

THE CHURCH AT JERUSALEM

David C.F. Wright, DD

The book of Acts is, primarily, a history book and not a book of doctrine. It has been said that Christian doctrine is never in narrative form but rather, it is what is said or written by the Lord or the apostles and, of course, much of it is written in the epistles.

When doctrine is established it does not vary. It remains the same. Yet church practises vary from one assembly to another and from one church to another so such practises cannot be called doctrines or truth.

The book of Acts is transitional. Doctrine and church policy were then undergoing development as the church was a new organisation formed on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. For example, in Acts 11 the church held a council meeting in Jerusalem to discuss whether Gentiles could be saved and if so, did they first have to become Jews by circumcision? For about the first nine chapters of Acts all recorded converts were Jewish including the Ethiopian eunuch who was a proselyte. The transitional period developed so that by Acts 10 it included teaching for Gentile believers as well.

It is important for us to study the early church and, particularly, the first church of all, the one at Jerusalem. There are several reasons; perhaps the most significant one is that its leaders knew the Lord Jesus Christ personally both before and after the resurrection. He told them that when the Holy Spirit came He would bring to their remembrance what He, the Lord Jesus, had taught them.

At His ascension, the Lord instructed His disciples to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the promise of the Father, the baptism in the Holy Spirit, which would occur “not many days hence” thus proving it was an historical one-off event just as the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ were one-off events. The baptism in the Spirit gave birth to the church and birth happens only once.

On this momentous Day of Pentecost, Jerusalem was full of Jews having come to the feast from various lands with their many different languages. The God-given gift of tongues (which notice were known languages and dialects not ecstatic speech or gibberish) were employed by the apostles to speak the wonderful words of God.

We should spend a few moments noting the sermon Peter preached and consider how it is an excellent model for proclaiming the Gospel today. Observe the following:

1. It was based on Scripture, the Word of God itself (verses 16 and 25).
2. It highlighted the death of Christ (verse 23) and man’s guilt.
3. It emphasised the resurrection (verse 24) - God’s vindication.
4. It preached salvation (verse 21) - God’s Will and man’s need.
5. It challenged with the need of a personal response (verse 38) -Repent and be baptised.

This is the Gospel to preach; and the Gospel is Christ. However, it must be realised that it is here preached exclusively to Jews:

Ye men of Judea verse 14

Ye men of Israel verse 22

Ye have crucified verse 23

The Jews accepted responsibility for the crucifixion of Christ, the most heinous sin of all time. Gentiles are never charged with being responsible for Christ's death.

Peter's magnificent sermon to these Jews resulted in their being pricked in their hearts (verse 37), their repentance and baptisms with the minimum of delay (verse 41). This was a staggering day for Jews. Never a day like it.

Verse 41 presents problems to some people. It should be noted that this verse does not say that the 3,000 converts were baptised on the same day as being saved. Of course that is possible but the only New Testament person known to have been baptised on the day of his conversion was the Ethiopian of Acts 8. However, six chapters earlier we can say that these baptisms had little delay for many were visitors to Jerusalem who had to return home. What is absolutely clear is that their eagerness to be baptised was due to the realisation of the gravity of their sin in putting to death their Messiah. The conditions here were unparalleled.

This verse is also the cause of, what might be, some dubious teaching. Some assert that as baptism is mentioned before the words 'being added' that this means that no one can normally join an assembly of Christians and break bread until they are first baptised and some quote the Ethiopian saying, "What doth hinder me to be baptised?" as, "Hurry up. Get baptised and then you can join our assembly and come into fellowship and break bread with us."

In verse 47 'added to the church' is the expression used although some Greek texts omit the word 'church'. In Acts 5 verse 14 and Acts 11 verse 24 converts are said to be 'added to the Lord' and that must mean to the Lord's Body, the One Church of which all believers become members at the moment of their conversion. In Acts 2 there was the beginning of the first assembly and for a short while the One Body consisted entirely of this one assembly of believers at Jerusalem.

It must be emphasised that people are added to the Lord and join the Body at conversion. Obviously this is so. The believers in Acts 2 were added to the Lord at conversion not hours or days later when they were baptised. Membership of the Body (being added to the Lord and to the One Church) evidently precedes baptism.

Arthur Clarke writes, "To be a member of the body there must be evidence of salvation, soundness of doctrine and consistency in life. Baptism is no test. An unbaptised believer is as much a child of God as a baptised one. Baptism is no more essential to membership of the body than it is to salvation."

Let me quote William MacDonald, 'Baptism is nowhere said to be the door of the assembly, though it is true that all believers should be baptised, but the moment we say that a believer must be baptised in order to be received into the fellowship of a local assembly we have gone beyond the Word.'

R.E. Harlow says, "While the Lord commands believers to be baptised, baptism is not the uniform you must wear before breaking bread in a local assembly. Greater emphasis should be put on the type of life being lived."

Arthur Clarke again, "In present circumstances it is advisable to have evidence of true repentance before baptising. In many mission fields, as well as at home, this has been found absolutely necessary."

We must distinguish between doctrine, which does not vary, and practises of assemblies whose procedures vary. Procedures are not doctrines.

