

Faith, Dogma and Knowledge of God

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Does Dogma really matter?

Suppose a well respected servant suddenly leaves the Orthodox Faith for a non-sacramental church. Upon inquiring why, the servant challenges you to read scripture and find God's vision on the sacraments, implying their lack of reality. Naturally, one will be quite inquisitive and seriously attempt to re-read scripture with a closer keen eye. Subsequently attending bible studies, in quest of these answers. Your questions, in an inquisitive behavior, turn more and more dogmatic, upon which point another attendee in exasperation shares their feelings: "enough with these dogmatic questions, they are not practical!"

Naturally, this raises a question: are all these dogmatic questions a waste of time? Were all these questions really all that necessary as long as we were all on the page that Christ is our Savior? Does anything else really matter? Does dogma really matter? Does Theology matter?

To answer these questions, it's essential to understand the significance of dogma and theology in shaping our faith. Let us first differentiate the terminologies.

What is dogma, doctrine and theology?

To fully grasp the level of importance of dogma, we must first differentiate the terminologies that often get intertwined: dogma, doctrine and theology. In the following table is presented the definition of each term and a practical biblical example. The table will show that dogma defines, doctrine titles and theology reflects.

	Dogma	Doctrine	Theology
Definition	The unchanging, non-negotiable core elements of the Orthodox Christian faith. Dogma is defined mainly by Ecumenical Councils. Dogma is not subject to debate or interpretation.	The ways in which dogma is explained to those who are learning it. The Oxford English Dictionary defines doctrine as follows: "That which is taught. a. In the most general sense: Instruction, teaching; a body of instruction or teaching. b. esp. That which is taught or laid down as true concerning a particular subject or department of knowledge, as religion, politics, science, etc.; a belief, theoretical opinion; a dogma, tenet."	Expansive, creative reflections and applications of dogma and doctrine.

Example	Jesus Christ is fully both God and man.	Referred to as the “Incarnation”. An emphasis on how divinity has become truly united with humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. Note, here the emphasis is actually on how God became human, not on a precise insistence on the fullness of both natures.	Because of the Incarnation, we engage God sacramentally.
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To reiterate, dogma then defines, doctrine titles and theology reflects!

Importance of knowing God

Dogma is critical. We cannot know God and at the same time not imitate Him to some degree. Does that mean a theological scholar is like God? Absolutely not. There could very well be very knowledgeable people about many religious matters; but little knowledge of God. At least, little true knowledge of God. At times, their very knowledge, and love thereof, prevents them from coming to the knowledge of the truth.

Knowledge that is not accompanied by diligence is dangerous – no matter whether the knowledge is of an academic character or of a mystical character. For this reason St. Paul says: “Knowledge puffs up.” (1 Corinthians 8:1) Yet, we cannot *truly* know God and at the same time not imitate Him to some degree. Imitating Him and conforming to His image is itself a result of such *true* knowledge.

It is for this reason that the Scriptures tell us that “by their fruit you shall know them.” (Matthew 7:16) If someone claims knowledge of God, but his life is not in conformity with the commandments of Christ, then we know that what we are hearing is largely delusional in character.

There is a beautiful story in Lives of the Desert Fathers: One of the Fathers was in prayer when the devil sought to trick him. A demon appeared in the cell of the monk (who was in prayer) and said, “I am the angel Gabriel sent from God.” Without looking up the monk replied, “Have you not been sent to another? For I am a sinner. I am not worthy for an angel to visit me.” The demon disappeared, defeated by the humility of the monk.

This is a description of the proper state of our heart. We desire to know God, but we want to know Him deeply enough, that we refuse to settle for anything less. Much of modern religious experience, as witnessed by its fruit, has little to do with the true God.

Before continuing, consider asking yourself, what is the relation between faith and knowledge – which comes first?

Knowledge of God begins with ...

