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**“Envisioning the Future
Exceptionally As We Equip
Disciples for Christ”**

**John 16:13; Gal. 5:22-23; Eph. 4:12, 13;
Tim. 3:16, 17**

Dr. James H. Cokley, Congress President

Dr. Elliott Cuff, Congress Dean

Moderator’s Division

Lecturer

**Dr. Green Davidson III
St. James M.B. Church
Leighton, Alabama**

“The Nature and Need of Christian Doctrine:

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Subject: The Nature and Need of Christian Doctrine

In this introductory setting, we will try to make a preliminary survey of our subject. Certain questions naturally arise in approaching any study such as, what is the nature of the study? What is the need for it? These questions we will consider in this introductory study.

I. The Nature of Our Study

1. Definition

Christian Doctrine is that line of study that undertakes to set out the teachings of the Christian religion. It is the organized exposition of the main doctrines of Christianity. It is the setting out in more or less complete and systematic form of the ideas necessary to an understanding of the Christian religion.

2. Purpose

The purpose of a treatment of Christian doctrine is not primarily to prove that Christianity is true but rather to set out what Christians believe about their religion. This means that we assume the Christian point of view and undertake to make clear to our minds and to others the nature and meaning of Christianity. We try to discover and state what the Christian view is with reference to the main facts and phases of Christianity. It is, then, the interpretation of Christianity as a Christian sees it. It is an effort to make intelligible the facts of Christianity.

II. The Need for Christian Doctrine

Many people today have little patience with any kind of definite doctrinal teaching in religion. This aversion to religious doctrine is not confined to those who are altogether indifferent or hostile to

religion. Even many religious people are unfriendly toward any kind of definite doctrinal teaching. They wish to confine religion to the realm of feeling or friendly good will, or make it a matter of practical social activity. There has been much discussion as to whether religion is properly a matter of feeling or belief, or activity. As a matter of fact, it is all three. Without the element of feeling, religion has little motive power; without doctrinal belief, the element of intelligence is lacking; without practical activity, it is vapid and empty.

Now we maintain that the element of doctrine in Christianity is necessary for the following reasons:

1. The Nature of Man Necessitates Doctrine

As indicated above, the true ideal of religion involves the whole of man's nature. When religion ministers to only one aspect of man's being, then religion becomes one-sided and perverted and develops one-sided and perverted people. Men cannot expect to exercise their intelligence in all other phases of life's activities and then stifle their intellects when it comes to religion. Men will think about religion and when a man thinks about religion, what he thinks is his religious doctrine. The man who is unfriendly to religious doctrine has thought to some extent about religion and often tells us with great vehemence what his thoughts are. That gives us his religious doctrine or doctrines. So, as a matter of fact, there can be no such thing as religion without some element of doctrine.

2. New Testament Christianity Put Large Emphasis on Teaching

About forty-five times in our four Gospels, Jesus is called a teacher and about the same number of times He is said to have taught. Paul and the other Apostles and New Testament leaders were teachers. The same thing is true of the Old Testament prophets. This fact ~ that Old and New Testament religion placed great emphasis on teaching ~ is so evident that it need not be argued further. Those who believe that the New

Testament should be our guide will probably agree that teaching or doctrine is necessary in Christianity. Teaching or doctrine was essential in New Testament Christianity. We hold it is necessary yet. New Testament Christianity was a religion of truth. It put emphasis on truth. Christianity always has claimed to be a form of truth. If Christianity is not a form of truth, then Christians have always been deluded as to the nature of their religion. Paul tells us what he preached as the Gospel. It was that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; that He was buried; and that He was raised from the dead according to the scriptures (I Cor. 15:3-4). The Gospel, then consists of certain facts, but not just the bare facts (if there could be such a thing), but also of the meaning of those facts. The meaning of these facts carries with it the conclusion that the gospel is one of truth, of significance. Christianity does not consist of unintelligible facts nor of mere sentiment. It is based on facts but facts of very definite significance for us and for our spiritual lives.

3. A Knowledge of the Truth is Necessary in the Christian Life

The Christian life is a life of faith. One becomes a Christian by an act of faith. By grace through faith are we saved (Eph.2:8). Whatever else faith maybe, it claims to be a recognition of truth and an act of trust based on that knowledge. It is an act of venture based on the promise of the Gospel. Faith I based on the Word of the Gospel. The Gospel is good news -- good news of something that God offers to men in Christ Jesus. Faith is the acceptance of that offer.

A knowledge of the truth is necessary to the growth of Christian character.

By faith we enter the Christian life; by faith we grown in the Christian life. Faith is an act of trust based on the promise of the Gospel and by feeding on the Word of the Gospel faith grows. Without a developing knowledge of the truth there can be little or no growth in the Christian life. One's spiritual life is as dependent as his physical life is on food.

