

METHODS OF BIBLE STUDY

By

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CHAPTER TEN

NEW TESTAMENT DOCTRINE

THE study of the New Testament by sections, books, and topics should lead to the important and necessary step of discovering the substance of the Christian doctrine therein recorded.

The New Testament is pre-eminently our guide into all the truth associated with the personal and historical revelation of our Lord.

The facts recorded are the foundation of the doctrine taught, and it is necessary to collect carefully the statements found in the various parts, and combine them into as complete a system of doctrine as we can obtain.

The first step in this connection is to consider the New Testament books or periods in sections, and to note the stages of progress in Christian doctrine. This principle of doctrinal progress or development is of the very first importance to all students. Theology is a progressive science, and the course of actual progress in the study of it is somewhat as follows:-

First: The observation of facts newly revealed.

Second: The consideration of facts whose full meaning is newly discovered, though already revealed.

Third: Facts to be correctly combined, and correlated with all other preceding ones.

The first two give us what may be called *Biblical Theology*, i.e. theology as recorded in the Bible; and the third gives us *Systematic Theology*, i.e. theology arranged and stated systematically as a body of doctrine.

We now proceed to consider the various stages of New Testament doctrine, dwelling only on the main outlines.

DOCTRINE IN DEVELOPMENT

First Stage: The Gospels.

A careful study of the four Gospels reveals several consecutive aspects of our Lord's teaching concerning Himself.

1. *The Messiahship of JESUS.* This is the keynote of the early Judaeen ministry (John 1-4). We can see it in each part of this section. Our Lord claims to be Messiah in Jerusalem, Judaea, and Samaria.

Then, with the opening of the Galilean ministry, comes a change, and we have

2. *The Kingdom of Heaven.* This marked the commencement of the ministry (Matthew 4), and is found in the Sermon on the Mount and the parables of Matthew 13. Consider the meaning of the Kingdom, its citizens, laws, and results.

Then comes another change, and emphasis is placed on

3. *The Person of the Son of GOD.* We notice this as brought about by the miracle of the five thousand, and as strongly marked in the discourses at Capernaum (John 6), culminating in Peter's Confession (Matthew 16) and the Transfiguration (Matthew 17).

Again we notice yet another change, and henceforward the stress is laid on

4. *The Sufferings and Death of CHRIST.* From the Transfiguration to the Entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 16:21; Luke 9:31) this is the dominant note.

Then comes another aspect

5. *The Second Advent.* From the Sunday to the Thursday evening we find our Lord's parables and general teaching to His disciples almost wholly concerned with the future, His own coming, and the events connected therewith.

In the Upper Room, however, we are conscious of yet another phase

6. *The Dispensation of the Spirit.* There the emphasis is not on the Death (it is not once mentioned or even alluded to), or on the great Future, but on the "little while between" - on the period covered by the present dispensation. The teaching of John 14-17 concerns the disciples, their life and work, with all the privileges, possibilities, and duties of discipleship.

Last of all, we find, after the Resurrection, the crowning aspect-

7. *The Great Commission.* In all four Gospels and in Acts 1 we see how prominent (or rather, predominant) this subject was in the post-Resurrection teaching of our Lord.

Thus in these seven aspects we have a complete view of the teaching of CHRIST concerning His person and work, His plan of redemption, His purpose of evangelization, and His prospect of glory and reign.

Second Stage: The Acts.

Starting from the Day of Pentecost and reaching to the arrival of the Apostle Paul in Rome, we have a record of the first thirty years of the Christian Church.

As we study the discourses of this book we find three main aspects of teaching stand out distinctly throughout:

1. *The Resurrection of CHRIST.* They preached "**Jesus and the Resurrection,**" and so demonstrated the claim of CHRIST to be GOD (Acts 2:24).
2. *The Rule of CHRIST.* The practical outcome of CHRIST's Godhead is His Lordship, His rule over man as King. So they preached the Gospel of the Kingdom as the logical conclusion of the Resurrection (Acts 2:33). Our Lord rose that He might reign (Romans 14:9).
3. *The Remission of Sins in CHRIST.* The claim of CHRIST to Lordship at once brought to light the sad fact that men were not subjects, but rebels by reason of sin, and that before they could have CHRIST as Lord and be His subjects they must accept Him as Saviour and receive pardon. The gospel of forgiveness was therefore preached as the first step in the process of the enjoyment of redemption (Acts 2:38).

A careful study of the whole book will reveal these elements of doctrine for unsaved and saved. There are of course subsidiary elements of teaching, but the above-named are primary and essential, and they remind us how the person and work of CHRIST is to be proclaimed by His people, and how sinners may become saints and saints become servants.

Third Stage: Pauline Epistles.

This gives us the largest section of the New Testament, and the most immediately important for doctrine.

1. We may consider the Epistles in the order of the Authorized Version, which dates from at least the fourth century, if not much earlier.

