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The Determination Of Doctrine

With the passing of Pope John Paul II, there are many Catholics, and others, who wait to see what changes in “church” doctrine there will be. Will the new Pope relax certain restrictions, allowing people to do more of what they want, or will he continue to follow a more conservative path. In a similar sense, we hear of religious organizations convening a number of conferences from time to time to determine needed changes in “church” policy and doctrine. Many times these are driven by social movements and shifts in the popular domain. Meanwhile, religious organizations that do not “update” themselves are seen to be archaic, not with the times and therefore become unpopular with the general public. How did this begin and is there any scriptural basis for the practice? Does the church have the right to determine doctrine ?

As Paul and Barnabas related the results of their first preaching trip to the other Christians in Palestine there was a question as to what the new Gentile Christians should be taught to practice. There were men from Judea and converted Pharisees teaching they should be circumcised and keep the Law (**Acts 15.1-5**). To settle the question, the elders and apostles came together to discuss the problem and determine what should be done. At that time Peter pointed out that there was no difference between Jew and Gentile (**Acts 15.9**) God placing them in equal stead with Jews when they believed in Christ. James finally spoke and stated that the Gentiles should be instructed to avoid pollutions of idols, fornication, things strangled and blood (**Acts 15.20**). These instructions were then conveyed to Christians in regions outside of Judea (**Acts 15.22-27**). Does this set a precedent for religious organizations to determine changes in doctrine as situations demand them?

The answer to this lies in the nature of the mission of the apostles, the statements of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the first century who guided them. Upon Peter’s confession of who Christ was, the Lord stated, “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (**Matt 16.18-19**). Peter preached the first Gospel sermons to the Jews (Pentecost in Jerusalem) and the Gentiles (Cornelius). These were the keys that Peter was given. The rest of the passage however is interesting. Does it imply that there is an exchange between God and his disciples in which doctrine was negotiated? The answer to that lies in the statements of Christ about the work that they would do after he had left them. The Holy Spirit would be sent to guide them (**John 16.13**). Part of this was to show them things to come. This indicates that not all had been revealed. On the day of Pentecost this began in earnest as the Holy Spirit fell on the twelve as promised. From that time onward we are introduced to the “apostles’ doctrine” (**Acts 2.42**). It is logical to conclude that this is the doctrine revealed to them by the Holy Spirit.

The process by which these men were inspired is not detailed. We find that they communed with the Spirit and that the Spirit was able to give them instruction directly. It is also apparent that doctrine was learned experientially. The best example of this is the preaching of Peter to Cornelius and the process by which this occurred (**Acts 10**). It was through a vision, and the Holy Spirit, that Peter came to the realization that the Gentiles were accepted in the sight of God. In the subject discussed in Acts 15, it is apparent that the process of revelation was active in the form of this coming together of the apostles and the elders. There is evidence for this in a statement that Luke makes toward the end of the chapter. “*For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well.*” (**Acts 15.28-29**).

While it appears that a “council” met to decide doctrine it should be noted that *doctrine was not determined*. The meeting helped clarify in the minds of these Jewish Christians what the will of God toward the Gentiles was. *Peter did not receive any new doctrine when he realized what God was trying to tell him in relation to Cornelius*. Doctrine was clarified or revealed, not changed. What these examples bear out is that there was a time when men needed to understand the will of God as it was being revealed and sometimes had to do so by reasoning together. The other thing that needs to be mentioned is that this occurred not just during the first century, but during the life of the apostles, the witnesses of Christ who were commissioned to continue the work of the Lord. We now have the revealed word of God that stands to guide those who seek him. Nowhere in the Bible do we find a human changing, or being given the authority to change doctrine, nor do we find that there is reason for updating the message to fit what social and economic times dictate. God’s word shall stand until the end of the world (**Matt 24.35**) and will then judge those who have lived (**John 12.48**). It would be unfair and unreasonable on the part of God to judge the current living according to a modified doctrine that those who passed before did not have. Today we have Bible study to come to an understanding of God’s word by reasoning together.

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