

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Early Church (Acts 2:42): The Apostle's Doctrine

This week, and for the three following weeks, we are going to think about that grand verse, Acts 2:42. It tells us that the early Christians "continued stedfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."

The fundamental concept addressed in the verse is the fellowship, Christian fellowship. That will be dealt with next time. Without going outside the text of our verse, we can see that it is the Apostles' fellowship. We can further see that the Apostles' doctrine and the Apostles' fellowship are so closely linked that they are termed the Apostles' (doctrine and fellowship). Furthermore, the close relation of all the topics to be considered from this verse is very clear.

First, the Apostles' doctrine regulates the fellowship.

Second, the breaking of bread is the greatest privilege and sweetest expression of the fellowship.

Third, prayers sustain us in the fellowship, that is, in the good of the fellowship.

On this occasion, we are to think about the Apostles' doctrine.

I am well aware that, if a popularity poll were to be taken, there is no doubt that DOCTRINE would be at the very bottom of the poll compared with other subjects we might consider. I am also aware that if no social or moral pressure were applied, and attendance at a series of lectures on Christianity were to be entirely voluntary, the lowest attendance would almost certainly be registered at an address on DOCTRINE.

The attitude of many otherwise keen Christians to the subject of doctrine is summed up in a statement I hear from time to time, "Don't give me doctrine, give me Christ!" That sounds alright but doesn't really bear examination. If we want Christ, we need the doctrine of Christ, for He is the sum and substance of it. This is why the Bible speaks of Him as the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. Doctrine, therefore, merits our earnest consideration.

The word doctrine itself, in its various forms and parts, is used in the New Testament about 50 times. My intention is to say sufficient to give the right basic impression about what doctrine is, and also the effect that doctrine is intended to have upon us. Doctrine, simply, is teaching. The Bible tells us that there is good doctrine, good teaching. There is also bad doctrine, bad teaching. We are warned in Ephesians 4:14, "be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine." We need to be very careful about what we believe.

As to good doctrine, good teaching, we read in the New Testament of:

The Apostles' doctrine - Acts 2:42

The doctrine of the Lord - Acts 13:12

The doctrine of God our Saviour - Titus 2:10

The doctrine of Christ - 2 John 9

Good doctrine - 1 Timothy 4:6

Sound doctrine - Various (Timothy and Titus)

As to bad doctrine, bad teaching, we are warned against:

The doctrine of the Pharisees - Matthew 16:12

The doctrine of the Sadducees - Matthew 16:12

The doctrines of men - Colossians 2:22

The doctrines of devils - 1 Timothy 4:1

Strange doctrines - Hebrews 13:9

The doctrine of Balaam - Revelation 2:14

The doctrine of the Nicolaitanes - Revelation 2:15

For the Christian, then, good doctrine, good teaching, is the intelligent, orderly setting out of the truth of God by the Holy Spirit. This leaves no room at all for the mind and opinion of man.

After the Lord Jesus died, and rose again, and because He was going back to heaven, He commissioned His disciples to move around, preaching and teaching on His behalf. He said to them, "As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you" (John 20:21). Because they were, in this way, "sent ones", they became the Apostles, for that is what the word means, "sent ones". The teaching thus committed to them was therefore termed "the Apostles' Teaching", or "The Apostles' Doctrine", as we have it in our Bibles. It is the total body of Christian truth, recorded for our benefit in the New Testament Epistles, written by those very Apostles, and preserved for two thousand years now so that we can read it for ourselves, meditate upon it, and make it our own.

To underline the importance of doctrine, it will be helpful to examine the subject under four headings.

First of all, the **SUBSTANCE** of doctrine.

Secondly, the **SCOPE** of doctrine.

Thirdly, the **SIGNIFICANCE** of doctrine.

Fourthly, the **SEQUEL** to doctrine.

Firstly, then, the **SUBSTANCE** of doctrine. By substance, I mean the essence and basic content. There can be no doubt that the substance of doctrine, indeed the substance of all scripture, is Christ. This is true whether we are reading Old Testament or New Testament. It is true whether we are considering type, prophecy, illustration, narrative or doctrine itself and its interpretation. It is true whether we are thinking about Christ personally, or the blessing that has accrued because of the work of Christ. It is true whether the immediate scope is the Christian church, the nation of Israel, or the Gentile nations. Whatever the detail, careful examination will determine that the heart of the matter is Christ.