Many early church fathers clearly tell us that faith precedes the knowledge of God. The knowledge of God is not merely some scholastic achievement rather an expression and extension of one’s faith. God is invisible and incomprehensible, and the wisdom of God hidden in a mystery; consequently, many parts of this learning can not be embraced by knowledge, but may be received by faith. “Faith, say, is

the eye which enlightens every man's conscience; it gives man knowledge. For, as the prophet says, 'If ye will not believe, ye shall not understand.'" St. Cyril of Jerusalem

This principle of working based on faith and developing knowledge based on faith is not simply a religious principle but St. Cyril meditates and says it extends even to non-believers in many of their day to day work: "It is not only amongst us, who hear the name of Christ, that faith is made so great a thing; but every thing which is done in the world, even by men who are unconnected with the Church, is done by faith. Agriculture is founded on faith; for no one who did not believe that he should gather in the increase of the fruits of the earth would undertake the labor of husbandry. Mariners are guided by faith when they entrust their fate to a slight plank, and prefer the agitation of the unstable waters to the more stable element of the earth. They give themselves up to uncertain expectations, and retain for themselves nothing but faith, to which they trust more than to any anchors."

Here, St. Cyril shows how agriculture, a fundamental human activity, is rooted in faith. Farmers toil the land, trusting that their efforts will yield a bountiful harvest. Without this belief in future returns, the arduous labor of husbandry would be futile. Mariners, too, live on this principle. They entrust their lives to the fragile planks of ships, navigating treacherous waters with faith as their guide. The vast expanse of the ocean may seem daunting compared to the stability of the land, yet mariners choose to venture forth, driven by hope and faith in a favorable outcome.

St. Cyril's observation highlights the power of faith. It permeates various aspects of human existence, even among those who may not identify as religious. Faith serves as a guiding force, inspiring individuals to undertake endeavors that require trust in the unknown and the unpredictable. It is a testament to the human capacity for hope, optimism, and unwavering belief in the potential for positive outcomes, regardless of the odds.

Knowledge of God is His delight

Josiah, a young boy blessed with an inquisitive mind and a deep yearning for spiritual truth, embarked on a remarkable journey of faith at the tender age of eight. From that tender age, Josiah dedicated himself to seeking understanding of the divine, driven by an unyielding desire to know God more intimately. "For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, **he began to seek the God of his father David**; and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the wooden images, the carved images, and the molded images." Josiah's pursuit of knowledge was not a fleeting interest but a lifelong commitment that shaped his character and influenced his actions as a king.

Growing up in a time of religious turmoil and idolatry, Josiah recognized the importance of turning away from false gods and wholeheartedly embracing the worship of the one true God. He immersed himself in the study of the scriptures, seeking wisdom and guidance from the words of the prophets. Through his diligent study, Josiah gained profound insights into the nature of God, His laws, and His love for His people.

Josiah's love for God was not mere intellectual curiosity but a genuine desire to live in accordance with His will. He implemented religious reforms, purging the land of pagan practices and restoring the temple to its former glory. His unwavering commitment to righteousness extended to social justice as

well, as he worked tirelessly to ensure fairness and compassion for the marginalized and oppressed. Josiah's true internal desire for the knowledge of God left a lasting impact on his kingdom and beyond.

In the 8th century BC, during a time of great material prosperity yet spiritual bankruptcy, the prophet Hosea witnessed to the northern ten tribes of Israel. He announced the coming judgment upon them at the hands of the Assyrians, which came to pass in 722 BC. In the midst of this impending doom, Hosea delivered a message of hope and restoration. He called the people to repent and return to the Lord, promising that God would heal their wounds and raise them up on the third day.

"Come, and let us return to the Lord; For He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up. After two days He will revive us; On the third day He will raise us up, That we may live in His sight. **Let us know, Let us pursue the knowledge of the Lord.**" (Hosea 6:1,6)

In response, God emphasizes that His delight is not in sacrifices and offerings alone, but in the genuine knowledge and pursuit of Him.

"For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, And the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings." (Hosea 6:6)

Here, we see God clearly expressing His desire for us to get to know Him. More than the rituals and external religious acts, which played a significant role in the salvation of mankind, God longs for a deeper connection with His people. The true God can be known. This is one of the first and most important things to understand about Him. God not only desires to be known but also takes delight in revealing Himself to those who have accepted His movement toward them and His revelation.

