

From ACTS 15-- The Formation of a Doctrine
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From Acts 15:1-35. THE FORMATION OF A DOCTRINE

PART 1: THE PROBLEM v.1-6.

#1. "Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved'" v.1

#2. This was a distinct contradiction to the gospel message first received. The arrival of those men must have created doubts about the salvation of the Gentiles and induced more questions than answers. There was "great dissension and debate" v.2.

#3. Upon arrival in Jerusalem, "The apostles and the elders met together to look into this matter" v.6.

#4. Why all the debate and tentative language? The leaders were looking for something that, at that time, they did not have: *A doctrine of salvation by grace* .

#5. A doctrine is an application of revealed truth to human behavior in the world.

#6. In the formation of doctrine, the situation does not shape the doctrine (teaching), rather, doctrine shapes one's understanding of the situation and one's behavior in it.

#7. Doctrine springs from the grammatical structure of revelation. It is not generated by consensus.

#8. Biblical doctrines resolve confusion and focus understanding. The leaders in Jerusalem and the Gentile believers were trying to resolve an issue that was tearing the churches apart.

#9. The formation of a doctrine is the pursuit of a distinct language manifold, founded upon the word of God, that carries the mind beyond human vagary. Men of faith pursue the formation of true doctrine. There is nothing subjective about it.

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PART 2: THE RECIPROCAL: GENERATOR OF DOCTRINE v.7-18.

#1. At the conference in Jerusalem, Peter and James demonstrated the power of this reciprocal in the formation of true, reliable doctrine.

#2. "...Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe" v.7. And that was confirmed by the "Holy Spirit" v.8. Peter's line of reasoning was rooted in revelation.

#3. James continued that direction of development. "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written" v.14, 15. Then James refers to Amos 9:11, 12 cited in v.16-18.

#4. These two leaders traced the structure of the reciprocal. It begins with the revelation, the word of God. Revelation comes to bear upon human language, giving it its shape. That is the first arm of the reciprocal. Then that language, so structured, refers back to the word of God that generated it. The second arm of the reciprocal.

#5. The formation of doctrine is that reciprocal. True and reliable doctrine is the fruit of that reciprocal.

#6. The purpose of Bible study is the formation of doctrine. Without doctrine formation our use of scripture is severely limited. With it, the Bible suddenly applies to the totality of human experience.

#7. Out of this reciprocal came the resolving doctrine of salvation by grace.

#8. "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are" v.11.

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PART 3: THE RANGE OF DOCTRINE.

#1. There must be *a doctrine of understanding*. That is to say, a doctrine as to how Christians should seek to understand any or every element of human lived experience.

#2. Doctrine connects revelation, scripture to time, life and history. It is the way of making sense of our experience. Inherently, then, doctrine sets priorities.

#3. The apostles and elders had found the doctrine of salvation by grace and the priorities that go with it.

#4. The doctrinal priorities:

- a) Do not put God to the test by willful ignorance v.10.
- b) Bring the doctrine to bear on personal speech, thought and behavior v.11.
- c) Refer to the totality of revelation v.13-18.
- d) Do not trouble those Gentiles turning to Christ v.19. Do not encumber their nascent faith.

e) Gentile believers should not exacerbate the peace of their Jewish brethren by thoughtless behavior v.20.

#5. The generation of doctrine should be thought of as an advent (the arrival of something notable). The advent of doctrinal truth changes everything.

#6. The letter to the Gentile churches announced the advent of the doctrine of salvation by grace v.23-29. The possibility of salvation by works was thus discredited.

#7. The advent of doctrine dispels ambiguity, on the one hand and discredits its opposition on the other.

#8. Without doctrine, we are in a state of free-fall through human experience. No person of biblical faith can tolerate that. The churches in Acts 15 had reached a necessary point. Either doctrine predominates or men do.

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PART 4: WE NEED MORE DOCTRINE, NEW DOCTRINE.

#1. A prevailing opinion, much in error, has it that biblical doctrine has already been catalogued and consigned to the past.

#2. The contemporary church has no interest in the continuous generation of doctrine from the revealed reciprocal. Interpretive approaches to the Bible are devoted to finding meaning in the past, from an ancient text.

#3. Today, now, we need more doctrine not less. Because the churches and many believers have disparaged doctrine, we are unprepared to think about many things.

#4. A doctrine of technology is greatly needed. What does Scripture have to teach us about such things?

- A doctrine of the reproductive sciences is quite necessary.
- A biblical doctrine of the environment (nature) will protect us from stupidity.
- A doctrine of politics would set the believing mind above political manipulation.
- A doctrine about the medical sciences would enable believers to see beyond its institutional pressures.
- A biblical doctrine of education is of immediate urgency, for the protection of our children.

#5. Acts 15 generalizes to the need for the continuous generation of doctrine. Students of the Bible must learn how to generate the governing doctrines for life or accept the truncation of personal faith.

#6. In the present, neither believers nor churches, know how to generate doctrine from scripture. Nor is there an interest in such a prospect.

#7. We need doctrine's settling effect: "So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement" v.30, 31.