4. A Knowledge of the Truth is Necessary to Propagate the Gospel

One of the fundamental impulses of the Christian life is the impulse to propagate the Gospel. It was pointed out above that becoming Christian was a rational and voluntary act based on a knowledge of the Gospel. The one propagating the Gospel then must be able to give to the one whom he would bring into the Christian life an intelligent conception of what it means to be a Christian. Becoming a Christian is not just a blind plunge in the dark. The propagator of the Gospel, therefore, must have an intelligent grasp of the meaning of the Gospel and he must be able to give an intelligent statement of the same.

5. A Knowledge of the Truth is Necessary to a Defense of the Gospel

Sometimes the Gospel must be defended. But one cannot defend that which has no meaning. A religion without doctrine would be a religion without meaning. Such a religion could be neither propagated nor defended.

In the New Testament, especially toward the latter part, we find Paul and others vigorously defending the Gospel against those who would deny or pervert it. Paul spent much of his life an energy opposing the Judaizers, and Paul and John both vigorously defended the Gospel against the Gnostics. To do so they had to state the Gospel in terms of definite meaning.

The element of doctrine in Christianity, then, is necessary. To talk about religion without doctrine is to talk nonsense. Of course, this is not to say that doctrine is all that there is in religion. It is possible to overemphasize the place of doctrine. We need to remember also that doctrine does not exist for its own sake; it is not something to be held in the mind and thought about only. It is a program of activity. The whole New Testament emphasizes the fact that to hear the Word is not enough; it must be put into action. Doctrine is not a system of

ideas to be contemplated only; it a call to life and activity. One must not only hear the Word; he must also do it. But, we repeat, doctrine is necessary or our activity is blind and purposeless.

Man's Capacity for God

If man is to live a religious life that is worthy of the name, he must know God, he must enter into fellowship with God.

This will necessarily involve two things: revelation on God's part and a capacity on man's part to know God; or, to use the more significant expression he must be capable of fellowship with God. The question of revelation will be discussed at a later time. In this lecture, we want to look at the question of man's capacity for knowing God or having fellowship with God.

We must keep in mind, however, that these two questions in reality belong together, that they are two phases of one question not in reality separate questions. The question as to whether man is capable of fellowship with God cannot be settled apart from the question of revelation no more than the question as to whether man can see could be settled apart from objects of vision. Of course, man could not see unless there were objects of vision, nor could there be objects of vision unless man had the power to see. Each involves the other. The same thing is true with reference to revelation and man's capacity for fellowship with God. Sometimes men have discussed man's capacity to know God as if such a capacity in man could be something apart from revelation on God's part or they have discussed revelation as if there could be such a thing as revelation apart from a capacity on man's part to receive such a revelation. But all such abstractions miss the point. Man has no capacity to know God except as God reveals Himself nor could God reveal Himself to a being who had no capacity to know Him. Each implies the other.

Nor is this to be taken to mean that in religion God and man stand on a plane of equality with each other. This is not true. God always takes the initiative and acts creatively. Man recognizes God as

sovereign and acts responsively. Yet man must have a capacity to respond to the creative and redemptive power of God. In other words, there must be something more in man than there is in things or animals; else he could not be religious. If there were not found in man a capacity not found in things or animals, God could not bring him into fellowship with Himself.

I. The Biblical View of Man

1. Man, more than a physical organism.

It is evident from experience and observation on the one hand and the teaching of the scriptures on the other that man is more than a physical being. His body came from the dust of the ground; but God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul (Gen. 2:7). God made man in His own image (Gen. 1:26-27). This evidently refers to man's spiritual nature not to his body. This divine image may be reflected in the fact that man walks upright but the essence of it lies in something deeper, something not visible to the physical eye. Man, then is more than a physical being. There is an unseen or non-material phase to his life.

2. Man, a spiritual personality

What the Bible means by man's being created in the divine image may be expressed by saying that man is a spiritual person. Perhaps it would be better to say that he has the capacity for becoming such a person. The greatest thing about man is not what he is but it is what he is capable of becoming.

It might be well to look at man's capacities, those that are involved in his personality. What are the powers possessed by man that makes him capable of growing into a spiritual personality -- not powers fully developed but rather capacities or potentialities?

1) One is intelligence

The power to think, to know, marks man off from things and animals. Animals have a rudimentary form of intelligence but in this respect, they cannot be put in the same class with man. Man has the power to reason, to reflect, to investigate, to come to conclusions, to guide his life by his thought and conclusions. This the lower animal cannot do. Man has not only the power of consciousness, he has also the power of self-consciousness. He has the power to objectify self, to make self an object of thought, to know oneself in relation to the world in which we live and in relation to other selves. No dog or horse or ape ever shows any sign of such a capacity.