Knowing God is not merely a task or an obligation, but the very purpose and goal of human existence. It is through this knowledge that we find true fulfillment and meaning in life. As the verse from John 17:3 states, "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."

As previously mentioned, this knowledge of God extends beyond mere intellectual understanding. It encompasses a deep, personal, and intimate relationship with the Creator. It is a journey of faith, trust, and surrender, where we open our hearts and minds to the divine presence within us. When we know God, we come to understand our place in the universe, our purpose, and our ultimate destiny.

Saint Athanasius, an early church father, beautifully expresses the transformative power of contemplating God and His Word. He says, "... the contemplation of God, and the Word which is from Him, suffice to nourish those who hear, and stand to them in place of all food. For the angels are not otherwise sustained than by beholding the face of the Father and of the Savior who is in heaven."

This contemplation is not a passive or idle activity but an active engagement with the divine. It involves seeking God through prayer, meditation, and the study of His Word. It is a process of continually growing in our understanding and appreciation of His character, His love, and His wisdom. As we immerse ourselves in this contemplation, our hearts and minds are nourished. We find solace, strength, and guidance in the midst of life's challenges. We begin to see the world through God's eyes, developing a deeper compassion for others and a greater understanding of our own purpose.

The knowledge of God is not limited to a select few but is accessible to all who seek Him with a sincere heart. It is through this knowledge that we experience true life. And as we continue to grow in our understanding of God, we come to realize that the journey of knowing Him is an eternal adventure, filled with wonder, awe, and the promise of endless discovery.

Ignorance of God is death

As the world grows in diverse theistic and atheistic teachings, Christians are more and more tempted to grow indifferent to their surroundings. "To each their own" one might think. Is the sheer indifference to living a Christian life a tragedy, something unfortunate, inconvenient, relevant, irrelevant, none of our business? Should our faith be PASSIVE or ACTIVE with these individuals?

False concepts about God that abound in the world do not please Him. It does not please Him that some people think Him to be a part of creation, while some think He is an impersonal force. Or that others think that the Godhead is not one single but various and multiple as the polytheists do. Or to have monistic monotheistic model theists affirming that the one god who exists is not a father. He does not have a son. Such erroneous concepts of God are not just unfortunate. Those are tragic. Not in passing 'all to their own' or 'that is sad'. It is a tragic event painful to Your Father!

Are we guilty of sins committed unwillingly, or unknowingly? If those sins are unrepented, how does God perceive them? In reading Leviticus 5:17-19, one comes to see that we are indeed guilty of sins committed willingly and unknowingly.

"If a person sins, and commits any of these things which are forbidden to be done by the commandments of the Lord, though he does not know it, **yet he is guilty and shall bear his iniquity.** 18 And he shall bring to the priest a ram without blemish from the flock, with your valuation, as a trespass offering. So the priest shall make atonement for him regarding his ignorance in which he erred and did not know it, and it shall be forgiven him. 19 It is a trespass offering; he has certainly trespassed against the Lord." – Lev 5:17-19

Clearly, atonement is required for unwilling and unknowingly committed sins. A desire and will that Christ, the true High Priest, offers the atonement on our behalf is necessary for salvation. Thus, to some degree, ignorance of God is death. Without this simple basic knowledge, how will those sins come to be atoned?

To affirm that all religions are true in their affirmations about God is to say that God is both created and uncreated. He's both all powerful and not all powerful; both personal and impersonal; both single in nature and supreme; at the same time multiple and divided in nature and without a clear supremacy of power. Of course to say such a thing is utter nonsense. And an insult to the true God. Such teachings about God are not only a denial of His self revelation, but also of the fact that He has labored to make himself known to us. So that we can actually have meaningful communion. This is what you do with people you love. You want them to know you and you want to know them. Faith is not passive.

God's continuous Revelation

God's existence and nature transcend human comprehension. He is not a mere product of our imagination or a result of intellectual deduction. Rather, our understanding of God stems from His own revelation toward us. Through His outstretched hands, He seeks us, inviting us into a profound relationship.