This order gives first the Epistles to (seven) churches, beginning with the longest; then in order of length the Epistles to individuals; and last of all Hebrews, because of the difference of character and destination, and possibly because of the doubts as to Pauline authorship.

Studied in this order, we have-

- (a) Romans. Doctrinal foundation.
- (b) Corinthians. Church life.

- (c) Galatians. Defection and danger.
- (d) Ephesians. Fuller doctrine for Christian life.
- (e) Philippians. Christian life illustrated.
- (f) Colossians. Dangers safeguarded.
- (g) Thessalonians. The Blessed Hope.

Another grouping of these seven Epistles (in this order) may be seen in Dr. Bullinger's book, *The Church Epistles* (p. 17), and will be found suggestive for comparison.

The Epistles to individuals are mainly personal, and require separate discussion.

2. The Epistles may also be studied chronologically in groups:

- (a) Group 1. I and II Thessalonians. The Epistles of the Second Missionary Journey. Eschatological in character. CHRIST is seen as King. The Grace of Hope is prominent.
- (b) Group 2. Galatians, I and II Corinthians, Romans. The Epistles of the Third Journey. Soteriological in character. CHRIST is seen as Redeemer. The Grace of Faith is prominent.
- (c) Group 3. Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon. The Epistles of the First Captivity. Christological in character. CHRIST is seen as Lord. The Grace of Love is prominent.
- (d) Group 4. I Timothy, Titus, 2 Timothy. The Epistles of the Release and Second Captivity. Ecclesiastical in character. No new aspect of CHRIST. Stress is laid on organization and conduct rather than on doctrine.

The above grouping may be compared with Bishop Lightfoot's plan (*Biblical Essays*, p. 224), who thus characterizes each group:

- (a) The Epistles of the Tribunal, or CHRIST the Judge.
- (b) The Epistles of the Cross, or CHRIST the Redeemer.
- (c) The Epistles of the Throne, or CHRIST the Word.
- (d) The Epistles of the Congregation, or Church Organization.

Thus we have four groups answering to the "springtime, summer, autumn, and winter of the great Apostle's year" (Beet).

Fourth Stage: John's Epistles and Revelation.

This represents the latest type of New Testament doctrine. As Bishop Westcott says, the Gospels and Acts lay the historical foundation, Paul gives the logical construction, and John supplies the theological completion.

- 1. The Epistles give his view of life in the present.
- 2. The Revelation shows his views of glory in the future.

The contributions of James, Peter, and Jude, and the Epistle to the Hebrews cannot be said to represent historical stages so much as particular aspects to be considered in their respective places.

- James' Epistle should be associated with the early Church of Jerusalem (Acts 1-15);
- I Peter with the time of and after Paul's fourth group of Epistles;
- II Peter and Jude with the time between Paul and John.

One other fruitful method of the study of doctrine may be mentioned, though it is obvious that it can only be taken quite generally, and must not be pressed into complete detail. It is to study the writings by their authors, especially the Epistles, and to see in Paul the Apostle of Faith, Peter of Hope, John of Love, Jude of Truth, and James of Duty.

As a guide to this method of study the best book is the one already mentioned in another connection, Bernard's *Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament*, of which a second edition has recently been published.

Many of our most valued Bible teachers to-day owe much to the first edition of Bernard, published some thirty years ago.

DOCTRINE AS A WHOLE

When we have thus gained some idea of the contribution of each period and of each writer to the sum total of Christian doctrine, it remains for us to attempt to gather up the results into one complete whole by arranging the teaching in subjects. The following conspectus may be regarded as fairly complete for use as a guide:-

1. GOD the Father.
2. CHRIST the Son.
3. The Holy Spirit.
4. Sin.
5. Redemption.
6. The Christian Life.
7. The Future.

Under each of these we may group, with the necessary subdivisions, almost everything in the New Testament.

As a single instance of what may be done in this way, let us take one short Epistle, that to the Ephesians, and discover what it teaches about the Holy Spirit. We shall find at least ten (perhaps twelve) references.

We notice first,

Four Facts about the Work of the Holy Spirit:

- Sealing, 1:13;
- Access, 2:18;
- Indwelling, 2:22;
- Revelation, 3:5.

Then follow Four Consequences:

- Strength, 3:16;
- Unity, 4:3;
- Sensitiveness, 4:30;
- Fulness, 5:18.

Lastly come Two Methods of maintaining the Holy Spirit's presence:

- The Sword of the Spirit (GOD speaking to us), 6:17;
- Prayer in the Spirit (we speaking to GOD), 6:18.

This is but one of many similar possibilities of fruitful and enjoyable study. Bishop Moule's invaluable *Outlines of Christian Doctrine* will be of great service on this whole subject.

We can thus see what fullness, variety, and beauty there are in the New Testament, and how rich the provision made for us, whether for teaching or correction, or for instruction in righteousness. And it is all with the one aim and object "**that the man of God may be perfect** (adjusted), **thoroughly furnished** (fitted) **for all good works.**"

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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