it, I realized that the only way to do it justice is to just make the commitment.

And since it's summer, we have that luxury.

I put a schedule in our newsletter this month so hopefully you got that... If not, let me know so that I can send you one.

The schedule is a rough outline, and very much subject to change. Sometimes direction is a hard thing to forecast when there are so many possibilities.

And if you have questions you would like to add to the mix then we can do that too. I invite your participation in this event.

We may even have more interactive sermons with questions and answers.

I will be referring a lot to books and materials that I still have from my church history classes in seminary, and I am excited to look at this stuff closely again – 6 years later.

Because the history of our church contains the most amazing trail of bread crumbs I have ever examined in my life.

So off we go, and as always, may it be with you all according to God's word.  
Amen