

REAFFIRMING THE APOSTOLIC DOCTRINE IN MODERN PLURALISTIC CONTEXT

"And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine ..." (Acts 2:42)

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Introduction

Six blind men were touching an elephant. The first blind man was holding the elephant's leg. He said, "I think an elephant is like the trunk of a great tree." The second blind man disagreed. While holding the elephant's trunk he said, "I believe an elephant is like a large snake," The third blind man was holding the tail. He said, "I think an elephant is like a broom." The fourth blind man was touching the tusk. He said, "No, an elephant is like rod." The fifth blind man disagreed and he said, "An elephant is like a fan," he was holding the ear. The sixth blind man believed they were all wrong. "An elephant is like a great wall," he exclaimed. He was touching the elephant's side. Each blind man was convinced he was right and others were wrong without ever realizing they were all touching the same elephant.

Some believe the blind men in this parable represent the major religions of the world, each in contact with the same "elephant" without knowing it. And each ones of them are touching the one and same elephant though it looks different. But in the context of searching for the true religion, while some religions tells us that we are part of God but because of ignorance we do not know that we are god and the main goal of these religions is to to become like God again through the knowledge that we are god. So, thinking about religion, it's not the same with the six blind men touching the same elephant, all the world's religions are not leading to the same doctrine leading to the the true living God. We must know that there is only one God and there is only one way to have a fellowship with Him. Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). So, we can attain salvation through Jesus only, there is no other way of salvation apart from Jesus. So let us try to reaffirm the apostolic doctrine in this pluralistic post modern world.

The Apostles

The Greek word *apostolos* is used more than 80 times in the New Testament. It derives from the very common verb *apostello*¹ (meaning to send). Since *apostello* seems frequently to mean 'to send with a particular purpose', as distinct from the neutral *pempo* (meaning 'I send'), the force of *apostalos* is probably 'one commissioned' - it is implied by Christ. Rengstorf has elaborated the theory that the theory that it reflects the Jewish *saliah* (שליח meaning "stretch out", "send"), an accredited representative of religious authority,

¹ But in non-Christian Greek, after Herodotus in the 5th Century, there are few recorded cases where it means 'a person sent', and it generally means 'fleet', or perhaps occasionally 'admiral'.

entrusted with messages and money and empowered to act on behalf of the authority.² Therefore, when we talk about the word Apostle within the church circle, we mainly refer to the twelve Apostles (the disciples of Jesus).³ It is obvious that the Twelve chosen by Jesus are a select company and occupy a unique place in God's purposes for the Church because throughout Scripture they are referred to as "the Twelve", a set number neither to be added to nor subtracted from (See, for example, Matt. 10:2; 26:14; Mark 9:35; Luke 18:31; Acts 6:2; 1Cor. 15:5). Their uniqueness is clarified by the fact that Jesus tells them that, in the age to come, they will sit upon twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28).⁴

Paul also counted himself among the twelve, and James the brother of Jesus and Barnabas were also counted as an apostle (I Kor 15: 7; Gal 1: 19).⁵ Even though it is clear from Paul's epistles that he was convinced of his equal status with the Twelve (see 2 Cor. 11:5), he eventually traveled to Jerusalem and presented to them the gospel he preached for their corroboration (Gal. 2:1-2). He apparently deemed it necessary to confirm that the gospel he was preaching to the Gentiles was in accord with the original eyewitness accounts of the Twelve and the teaching they had personally received from the Lord (Gal. 2:1-2). The Twelve accepted him and affirmed the Gospel that he was preaching.

Apostolic Doctrine

Apostolic doctrine, therefore, is not the new and novel teachings of someone who calls himself/herself an apostle. Apostolic doctrine is the message of Jesus, His redemptive work, and His call to selfless discipleship that is found in the 27 books of the New Testament.⁶ It is the doctrine taught by the Apostle of Jesus that is handed over to the leaders of the church when all the Apostles died. It is time that we asked ourselves, "Are we continuing in the apostles' doctrine?"

In Ephesians 2:20-22 we see, *"And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are built together for an habitation of God through the Spirit."* Jesus Christ, being the Chief Apostle and the Chief Cornerstone,

2 A. S. Wood, 'Apostle' in the *New Bible Dictionary* edited by I. H. Marshall et. al., *New Bible Ditionary*, Third ed. (Secunderabad: OM Books, 2005), 58.