You will remember those lovely statements in Luke 24. Verse 27 says, "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself." Then in verses 44 and 45 we read, "And He said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning Me. Then opened He their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures." Again, the vital matter referred to in 2 John 9 is "the doctrine of Christ."

Secondly, the **SCOPE** of doctrine. The Old Testament largely teaches us that the nation of Israel, and the nations at large, will only experience true, lasting blessing when the long-promised Messiah (that is, Christ) is given His proper place. The plain declaration is recorded in Acts 17:31, "God hath appointed a day, in which He will rule the world in righteousness by that man whom He hath ordained; whereof He hath given assurance unto all men in that He hath raised Him from the dead."

In the Gospels, the King presents Himself, is refused by Israel and the nations, and the door is opened to deeper, fuller blessing to whosoever will.

We now come to the New Testament Epistles. We shall never really understand the full implications of the Gospels in general and the Lord's words in particular if we aren't well grounded in the New Testament Epistles. We need all the scriptures, but especially the Apostles' doctrine as given in the Epistles.

Sadly, many have abandoned the Apostles' doctrine, although not necessarily the confession of Christ as Saviour. For an illustration of this, Paul says in 2 Timothy 1:15: "All they which are in Asia have turned away from me" – not necessarily from Christ, but certainly from Paul and the distinctive ministry he had been given. However, if I ignore or reject the Apostles' doctrine, I should not be surprised if much of the Bible is a closed book to me. If I throw away the key to a treasure chest, I should not be surprised if I find difficulty in gaining access to the treasure the chest contains.

We learn in 1 Timothy 2:4 that God's continuing disposition is that all men might be saved, and come unto the knowledge of the truth. Many Christians may well be satisfied with being saved, having their sins forgiven and being assured of a place in heaven. God's will for us is that we should go on from that essential foundation, to come to a knowledge of the truth, the scope and detail of the revealed body of Christian truth, that is, the Apostles' doctrine.

In practice, it works like this. When we first start reading the Bible as new converts, we are drawn to the four Gospels, which tell us so much about the Saviour we love. Then, as we grow a little in our souls, we find that we gain an increasing interest in the Epistles, which teach us the deeper implications of all the blessings and responsibilities of Christianity. Even more, they instruct us about the many glories of the Lord Jesus Himself. Then, with the passage of time, and as we deepen in our appreciation of the Apostles' doctrine, we find increasing delight in going back to the Gospels. We begin to see there some of the sweeter fragrances and beauties of the Saviour, because the truth of the

Epistles, the Apostles' doctrine, has equipped us to see them, in the power and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This takes us back into the Epistles once more, where we become increasingly sensitive to what they tell us about the Apostles' doctrine, and the wonderful Saviour of whom they speak. This continuing process is cumulative and for our own soul's sake, altogether apart from any service we are privileged to render.

In Luke 24, we read that the Lord Jesus showed them in all the Scriptures, things concerning Himself. At that time, of course, the scriptures comprised the Old Testament, as we speak of it.

In John 14:26, the promise is given, "The Holy Spirit shall bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you." We have the record of that in the Gospels.

In John 15:26-27, we have, "He shall testify of Me: and ye also shall bear witness." This was fulfilled in the early history of the Christian church, recorded for our benefit in the Book of Acts.

In John 16:13, "He will guide you into all truth." As we have seen, this applies particularly to the Epistles. In the same verse, the Lord said, "He will show you things to come." We get this in the prophetic part of many of the New Testament books, especially in the Book of Revelation.

The overall motive is given in John 16:4: "He shall glorify Me."

We see, then, that we need to be conversant with all the Scriptures, particularly the whole of the New Testament, if we are to gain an intelligent appreciation of the Apostles' doctrine.

A further point is stressed in Ephesians 6:17, "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God." The specific word used there involves, not only the overall scope, but the detail, the fine print, that particular bit that is needed to meet a particular attack of the devil. Therefore we need it all.

Let us now think about the general **SCOPE** of the Apostles' doctrine; that is, major trends developed in the New Testament Epistles. Of the five writers of the epistles, three demand our special attention in this respect, Paul, Peter and John. Each has his own particular emphasis.

