DEFINING TERMS

Summary:

I.   **THE TERMS: History of Dogma or History of Doctrine?**
II.   **THE METHOD of the Study of the History of Doctrine.**
III.   **THE HISTORY of History of Doctrine.**

I.   **THE TERMS: History of Dogma or History of Doctrine?**

"Dogma" and "doctrine" are not strictly synonymous terms. Therefore, we begin with an understanding of the terms, their differences and similarities.

  A.   **Dogma**

  1.   The term, dogma, derives from a Greek term which generally means "a decree, a decision, or a command." "*dokein*" (it seems). In the New Testament it became attached to the findings of an ecclesiastical body such as in Acts 16:4 (*dogmata*).

  The term dogma (*dogma*) also appears in Luke 2:1, Acts 17:7, Ephesians. 2:15, and Didaché 2:3.

> "The name dogma is appplied to the crystalized statements which were received by the church." Heick, *A History of Christian Thought*. I:3

  2.   Dogma technically refers to the study of confessional statements. The **history of dogma** is the study of the gradual development of theological thought from its rise in the post-apostolic age to its final creedal formulation.

  a)   Eastern Orthodox Church dogmatics end with the second Council of Nicea in A.D. 787 (admitting no further refinement or clarification).

  b)   Roman Catholic dogmatics end with Vatican II (1963–65) or the recent statement of faith (1992).

  c)   Lutheran Church dogmatics end with the Formula of Concord (1580).

d)   Reformed Church dogmatics end with the Synod of Dordt (1619) and the Westminster Confessions (1649).

"The theological term, Dogma, designates either an ecclesiastical doctrine, or the entire structure of such doctrines, *i.e.,* the doctrinal system of the church. As Dogma is the formal expression of the truth held by the church at large, or by a particular church. . .We apply the term, Dogma, not to every kind of theological propositions or formulas . . . but only to such propositions as have attained an ecclesiastical character, *i.e.,* such as have by a public declaration of the church at large, or some particular branch of it, been acknowledged as expressing Christian truth. Although the form of Dogma is the work of theology, its content is derived from the common faith of the Christian church."   Seeburg, *The History of Doctrine*, 19

B.   Doctrine: a broader term, "the teaching of a group or an individual"

1.   The term, doctrine (*didaskalia*, 1 Tim. 4:16), is almost universally translated "teaching" in the New Testament. Doctrine, in the broader sense of the term, is that which is taught; what is held, put forth as true or supported by a teacher, a school, or group. In this sense doctrine denotes teaching as distinguished from dogma which denotes only such teaching as is part of the written confession of the church.

The term doctrine in contemporary usage has often been restricted to abstract theology as distinct from application. However, biblically speaking the term more accurately covers the entire spectrum of what is taught in the Bible, from presuppositions to application. Doctrine frequently has a meaning related to biblical procedures from thought to action. Thus God's policies for His creation and the behavior of His creatures are properly called doctrine in a broader sense then basic theological parameters.

Obviously, this word, like most words, can have several meanings. It can be someone's opinion on a particular subject, as when we speak of "Plato's doctrine of the soul." It can be a principle that guides the actions of a person or of an entire nation, as when we speak of the "Monroe doctrine," establishing a policy to keep the European powers out of the Western Hemisphere.. . . A doctrine is the official teaching of a body—in this case, the church— that gives it shape, coherence, and distinction.   Justo L.Gonzalez, *A Concise History of Christian Doctrine*, 2.

2. In this course the content will consist of a study of both dogma and doctrine. It will consist of the study of creeds, but beyond the creeds to further doctrinal formulations.

> "Thus dogmas have been "deepened," or "disintegrated" and superficialized —logically developed, or, under the influence of advancing views, transformed, restored, and again newly interpreted. To delineate these historical processes is the office of the History of Doctrines—to show how the Dogma as a whole and the separate dogmas have arisen and through what course of development they have been brought to the form and interpretation prevailing in the churches of any given period." Seeburg, 19-20

> **N.B.** An example of the difference between these terms, dogma and doctrine, is that the confessional churches (Reformed, Lutheran, Roman) have dogma, but Baptists and other non-confessional churches have but doctrines; that is, they have not held or recognized ecumenical councils.

C. **The Development of Doctrine**

1. The teaching or doctrine in Scripture never changes, but the understanding by Christians of what the Bible teaches changes through history. Much of this development is positive, as we clarify and refine our exegesis and understanding of the text. Some is negative as extra-biblical philosophies impact the study of the Bible.