3 Revd. Chuauthuama, "Apostol" in *Bible Thumal Hrilhfhahna:Dictionary of Biblical Terms* edited by Revd Chuauthuama (Kolkotta: Revd Chuauthuama, 2008), 36.

4 Revd. Chuauthuama, "Apostol" in *Zotawng Bible Dictionary* edited by Revd Chuauthuama (Guwahati: Revd Chuauthuama, 20011), 61.

5 Revd. Chuauthuama, "Apostol" in *Zotawng Bible Dictionary...*, 61.

6 <http://www.pneumafoundation.org/article.jsp?article=/EHyatt-WhatIsApostolicDoctrine.xml> as on 12.9.2013

along with His apostles and prophets laid the foundation of the doctrine of the church that seemed to almost become extinct through the dark ages and many generations due to religious mindsets.

The “apostles' doctrine” of Acts 2:42 is a reference to the original eyewitness accounts of Jesus by the 12 apostles. The so-called ‘apostle’s doctrine’ consist of three parts:⁷

- a) that Jesus was the Christ (Acts 3:13-18)
- b) that He rose from the dead (Acts 1:22; 2:24, 32)
- c) that salvation was by faith in His name (Acts 2:38; 3:16; 4:12)

Paul's writings were later added to this original testimony and, with the addition of James, Jude, Hebrews, 1 & 2 Peter , 1, 2, & 3 John , and Revelation there came into existence what we know as the New Testament canon.

Now, let us study what the Apostles are teaching from the Bible:

i) The Apostles Baptized in the Name of Jesus: Every time the Bible records the name or formula associated with an actual baptism in the New Testament church, it describes the name Jesus. All five such accounts occur in the Book of Acts, the history book of the early church.⁸ The Book of Acts is the historical record of how the apostles are fulfilling the commands of Jesus, and in this book we can see in what name they baptized.

On the first Day of Pentecost after the ascension of Jesus, the Holy Spirit baptized the waiting 120 disciples. When they were filled with the Spirit, they began to speak miraculously in languages they had never learned, as the Spirit gave the utterance, and this miracle attracted a large multitude. Then the apostle Peter, with the support of the other eleven apostles, preached the gospel to the thousands of curious onlookers (Acts 2:14). He preached the simple gospel message, namely, the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:22-36; I Corinthians 15:1-4). His message culminated with the proclamation, “God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36).⁹ The result was intense inner pain: they were *cut to the heart*, feeling the anguish and despair of “the brokenhearted”. Peter’s answer was straightforward, “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized” (Acts 2:41). And we know that three thousands who believed the preaching of Peter received baptism in Jesus’ name.

The Book of Acts records how the apostolic church carried out the Lord’s expectation and command regarding baptism. When the Samaritans believed

⁷ Herbert Lockyer, *All the Doctrines of the Bible* (Secunderabad: OM Books, 2003), 1.

⁸ David. K. Bernard, *In The Name of Jesus* (Hazelwood, MO: World Aflame Press, 1998), 41.

⁹ David. K. Bernard, *In The Name of Jesus ...*, 42.

the preaching of Philip they too were baptized in the name of Jesus (Acts 8:12, 16). The Ethiopian eunuch, Saul of Tarsus, Cornelius, Lydia of Thyatira, the Philippian jailer, the Corinthians, and John's disciples at Ephesus were all baptized when they heard and believed the preaching of the gospel (Acts 8:35-38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:15; 16:33; 18:8; 19:5). Even though Cornelius and his household had received the Holy Ghost, Peter "commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord" (Acts 10:47-48). Ananias commanded Paul to be baptized in the name of the Lord (Acts 22:16).¹⁰ We do not find any record in the New Testament church where any convert or believer was baptized in any other way except in the name of Jesus.

ii) The Apostles taught about the importance of receiving the Holy Ghost: Again, in the Book of Acts, we see that the church during the time of the Apostles is receiving the Holy Spirit with the initial evidence of speaking in tongues. Before his ascension Jesus said, "Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence" (Acts 1:5). When the first Pentecostal revival came, the 120 receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit and they spoke in tongues (Acts 2). This experience did not stop in Jerusalem, soon those in Samaria received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17).