Paul	Peter	John
God's disposition (Saviour God)	God's character (Holy, Righteous God)	God's nature (God is love)
God's mind	God's ways	God's heart
Gentiles (the uncircumcision)	Jews (the circumcision)	Both
The church of God	The kingdom of God	The family of God
The purpose and counsel of God	The government of God	The truth of God
The Christian's position	The Christian's condition	Christian relationships
Faith	Hope	Love

We turn, now, to the **SIGNIFICANCE** of the Apostles' doctrine. The Apostles' doctrine GOVERNS and REGULATES the Apostles' fellowship to which all true Christians belong.

In Romans 16:17 Paul warns about those who act "contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned."

In 2 John 9 and 10 we read, "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed."

Now, the **SEQUEL**, the result, the effect of the Apostles' doctrine. The definitive scripture is Isaiah 30:21. "This is the way, walk ye in it." Knowing the way leads to an appropriate lifestyle.

The PRINCIPLES we hold promote appropriate PRACTICE.
 What we BELIEVE affects our BEHAVIOUR.
 Our CREED controls our CONDUCT.
 Our DOCTRINE determines our DUTY.
 Appreciation of our POSITION before God affects our moral CONDITION.

And so we might go on. One thing is sure. The Epistle to the Corinthians teaches us that bad behaviour is bad, very bad. The Epistle to the Galatians teaches us that bad doctrine is even worse, much worse.

We now need to consider the RESOURCES God has made available to us to enable us to learn and continue in the Apostles' doctrine.

First, the HOLY SPIRIT. Consequent upon the ascension of the Lord into heaven, the Holy Spirit has come down from heaven to indwell every true believer on the Lord Jesus Christ. Think again of the verses already quoted about His present work in the believer. "He shall bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you." "He shall testify of Me." "He will guide you into all truth." "He will show you things to come." "He shall glorify Me."

Second, the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures. We need the overall scope, the framework, the scripture of truth. We also need the detail necessary at any particular time. If we haven't read it, we cannot expect the Holy Spirit to draw it to our attention in case of need. Therefore we need to read it all.

Third, and, like the others, extremely important, PRAYER. Prayer is the counterpart to study. First of all, pray for help in the understanding of scripture, then give thanks for help received, and seek grace to put into practice what you now know to be true.

In a secondary way, we can also gain much help from the oral ministry of mature Christian teachers we have learned to respect. Likewise, there is much worthwhile written ministry available to us. In both cases, we need to discern what is helpful and good for our spiritual growth. Even then, we must judge all ministry against the plumbline of the Word of God, and not the other way round.

In drawing towards a close, I feel I should offer a few PRACTICAL HINTS.

- DON'T expect to know everything straight away. As long as we are in this life, we shall, at best, "know in part" (1 Corinthians 13:12).
 - DON'T worry if the Bible is attacked. It is an anvil that has worn out many hammers.
 - DON'T fill your mind and most of your time with such things as pop music, television, hobbies, sport, career advancement, social engagements and the like, and then complain that you cannot enjoy or even understand the Apostle's doctrine.
 - DO read all the scriptures, not just your favourite little bits.
 - DO study regularly, consistently, systematically, to a plan.
 - DO saturate your mind in the scriptures.
 - DO always be willing to learn.
 - DO take every opportunity to be present whenever the Scriptures are to be expounded.
 - DO use a notebook, otherwise you will forget.
- DO follow the well-proven formula: Dig it up, Read it through, Think it over, Write it down, Pray it in, Live it out, Tell it forth.

Remember, the Apostles' doctrine is vital for all Christians, men, women, boys, girls.

Finally, let Scripture itself voice what our RESPONSE to the Apostles' doctrine must be.

Romans 6:17 - Obey from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you

Romans 12:7 - let him that teacheth concentrate on teaching

Romans 15:4 - whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning

1 Timothy 4:13 - give diligent attention to ... doctrine

1 Timothy 4:16 - take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine

Acts 2:42 - let us continue stedfastly in the Apostles' doctrine

John 13:17 - Ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.

May God give us the grace and the stamina to do just that. Amen.

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