The created cosmos serves as a daily testament to God's glory. As Psalm 19:1-2 NKJV beautifully expresses, "The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, And night unto night reveals knowledge." The intricate beauty and order of the universe, from the celestial bodies to the smallest living organisms, speak volumes about the majesty and wisdom of its Creator.

However, there are certain aspects of the Lord God Almighty that remain beyond our limited human understanding. No mere mortal has ever gazed upon God's true essence, nor can any created being fully comprehend His nature. Scripture confirms this, stating that "no one has ever seen God" (John 1:18 NKJV).

Even the truths that God has chosen to reveal to us in His wisdom for our salvation can be challenging to grasp, especially given our inherent limitations and biases. Our personal perspectives, often clouded by sin and worldly desires, can hinder our comprehension of divine mysteries. That's why Jesus emphasized the importance of purity of heart in Matthew 5:8, saying, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

A cleansed heart allows us to perceive God's presence and understand His ways more clearly. By seeking holiness and living in accordance with His commandments, we open ourselves up to a deeper revelation of His nature. It is through a humble and devoted heart that we can truly encounter God and experience the profound joy and peace that come from knowing Him.

Discerning proper Dogma - Theology and Prayer

Theology, far from being a mere propagation of ideas about God, holds a profound connection with prayer. It is through the act of prayer that we truly come to know and understand the Divine. No human, no creature, should dare to speak about the Lord God without a sense of trepidation and deep circumspection. We do not use God's name casually in our everyday language or invoke it flippantly. It is a sacred and awe-inspiring name that deserves our utmost reverence.

Why, then, do we make the sign of the cross before we speak about God? This simple gesture is a reminder of the profound mystery and majesty of the Divine. It is a way of acknowledging that we are approaching a subject that is beyond our full comprehension, and that we do so with humility and respect. The act of making the cross also serves as a prayer in itself, invoking the protection and guidance of God as we embark on our theological inquiries.

As the ancient Christian writer Evagrius once said, "He who prays is a theologian, and a theologian is the one who prays." These words capture the essence of the relationship between prayer and theology. Prayer is not simply a means of asking God for favors or making requests. It is a way of communing with the Divine, of opening our hearts and minds to God's presence and grace. Through prayer, we enter into a dialogue with God, and it is in this dialogue that we come to know Him more deeply.

Theology, in turn, is not merely an intellectual exercise or a body of abstract ideas. It is a living, breathing tradition that is rooted in prayer and contemplation. True theologians are not simply scholars who study about God, but people who have a deep personal relationship with Him. They are people who have spent countless hours in prayer, seeking to know and understand God more fully.

It is through this combination of prayer and theology that we come to a deeper understanding of God and our relationship with Him. Prayer helps us to open our hearts and minds to God's presence, while theology provides us with the language and concepts we need to articulate our understanding of Him. Together, prayer and theology form a powerful path to spiritual growth and transformation.

Discernment of proper Dogma - Basis of Judgement

A judge uses the law, the jury and the work of prosecutors and lawyers to discern the fate of the accused. When it comes to discernment in Christianity, the judge (you, the individual) has what as its means of discernment? Which of the following is the most governing authority of discerning proper dogma/teachings? Feelings/Conscience, Scripture, Holy Tradition or The Law? Let us look at each separately.

Feelings/Conscience

As narrated in the Bible, during creation God imprinted into the nature of man His Divine Image, which draws man toward everything that is morally good and averts him from everything that is morally evil. As a distinct human faculty, conscience provides a sense of goodness or blameworthiness in our conduct and quality of character, urging us to do right and be good.

Because it is an integral part of human nature, it is active in all people—regardless of their age, race, education, or development. However, this conscience may be corrupted due to sin, and should not be counted as a basis for discernment: “To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled.” (Titus 1:15). Furthermore, the conscience is often intermixed with feelings and feelings and emotions are highly deceptive: The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9)

The Law

Just as judges and lawyers govern our society based on laws, God's law serves as the standard for our conduct. Not as those who focus only on the law have a haram / halal perspective. The Law is not a list of dos and don'ts—the things you need to do to make God happy. In Christ, the Law is more about preserving proper worship of God. God's commandments are invaluable instructions on how to interact with God and how to interact with man.