I was present at the conversion of a 13 year-old. She quickly saw that she should be baptised but her non-Christian parents opposed it. Being a minor she rightly submitted to her parents. Yet she asked if she could join the assembly and break bread in obedience to the command of the Lord Jesus. It would

have been wrong to refuse her and prevent her obedience to the Word of God.

From verse 42 onwards notice the practice of the disciples

1. They continued in the apostles' doctrine. Doctrine always comes before practise. It is vital. It governs behaviour, or should do. Of course, some apostolic teaching is unpopular today. Some of us have been exercised lately about being sober, in the sense of being serious, since we are often flippant and, perhaps, irreverent. While Christians should not be miserable they are to be sensible and remember that they are called to holiness.
2. Fellowship. This is a much abused word. People say it just means sharing. I do not agree. Two Christians playing piano duets are sharing but that is not fellowship. Neither is fellowship gossip, tea and cake, Fellowship is always spiritual. It is sharing the things of Christ by communication, participation and mutual benefit.

When someone joins an assembly they are sometimes said to be 'received into fellowship'. That is very misleading. I was converted in June 1960 and was immediately in the Body of Christ and in fellowship with God. I joined this assembly in November 1984, 24 years later. It would be foolish to say that for the first 24 years of my Christian life I was not in fellowship.

We need fellowship with each other. And that is not socialising. It is sharing the things of Christ. Standing together is strength. The writer to the Hebrews warns against the neglect of assembling together. We need the enthusiasm of young believers, the dependability of middle age and the experience of older believers. The assembly should welcome believers of all ages and their children. Assemblies are not geriatric wards or kindergartens. Nor are they exclusive clubs where you abide by man-made rules which are not found in the New Testament.

3. Breaking of Bread. They remembered the Lord in His appointed way. They did what the Lord commanded. They obeyed Him.
4. Prayers. Public prayer is thought to be meant here. They had a desire to pray together.

Consequently fear came upon every soul. If this refers to the believers then this fear is the reverence, respect and dignity for the Lord. It is holiness and sanctification, being set apart for God and weren't they just! This was new to them and thrilling. Life would never be the same again.

In verse 45 possessions were sold to meet the needs of new converts, to relieve the plight of the poor and to help the widows. This was an expression of kindness and love motivated by the realisation of Christ's love for them. Do something in Christian service for your own ends and it will not last. It is only what is done for Christ and exclusively for His Glory that will last, a thought repeated in 4 verse 34.

It is obvious, but perhaps I should add, that both men and women were saved; people were 'added'.

Chapter 3 deals with the healing of a lame man and it is worth noting that Peter preached Christ, the resurrection, the need of a response, and conversion (verse 26).

The following chapter introduces the persecution of Christians by the Sadducees, rulers, elders and scribes. Peter and John stand before their accusers and proclaim Christ. In verse 4 we read 5,000 believed. No wonder in verse 31 it says that the preaching was with boldness and courage; it was not in their own power though great grace was upon them (verse 33). Grace here means beauty. Consequently, we sometimes sing, 'Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me'.

But in chapter 5 we read of the deception of Ananias and Sapphira. They sold land and donated part of the proceeds saying that it represented the total proceeds. Perhaps they wanted to be looked up to and desired prominence; perhaps they were jealous of the admiration shown to other donors. Jealousy and pride are evil; they destroy relationships and assemblies since these thoughts are only a step away from hatred and malice.

Ananias and Sapphira both died at the hand of God. Remember that these were exceptional days with corresponding results as, indeed, was the Day of Pentecost. It is not the norm for today; but Ananias and Sapphira are still an example of the principle that discipline in the church is essential when someone is evidently out of order. We should remind ourselves that a private offence calls for private discipline; a public offence for public discipline when the whole assembly and the offender are to be present. There are always two sides to a story and both must be heard from the actual persons themselves before any judgement or conclusion can be given.

Chapter 6 deals with the appointment of deacons to deal with practical needs. Seven men were chosen. All had Greek names because it was the Grecian Jews who brought the complaint to the apostles. Note elders give themselves to prayer and ministry of the Word (verse 4).

One such deacon was Stephen, full of faith, power and wonders. Religious people became jealous of him. He was regarded as a rival and therefore a threat. Sadly today, Christians are persecuted and, at times by fellow Christians, who can display arrogance, jealousy and prejudice. Many fear rivals usually because they are more gifted and spiritual. Even with such persecution it is good to read verse 7 which records the conversion of many priests.

In Acts 8 the church suffers further persecution from one Saul of Tarsus and as a result believers are scattered. But this is God's Will. The enmity of Saul, a zealous and religious man, is severe but widespread evangelism follows and Saul is converted.

Following the events of chapter 10 a council meeting takes place in Jerusalem. Peter had witnessed the conversion of a Roman soldier, Cornelius. He was a Gentile! Could salvation be appropriated by non-Jews? Eventually in chapter 11 verse 18 the verdict is reached that God hath granted repentance to the Gentiles.

And so you and I are included. Salvation is possible to all men. It is not exclusive but inclusive and in that we rejoice.

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(This is the text of a recorded address given at the Gospel Hall, Shanklin in Spring 1990)

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