The Book of Acts describes the baptism of the Spirit in many ways: "filled with the Holy Ghost" (2:4); "the promise of the Holy Ghost" (2:33); "the gift of the Holy Ghost" (2:38); "the Holy Ghost fell on all them" (10:44); "poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost" (10:45); "received the Holy Ghost" (10:47); and "the Holy Ghost came on them" (19:6). The epistles explain that the Holy Spirit dwells in us (Romans 8:9).¹¹

Jesus both promised the Spirit baptism and commanded His disciples to receive the Spirit, as the following quotations demonstrate: In Luke 11:13 he says, "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" And in John 3:5 we see Jesus saying, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." In John 4:14 Jesus says, "But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life." The next quotation indicates that Jesus spoke of the Spirit outpouring. In John 7:37-39 we see Jesus saying, "In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spoke he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified)."

¹⁰ David. K. Bernard, *The New Birth* (Hazelwood, MO: World Aflame Press, 1984), 126.

¹¹ David. K. Bernard, *The New Birth ...*, 188.

Peter on the Day of Pentecost did not speak against the new experience (i.e. receiving the Holy Spirit Baptism with speaking in tongues), rather he advocate it. And the apostle Paul also exhorted the Ephesians church to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:8). So, as the apostles themselves are receiving the Holy Ghost and are teaching their contemporary, the church today cannot just ignore it.

iii) The Apostolic Church believed that God is one and the name is Jesus: In this modern pluralistic context, there are some denominations believing in the plurality of individuals in the Godhead. Neither the term 'Three Persons' nor 'Trinity' can be found in the Bible. These terms were extracted from Latin, not from Hebrew, Chaldean or Greek. If a Latin word or any word alters the intent and meaning of the original Scriptures, then other words must be found and used. Why not simply say as both the Old and New Testaments do: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD." "God is One" (Deut. 6:4 and Galatians 3:20).¹²

Tertullian was the first to assert clearly the tri-personality of God, and to maintain the substantial unity of the three Persons. But even he did not reach a clear statement of the doctrine of the Trinity.¹³ The apostle John teaches us in John 1 that, the Word is God's self-revelation, self-expression, or self-disclosure. Before the Incarnation, the Word was the thought, plan, reason, or mind of God. In the beginning, the Word was with God, not as a distinct person but as God Himself—pertaining to God much as a man and his word. "The Word was God Himself" (John 1:1, Amplified Bible). In the fullness of time God put flesh on the Word; He revealed Himself in flesh. In the person of Jesus Christ, "the Word was made flesh" (John 1:14). "God was manifest in the flesh" (I Timothy 3:16). The eternal Word was revealed in the begotten Son.¹⁴

Since most of the first Christians were all Jews, they presented their message to the Gentiles also. The early church never taught or gives a clue towards the trinitarian teachings, but they plainly believe in one God. The Apostles never know and never teach about trinity and there is no record about it. The Apostle James wrote, "Thou believest that there is one God, thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble" (James 2:19). Paul also wrote about the oneness of God in his epistles - "There is but one God"(I Cor 8:6); "For there is one God" (I Tim 2:5); "God is one" (Gal 3:2). And in the Gospel of John we could see that the name of God was Jesus because Jesus often identified

12 Kenneth V Reeves, *The Godhead*, 7th ed. (Hazelwood, MO:Word Aflame Press, 1962), 49.

13 Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (London,: Banner of Truth, 1996), 83.

14 David K. Bernard, *Oneness and Trinity, AD 100-300:The Doctrine of God in Ancient Christian Writings* (Hazelwood, MO: World Aflame Press, 1998), 11-12.

Himself as the Old Testament God. In John 8:24 we see Jesus saying, "I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins." And in John 12:45 we see Jesus saying, "And he that seeth me seeth him that sent me." In John 10:30 again Jesus says, "I and my Father are one." So, even from these few passages we could see that Jesus was the Old Testament God. And this was being taught by the apostles.

