



DOCTRINE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

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Good morning and welcome to Let the Bible Speak. Over the past four weeks, we have been examining the church revealed in the New Testament: Its origin, its form, its government, and its membership. Today, we wish to consider its doctrine. I can't think of a question about the church that will provoke more controversy than the question: What does the church believe? The reason, quite obviously, is the religious community is divided in hundreds of ways over what the church should be teaching. Not only are there scores of denominations and religious bodies, but those many organizations and religious traditions differ in belief, name, organization, and practice.

One might say "maybe so, but we are united by the most basic tenets of the gospel and nothing else matters." First, it's wrong to say nothing else matters but I'm not sure it is even correct to say that the religious community is united on "basic tenets of the gospel" however you define such and what you may or may not include within your definition. Rather, people claiming to be the church have been segregated into factions and denominational camps for so many centuries, until some take it for granted that this is the way it was from the beginning. But as Jesus once said in relation to another subject "from the beginning it was not so." Christ and the apostles intended for the church to embrace, preach, and practice "one faith" (Ephesians 4:4; Jude verse 3).

This begs the question: what did the church of the New Testament believe? What constituted truth and sound doctrine? For our beginning text, we go to Acts chapter 2 and the Day of Pentecost, the day the Lord's church began on earth. We read in verses 41 and 42: "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." There may be many disagreements about doctrine, but we will never even begin to sort out any confusion until we determine "where did the doctrine (or teaching) of the New Testament church come from? That will be the theme of today's study.

To some, doctrine is intimidating. They think of the simple gospel as one thing and church doctrine as something entirely different. They try to avoid discussing doctrine because they believe doctrine divides people or doctrine is not all that important or they may think that doctrine ought to be left in the seminary and left out of the pew. But the word “doctrine” simply means “teaching” and the Christian should not try to avoid it but should pursue it. In fact, the church cannot be the church without doctrine. If you have a church without a doctrine, you have a social club or a human organization of some kind – but you don’t have a church.

We learned last week that the church is made up of disciples of Jesus Christ and Jesus told His apostles, when He commissioned them before returning to heaven, to go and make disciples by “teaching and baptizing those they taught.” The church is built upon teaching. Sometimes, the bible calls Christianity “the faith”, and the faith refers to a body of doctrine or teaching. Now then, not only was it teaching that brought people into the church, but the bible also tells us the church continued in teaching or doctrine. In Acts 2:42 we learn that those who were baptized on the Day of Pentecost and were thus added to the church “continued in the apostles’ doctrine...” At least 45 times in the King James Version, the word “doctrine” appears in the New Testament and in many of those occurrences, emphasis is placed upon the importance of that doctrine and of that doctrine being correct and being followed by the church. For example, Jesus went throughout the land during His ministry proclaiming His “doctrine”. When He concluded His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:28, it says: “And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine:” Other translations say, “His teaching”. In John 7:16 Jesus answered them and said, “My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me.” So, Jesus came preaching doctrine and emphasized its authority but saying that His doctrine came from God the Father.

When the apostle later went out into the world preaching the gospel, they were called to account before the Jewish Sanhedrin in Acts 5:28 when they said: “Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!” Later, Paul emphasized the importance of the right doctrine when he told Titus, “But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine.” (Titus 2:1) He likewise exhorted Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:13 “Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.” The bible also repeatedly warns against believing and tolerating false doctrine. For example, in Ephesians 4:14, Paul said that God set up and equipped the church in such a way “that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine...”

So, the bible’s emphasis upon doctrine should tell us how important it was to the early church that its doctrine be pure and carefully preserved and guarded. But where did the church in the New Testament derive its doctrine? Where or to Whom did the first disciples look to as the source of their teaching and what was their rule of faith? What were they charged with guarding and keeping? Well, when Paul, the apostle, wrote to Timothy about his responsibilities as an evangelist he said in 2 Timothy 1:13-14 “Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us.”