2. Doctrines are refined and clarified in the context of heresy.

3. Caveat: knowledge about doctrine should not be confused with a mature relationship with God. Relationships cannot develop apart from knowledge, but knowledge alone does not mature a relationship.

II. **THE METHOD of the Study of the History of Doctrine.**

Two methods have been applied in the study of the history of doctrine: one stressing periodization and systematics; the other, only systematics.

A. **The Historical-Analytical Method.**

This method divides the History of Doctrine into General or Synthetic and Special or Analytic History. It seeks to segment church history (Ancient, Medieval, Reformation, and Modern) as the framework for the study of the development of the seven branches of Systematic Theology.

The reasons for not accepting this method are as follows:

1.   It makes the study of doctrine disjointed (anatomic rather than organic) and, thus, suffers from lose of continuity. History swallows doctrine. There is a danger if history is totally neglected because it does provide the context of historical development. The stress in our course is doctrine, then history.

2.   It necessitates inevitable repetition which can otherwise be avoided.

3.   It, most importantly, does not admit to a strictly historical treatment of the subject

B.   The Synthetic-Historical Method

This method attempts to trace each branch of systematic theology (i.e., the rubrics of dogmatics) individually through the entire history of the church. It assumes a working knowledge of the flow of Church History and focuses upon the development of an overview of the course of each doctrine in history.

N.B.   Since the development of Systematic Theology is the fruit of Church History, not New Testament history (i.e., "sober reflections of the church on the teaching of the Bible") at least two points require clarification at the outset of the study.

1.   While Systematic Theology and dogma were developed by the church; it was not created by the church. Development supposes existing materials; creation supposes none. The terms are mutually exclusive.

2.   While dogma is formulated or developed in the history of the church, such development is not necessarily synonymous with improvement. Improvement is relative to the clarification of the original content from a particular perspective; it can be positive or negative improvement.

III.   THE HISTORY of the History of Doctrine.

The study of the History of Doctrine is of recent origin, the eighteenth century.

A.   Johannes S. Semler, a German church historian and biblical critic, demonstrated in 1762 that the History of Doctrine should be separated from ecclesiastical history (*Historical Introduction*). Tholuck pronounced him, "The father of the history of doctrines."

B.   Wilhelm Muenscher, a disciple of Semler and a theologian of the Enlightenment, has been called by Heick (*A History of Christian Thought*. I, 6), "The father of the

modern history of dogma." He wrote *Handbuch der Christliches Dogmengeschichte* (4 vols.) from 1797–1809 and *Lehrbuch der Christiches* in 1811.

C. German scholars have dominated the study of the history of doctrine.

    1. Johann August Wilhelm Neander (d. 1857), *History of Christian Dogmatics*.

    2. Karl Rudolf Hagenbach (d. 1840), *A History of Christian Doctrine*.

    3. Ludwig Frederich Otto Baumgarten-Crusius (d. 1832), *Glaubenslehre*.

    4. Johann Georg Veit Engelhardt (d. 1839).

    5. Adolph Harnack, the giant in the field, wrote *History of Dogma* (7 vols.) depositing the origin of dogma in early church "Hellenism."

    6. Friedrich Loofs, *Leitfaden zum Studeium der Dogmengischichte* (1889).

    7. Reinhold Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (1895, 1898).

    8. Friederich Wiegand, *Dogmengischichte* (1912, 1919).

D. Among the Americans five are outstanding.

    1. William G. T. Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine* (1889).

    2. H. C. Sheldon, *History of Christian Doctrine* (1886).

    3. George Park Fisher, *History of Christian Doctrine* (1886).

    4. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *History of Christian Thought* (1932, 1933). He was a follower of Harnack's approach.

    5. Otto W. Heick, *A History of Christian Thought* (1965).

N.B. The English have not produce any standard works in the field, but deserved mention must be made of the Scottish Free Church William Cunningham's *Historical Theology* (1862).

THE COMPONENTS OF DOCTRINAL FORMULATION
A QUESTION-ANSWER EXERCISE

THE SCRIPTURES

QUESTIONS-------------------CHURCH REFLECTION------------FORMULATED
                                                                                             REPLIES
                                                                                            DOCTRINE

AN EMERGENT, EXPLANATORY MODEL
OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINE

THE APOSTLES' TEACHING

The Static: Scripture

The Catalyst: the expression of scriptural teaching in response to a historic threat, or
        situationalism.

The Tests: Consistency Principle
                    Complementary Principle
                    Universality Principle