New Teachings in Modern Pluralistic World

There are certain teachings that are coming up in this modern pluralistic world which tries to invent a new way of salvation for man. Some people are using the Bible trying to seek another way of salvation which was not taught by Jesus Christ. Some of those are as follows:

1. Universalism: Universalism is the belief that eventually all human beings will be saved.¹⁵ A very concise definition of "Christian Universalism" was given by Thomas Sawyer as: "Universalism," in its simple and proper theological sense, is the doctrine of universal salvation; or in other words, of the final holiness and happiness of all humans, to be effected by the grace of God, through the ministry of his Son, Jesus Christ. **Christian Universalism** is also known as **Universal Reconciliation**.¹⁶ Universalism is the theological view arguing that all persons will ultimately be saved. Some also teach that there is no such thing as a literal hell or eternal punishment.¹⁷ This doctrine is also known as *apocatastasis*, that hell is in essence purgative and therefore temporary and that all intelligent beings will therefore in the end will be saved.¹⁸

The basic faith statements of Christian Universalism are:¹⁹

i) The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments contain a revelation of the character of God, and of the duty, interest, and final destination of mankind.

ii) there is one God, whose nature is love; revealed in one Lord Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.

15 _____, 'Universalism' in *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Church Worldwide* edited by William A. Dryness and Veli-Matti Karkkainen (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2008), 914.

16 <http://www.auburn.edu/~allenkc/chr-univ.html>. Retrieved on 19.10.2013.

17 <http://www.theopedia.com/Universalism>. Retrieved on 10.9.2013.

18 _____, 'Universalism' in *Dictionary of the Christian Church* edited by F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone (Massachusetts, USA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 1667.

19 <http://www.auburn.edu/~allenkc/chr-univ.html>. Retrieved on 19.10.2013.

iii) We believe, that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected; and that believers ought to maintain order, and practice good works, for these things are good and profitable unto men.

iv) God, as the moral governor of the universe, will bestow righteous and equitable rewards and punishments upon all mankind according to their several characters or deserts; but that all punishment will be remedial, and consequently limited.

2. Pluralism: Different interpretations of religious pluralism have been developed. In particular, M.M. Thomas distinguishes between two kinds of religious pluralism: 1) Scientific approach, which attempts to understand the diverse religious beliefs in its various expressions through rational and comparative approaches; and 2) confessional which evaluates other religions from a particular faith perspective.²⁰ Pluralism acknowledges world religions as different paths to the same reality. Pluralism in the Christian theology of religions seeks to draw the faiths of the world religious past in a mutual recognition of one another's truths and values, in order for truth itself to come into proper focus.²¹ One of the proponent of religious pluralism, Stanley Samartha's understanding of the function of the Holy Spirit was that the Spirit of God cannot be limited to the church or to the individual believer but that the Spirit is present and active in the world.

Another proponent of religious pluralism, John Hick suggested that each of world's religions should be viewed as "different human responses to one divine Reality". In *An Interpretation of Religion* Hick presents a comprehensive theory that attempts to explain all religious phenomena. Hick refers to his theory as a "pluralistic hypothesis." Hick's hypothesis is that all religions are culturally conditioned responses to the same ultimate reality.²²

3. Trinitarianism: Between 313 - 451 AD, theological controversies resulted in councils attempting to resolve the issues by formulating creeds. These councils were held where the universal or ecumenical council leaders of the church were gathered together to resolve conflicts.²³ Though Tertullian had provided the church with the formula that God is one substance, consisting in three persons, he had by no means given the world a complete

20 M.M. Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake: Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Pluralism*, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987), 3-7.

21 Geomon K. George, *Religious Pluralism: Challenges for Pentecostalism in India* (Bangalore: Centre for Contemporary Christianity, 2006), 18.