Timothy was an evangelist working with and developing the church at Ephesus. Paul wrote to him from the dark and damp prison cell in Rome shortly before he was executed by Nero. Aside from his personal request for Timothy to come visit him one last time, Paul wrote to charge Timothy to keep the faith that he had received; to carefully guard the doctrine Paul had taught him. That doctrine, of course, included the knowledge of the person and redeeming work of Jesus Christ. But not only that but instruction for how he and the church were to live as individuals and function as a church. In his first letter to Timothy a

few years before, Paul told him that he wanted Timothy to know “how to behave himself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God.” (1 Timothy 3:15)

Now, in this second letter, he urges Timothy to hold onto the teaching he had been given. We notice several things:

- 1) He was to “hold fast” the doctrines he had been taught. He had no right to ignore them or to set out to do things his own way, but he was responsible to obey and teach others to obey the things he had been taught.
- 2) The things he had been taught were to serve as a “pattern”. The word pattern means a form or a sketch. It refers to something that is to be traced or conformed to and imitated. Some people try to convince us that there are no patterns in the New Testament and we’re free to do as we see fit but Paul says that the teaching Timothy received was to serve as a pattern for he and the church.
- 3) The thing that was to serve as a pattern was “sound words”. That implies that there are words in religion that aren’t sound. There is doctrine that is not sound because it’s not correct. How can we tell the difference?
- 4) Paul says “sounds words which you have heard from me.” In other words, Timothy was to use Paul’s teaching or doctrine as a pattern for himself and for the church that he was responsible to teach. It mattered where his doctrine came from. No, friend, one way is not as good or as right as another! It does matter where we get our doctrine and what we teach and practice.
- 5) Those teachings he received from Paul were a sacred trust! “Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us.” That phrase “which was committed to you” is one word in the Greek which means “a deposit, a trust, or a thing consigned to one’s faithful keeping.” Paul said the things that he had taught Timothy were being committed to him to keep and to follow.

Now, do you ever hear people suggest that what we really need to be worried about is the Sermon on the Mount or the Golden Rule and just try to follow the words of Jesus (the words written in red) and the rest isn’t as important and we shouldn’t get too mired down and wrapped up in the words of Paul? Well, that’s not what the early church understood. They were taught to respect the words of the apostles as being not only equal to the words of Jesus spoken while He was on earth but as constituting the words of Jesus as He had now spoken them from heaven.

You see, here’s the process or chain of revelation by which the church of the New Testament received its doctrine: Jesus came to earth with a doctrine. He came teaching the things not only concerning the kingdom of Christ itself but the wonderful truths that those in that kingdom would live by and follow. He entrusted those teachings to His disciples who would carry on when He had completed His redemptive work on earth and returned to heaven to receive His kingdom and build His church. In John chapters 14 through 16, shortly before He went to the cross, Jesus promised His disciples, who would be His commissioned apostles in the church, that He would send them the Holy Spirit to teach them all things

and help them to remember all of the things Jesus had spoken while He was with them. (John 14:26) He would guide them (the apostles) into all truth. (John 16:13) Why would He need to do that? Because these apostles would be His channel of revelation to the all of the church. That's why those men (personally selected by Christ) would serve as the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20) and that's why they could claim to be the ambassadors of the King, Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:20) and why they could claim that Christ was speaking through and by them. (2 Corinthians 13:3) The writer of Hebrews stated it this way in Hebrews 2:3-4, "how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, [4] God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?"

So, you see, the teaching the New Testament church was given to follow and practice came from Christ and was delivered through the office of the apostles. They not only preached those things which Christ, by the Holy Spirit, gave them to preach, but they preserved them for the churches throughout the world then and for the centuries to come in their writings, the New Testament. Friend, the only creed the New Testament church was ever given to believe, preach, follow, and practice was the inspired instruction of the apostles of Jesus Christ. To us today, that is the New Testament scriptures.