The law represents God's expressed will, demonstrating His holiness, justice, and goodness. It is intended to bless and guide us. The Law has a role in revealing our sins. “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” (Romans 3:20). However, the written law does not directly address all matters, rather the law teaches us the spirit of that which needs to be achieved.

Scripture/The Revealed Word of God

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). St. Basil the Great says, 'The hearers taught in the Scriptures ought to test what is said by teachers and accept that which agrees with the Scriptures but reject what is foreign'. 'Therefore let God-inspired Scripture decide between us; and on whichever side be found doctrines in harmony with the word of God, in favor of that side will be cast the vote of truth'

St. John Chrysostom says, 'Everything in the divine Scriptures is clear and straightforward; they inform us about all that is necessary' (Epis 2 ad Thess 3,4) and St. Origen says, "It is necessary to take the Holy Scriptures as witnesses; for our comments and statements without these witnesses are not trustworthy.”

However, Scripture in the Orthodox view is not as those that follow only scripture who are called sola scriptura. Orthodox Christians hold to both Tradition and the Scriptures, as both are seen as coming from the Holy Spirit. St. Paul twice specifically calls Christians to follow the Traditions of the church. 2 Thessalonians 3:6 says, “But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us.” And in 2 Thessalonians 2:15, “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.”

Holy Tradition

Holy Tradition is that same faith that Jesus taught to the Apostles and that they gave to their disciples, preserved in the Church and especially in its leadership through Apostolic succession (Jude 1:3).

St. Anthony says, "Wherefore keep yourselves all the more untainted by them, and observe the TRADITIONS of the FATHERS, and chiefly the holy faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, which you have learned from the SCRIPTURE, AND of which you have often been put in mind BY ME." We are a church that looks at it all. Which is what Holy Tradition is. Encapsulates all that matters.

Holy Tradition encapsulates the the Scripture, which teaches us the Law and which in turn encapsulate that which feeds our conscience “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul” (Psalm 19:7)

Holding on to doctrine

While some argue that dogmatic questions are impractical and unnecessary, they serve several vital purposes. Dogma offers a foundation for our beliefs, helping us to articulate and clarify our understanding of God and the world. It also provides a shared language and framework for all believers, allowing them to communicate and engage in meaningful dialogue. Moreover, dogmatic questions lead to deeper spiritual growth and understanding.

By grappling with complex theological concepts, we challenge our assumptions and biases, fostering a more nuanced and mature faith. This process of inquiry and reflection can bring us closer to God and strengthen our connection to our traditions. Theological questions also have practical implications for

our daily lives. They shape our moral decision-making, ethical considerations, and attitudes towards the world around us. By engaging in theological discussions, we can develop a more informed and compassionate approach to life's challenges and opportunities.

The significance of dogma and theology cannot be dismissed as mere intellectual exercises. They are essential components of faith, providing a foundation for our beliefs, fostering spiritual growth, and guiding our practical actions. While it's important to approach dogmatic questions with humility and openness, they are anything but a waste of time. They are an invitation to explore the depths of our faith, connect with others, and deepen our understanding of the divine.



Review Questions

1. What is Dogma? (A. The unchanging, non-negotiable core elements of the Orthodox Christian faith. Dogma is defined mainly by Ecumenical Councils.)
2. What is Theology? (A. Expansive, creative reflections and applications of dogma and doctrine)
3. What is true knowledge? (A. Knowledge that is not accompanied by diligence is dangerous. We cannot know God and at the same time not imitate Him to some degree. Imitating Him and conforming to His image is itself a result of such true knowledge.)
4. True or false: Knowledge of God begins with Faith. (A. True. Many early church fathers clearly tell us that faith precedes the knowledge of God.)
5. What is the agnostics and atheists approach? (A. It is an approach to emotions and feeling. Their atheism is not due to dispassionate reasoning, but the effect of emotional or relational discomfort with what they perceived God to be.
6. If the Law is not a list of dos and don'ts—the things you need to do to make God happy, what is it? (A. The Law in Christ, is more about preserving proper worship of God. God's commandments are invaluable instructions on how to interact with God and how to interact with man.