22 John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, Connecticut.: Yale University Press, 1989), np.

23 Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), 125.

understanding of the Trinity. Indeed, this doctrine puzzled the greatest theologians.²⁴

The threat from the state forced the church to internal unity in order to present united front. Then, too, Constantine's attempt to unify the the empire in order to save classical civilization meant that the church had to have a unified body of dogma if it was to be the cement to hold the body politics together. One empire must have one dogma. The method adopted by the church to resolve the vital differences of opinion concerning the teachings of the scriptures was ecumenical or universal council, usually called and presided over by the Roman emperor.²⁵

The Council of Nicea was called in AD 325 to settle the dispute over the tri-personality of God who is of one substance. Then the Council adopted the following statement: 'we believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of thing visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, begotten not made, being of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father'.²⁶ But then, some church leaders are not satisfy with these creed and controversy continues among the theologians. When, in AD 381, the general Council of Constantinople met, it declared its approval of the Nicene Creed and under the guidance of Gregory of Nazianzus accepted the following formula respecting the Holy Spirit: 'And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Life-giving, who proceeds from the Father, who is to be glorified with the father and the Son, and who speaks through the prophets.'²⁷

Though the Council of Nicea had proclaimed that Jesus was fully God, the church had yet to understand His human nature. Therefore there is another controversy that creeps in the church yet again - whether Jesus is fully human or not. Therefore another ecumenical Council was called in Chalcedon in 451 AD where nearly four hundred bishops, more than any previous ones met. In this Chalcedonian definition Christ is "acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation...the characteristic property of each nature being preserved, and coming together to form one person."²⁸ Most of the controversies were ended by 451 AD, but they left a definite impact on the Christian church.²⁹

24 A. Kenneth Curtis, J. Stephen Lang, and Randy Petersen, *The 100 Most Important Events in Christian History*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Revell, 1998), 34.

25 Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*,...,126.

26 Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (London,: Banner of Truth, 1996), 86-87.

27 Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*...,90-91.

28 A. Kenneth Curtis, J. Stephen Lang, and Randy Petersen, *The 100 Most Important Events in Christian History*,..., 50.

Reaffirming the Apostolic Doctrine

The churches have been invaded by ideas from other religions and the occult. In some ways all the influences from the past have common characteristics and have been combined by false teachers into doctrines that have caused many to be led into apostasy. The Bible tells us we are to keep the Faith, to guard the church against false doctrines. It is amazing that the Church doctrines and teaching nowadays are manmade, not God-made. All the Councils that we have just mentioned are convened by emperors, theologies were manmade. And the proponents of these theologies were using the same Bible we used. But let us not forget that even Satan used the same Scripture Jesus used to tempt Jesus.

In I Timothy 4:16, we see, "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers," so, let us be careful in what we teach and what we say. Paul denounces the heresy forcefully at the outset by introducing a contrast between true and false. False teachers are contrasted with Paul. False doctrine and misuse of the law are contrasted with the genuine gospel. And opening and closing charges to Timothy bracket this contrast. This juxtaposing of true and false and instructions to Timothy will carry on through the whole of the letter.

If we read, 2 Timothy 1:13-18, it says, "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. This you know, that all those in Asia have turned away from me, among whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes. The Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain; but when he arrived in Rome, he sought me out very zealously and found me. The Lord grant to him that he may find mercy from the Lord in that Day--and you know very well how many ways he ministered to me at Ephesus." Here, "Hold fast" is a command, let's hold on to the sound doctrine. Let us not change our stand just because of the manmade theologies, but the theology made by Jesus himself. Let us teach what the apostle teach, not what the new age theologians invent.

Conclusion

The situation is so dire today in what is left of Christendom, that if you are not careful you can be deceived even if you consider yourself to be one of the elect. The Bible says that if we put our faith in another gospel, another Jesus, another Spirit we have believed in vain. If your belief system gets corrupted, at some point you are no longer believing in the true Jesus Christ, but another 'Jesus'. The churches have been invaded by ideas from other religions and the occult. In some ways all the influences from the past have

29 Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries...*,132.

common characteristics and have been combined by false teachers into doctrines that have cause many to be led into apostasy.

Let us remind ourselves that there is only one way to heaven, i.e. through Christ as he himself is the only way. And even though there are many doctrines nowadays, let us see whether it is in tune with the apostolic doctrine or not. Are they same with what we see in the Gospel and the book of Acts. If they are not same, then it is doubtful. The apostle baptized in Jesus name, received the Holy Spirit with the initial evidence of speaking in tongues and believed that Jesus is God. If we are not putting our foot on the same shoe as the apostles are, then we might be far away from God. So, let us stand firm in the sound doctrine. Let us continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine as the early church do (Acts 2:42).