2) Another capacity that belongs to man by virtue of his spiritual Personality is the power of will. Man has the power to choose, to form ideals, to direct his energies toward the realization of his ideals. Some men hold that man has no freedom, that he is wholly determined by heredity and environment. By his heredity and environment, very serious limitations are placed on him, but to some extent he can rise above these. We might say rather that within certain boundaries marked by these, man is self-directive. He is not wholly the slave of either heredity or environment. Within the range of his heredity and environment, he has power of choice and self-determination. He has the power of choice sufficient to make him a responsible moral agent.

This freedom is enhanced when man comes into conscious fellowship with God in Christ. The New Testament emphasizes this freedom of the sons of God -- those who are reborn by faith in Christ. This is a freedom that gives him a victory in principle over himself and the world. Man, as possessed by the spirit of God is truly a regal being in his power over the hostile forces of nature and of sin. And even by nature there is an inherent power of choice in him that makes him a "subject of Gospel address"; a power that belongs to no being in the realm of nature below him.

3. There belongs to man also the power of rational affection

Lower animals have the power of instinctive affection. In the animal world, the mother will sacrifice herself for the good of her young. But in human life, this power of sacrifice rises to the level of rational quality. That is a person may and sometimes does arise to the level of deliberate sacrifice for the good of others. This is exhibited in the family relation -- parent for child or child for parent. Or such sacrifice maybe manifested on the part of friend for friend, patriot for his country, or in many other human relations.

Again, this power is seen at its best only where man has been purified from sin and drawn into fellowship with God in Christ. The supreme demonstration of such love was in the cross of Christ; and Christ alone has the power to inspire such love in the hearts of men so that it becomes the consuming and controlling passion of life.

4. As a spiritual personality man also has a moral nature

This means that he has a sense of right and wrong, that he can distinguish right from wrong and he judges himself and others with reference to right and wrong.

The sense of right and wrong is inherent in man; it is a part of his moral constitution. Without this he would not be human; he would be only a beast. Man possesses this sense of right and wrong by virtue of the fact that he is human. By the sense of right and wrong we mean the feeling (or intuition) that there is such a thing as right and wrong and that we are obligated to do the right and avoid the wrong. This sense of right and wrong cannot be originated in either the individual or the race by experience. It comes to both the race and individual by a creative act of God. Nor can this sense of right and wrong be interpreted in terms of any other kind of experience. It cannot be reduced to the pleasurable or the utilitarian. The feeling that a thing is right and that it is pleasant or useful are two different types of experience altogether. The feeling that an act or course of conduct is right is not a feeling of expediency. It partakes of the nature of a

categorical imperative. We feel that we are bound to do the right whether it is pleasurable or expedient or not. We may seek the pleasurable or expedient; we must pursue the right. Moral obligation is something imposed. We do not place the obligation on ourselves. Sometimes we would give the world if we could throw it off. It is placed on us by the system of things to which we belong -- as the Christian believes by God. This feeling of moral obligation may be increased and clarified or it may be dulled by experience; but clearly from its nature it is not originated by or in experience.

II. Personal Powers Necessary to a Christian Life

We would like now to point out that these powers or capacities of man as a spiritual person are essential to his religious life. We believe this could be made evident. With reference to any type of religion worth considering but we will consider it from the standpoint of the Gospel of Christ. Since it is Christian doctrines that we are considering not religion in general, let us see how these powers are essential to man's fellowship with God in Christ. This is so evident, however, if we keep in mind the teaching of the New Testament that no extensive discussion is necessary.

The Gospel of the New Testament was a message that each man must hear and accept for himself. It addressed itself to man as an intelligent being and appealed to his mind and will. One did not enjoy its benefits by virtue of being a Jew nor by virtue of being a member of a particular family. Jesus was a divider. He divided families (Matt. 10:21, 25, 36). Men aligned themselves for an against Him. He appealed to the wills of men. They must choose to follow Him. Moreover, he summed up God's requirements for man in love ~ love to God and man (Mark 12:30-31). This love that God calls for is not natural affection, it is rational good will. And the sons of God are expected to have this rational good will toward all men ~ enemies as well as friends. In this way only can we be the true sons of God (Matt. 5:43 ff).

Only then as an intelligent and free being with power to know and choose can man respond to and accept the Gospel of Christ.

Only as a being with a moral nature capable of knowing right from wrong with capacity to love God and man can he live the life required by the Gospel.

III. Man's Thirst for God

There is something in man that will not be satisfied with the seen and temporal. Something in him cries out for the spiritual and the eternal. Man thirsts for God. In the midst of the visible and the transient he reaches out after the invisible and the abiding. The psalmist voices is a universal cry of the human heart when he says: "As the heart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God" (Psalm 42:1). Wherever men have been found they have had some form of religion. If there are any exceptions to this statement, they are so insignificant as to be negligible. All men of all races and climes have cried out for God.

Another noteworthy fact is that this craving of the human spirit is met in Christ. He is the light of the world (John 9:5). He is the bread of life (John 6:35). He is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6).