Now, when you look to any other source for doctrine, division is the result. Some today claim to receive modern revelations from the Holy Spirit and that the church is being supernaturally guided by such. One of the many problems with such a conclusion is which ones do we follow? There are multitudinous people who claim to be supernaturally and extra-biblically led by the Holy Spirit yet they preach different and conflicting doctrines. Which ones should we listen to? One may say "well, whichever ones are in accord with the bible." But doesn't that defeat the purpose? If the bible already says it, then why do we need a separate revelation? Why not just point to what the bible already says? You see, the apostles received divine revelation and spoke by inspiration, they demonstrated and proved it by performing miracles which no man has the power to do today.

And then there are those who believe the church should have a written creed to unite around. By written creed, I mean a creed stated and assembled by the church distinct from the scriptures themselves. Well, which one? We've seen the Westminster Confession, the Philadelphia Confession, The Apostles' Creed (and I'm talking about the one distinct from the actual New Testament itself) Which one? Now, I know, people will rush to say that such creeds are simply an organization and restating of bible truth, but I have a hard time believing that because if you read and believe the various creeds, you'll come away with different conclusions about things. Friend, if your church creed simply says what the bible says, then why do you need the creed? If your creed says MORE than the bible says, it says too much. If it says less than the bible says, it doesn't say enough. If it says exactly what the bible says, no more and no less, then why not just take the bible itself? Someone else may say, but it's no different than a tract you distribute or a sermon you preach about the bible. Oh, but it is. My sermon has no authority outside of the bible it contains. A tract may serve (like a sermon) to explain the teaching of the bible but unlike a humanly written church creed, one doesn't have to confess my sermon or confess a tract and one isn't expected to recite my sermon to be in good standing with the church. Yes, we must all abide in the truth but it's the truth because it's what the bible says and not what a creed, tract, sermon, or set of bylaws may say. The creeds which claim to foster unity are ironically the source of division. The church in the New Testament church followed no such creed.

Now, I know some point to Acts 15 when the elders and apostles came together at Jerusalem to discuss how to integrate Gentiles into the Jewish church but the keyword there is "apostles". This was during

the age when Christ's revelation was just beginning, and the apostles (in their person) were overseeing the development of the infant church. It is in no way parallel to men today assembling a creed for others to follow. The New Testament is our creed. The apostles teaching in the New Testament is our creed if we are like the New Testament church. 2 Timothy 3:16 says "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."

Now, very quickly, what did the doctrine of the New Testament church consist of? It certainly was focused upon the person and the work of Jesus Christ on earth and now in heaven. It was the teaching of Christ crucified, risen again, and now exalted as Lord and King. (Acts 2; 1 Corinthians 15). It included how one was justified thru faith in Christ and obedience to His gospel. Speaking of the Roman's baptism into Christ, Paul said in Romans 6:17 "But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered." It includes the daily conduct and lifestyle of the Christian including admonishments for holy living and warnings against sinful and spiritually compromising conduct. It included way the church should conduct itself in its government, organization, work, and worship. It includes the believer's future hope of life in the world to come. It is not only the apostles teaching ABOUT Christ, but it is also the teaching OF Christ taught and enforced by the apostles in Christ's kingdom.

And then, are ALL churches expected to follow the same doctrine? Well, listen to Paul as he wrote to Corinth. 1 Corinthians 4:17 "For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church." You see, Paul didn't allow that one church would believe one thing and another church believe something else.

And finally, should we in the 21st century be concerned about following the same doctrine as the church in the first century today? Well, we turn to 2 Peter 1:12-15 where Peter wrote: "For this reason I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know and are established in the present truth. Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding you, knowing that shortly I must put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. Moreover I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease." The apostle Peter expected the church to remember and follow his inspired teaching long after his death. I would remind you, my friend, that the doctrine of the church is critically important. It is to be the right doctrine. We should strive to know the truth and believe and practice ONLY the truth. 2 John 1:9 "Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son." 1 Timothy 1:3 "As I urged you when I went into Macedonia—remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine." If we wish to imitate the church of the New Testament, and that's the only church Jesus established and authorized, we must be committed to learning and following the same doctrine they believed and followed.

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