

# THE ALEPH COURSE : Notes for talking.

## 8 : DOCTRINE.

Last time we talked about JESUS. Despite appearances, it wasn't intended to be a hatchet job.

This time it's DOCTRINE, and a hatchet job might be more appropriate.

### WHY SO NEGATIVE ?

Well, that remark is an overstatement, for effect rather than to be taken seriously.

Doctrine, on the other hand, is meant to be taken seriously. We have to believe something, and that's bound to be doctrine of a sort, but once you start taking it seriously you start to have disagreements. I haven't studied the issue, but it seems that people will fight over practically any doctrine you care to propound, which gets us back to the fragmented church we discussed a little while ago.

I don't think it's unkind to suggest that most Christians manage very well with rather little in the way of formal doctrine.

That doesn't mean that they don't know any – just that it isn't labelled "doctrine" in their minds. It's labelled something like "religion", and is mixed up with custom, belief, and other things. The "religion" box might contain :

God exists.  
Turn ( liturgical ) east when you sing the Gloria.  
God is a Trinity : Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
I don't know what the Holy Spirit is.  
It's good to help people.  
Anglicans are liberal, and very suspect.  
Jesus died for our sins.  
Shopping on Sunday is bad, but it doesn't really matter.

That's an invention to make a particular point, but I think ( from my own experience before I started to get all analytical about it, and from listening to other people ) that it's essentially true.

### I DON'T THINK THAT MATTERS.

Being Christian people is far more important than knowing Christian theory. Or Jewish – Jesus was very hard on the theorists and producers of doctrine, and upbraided them for imposing unbearable loads on the people ( *Luke* 11.46 ), but also said that people the experts disparaged were the ones who were getting it right ( *Matthew* 21.31,32 ).

It is only honest to add that my first try at the first reference there was *Matthew* 23.4, and that, while it says what I want, it's coupled with an encouragement for people to take note of what the experts say – "... pay attention to their words. But do not follow their practice ..." ( *Matthew* 23.3 ). Nothing is simple.

But what you think you have to do to be Christian people depends on what's in the box, so it DOES matter that the things in the box are the right sorts of thing. "{ Roman Catholics | Protestants | Jews | Muslims | Black people | etc. } are { scum | sub-human | murderers | etc. } and deserve to die" is an extreme, but not unknown, example of a wrong thing –

How do I know it's wrong ? – because it conflicts with things in MY box like "Love your neighbours", "Love one another", "Love your enemies", for which I think I can claim better authority.

- and ( coming back to the original question ) I'm distrustful of doctrine because it's a prime source of such wrong things.

It isn't by any means the only source – custom, practice, misunderstanding, selfishness are examples of others – but it comes with the authority of the church behind it, and is therefore likely to be accepted without question.

#### WHAT IS DOCTRINE ?

"That which is taught", says my dictionary. Not helpful.

I OUGHT to like it. It comes from an exercise which sounds like just what I'm recommending in this series; people have sat down to try to work out what assumptions they should make, have made them, and worked on from there for a long time. Doctrine is the result of that process.

It's a collection of statements worked out by experts. They think the statements are AUTHORITATIVE. Originally, they were GUARANTEED TO BE RIGHT, but we might not be quite so sure now.

Once worked out, doctrine is simply presented. The debate and argument are over. You don't worry about what goes on in your car engine; you just drive the car, assuming that someone who knows how to do it has done the right things.

So the attitude is "This is our doctrine; you can accept it as true". Which is fair enough.

Another attitude is "This is our doctrine; you must accept it as true". Which is not fair enough.

#### WHY MIGHT YOU DOUBT ?

Because they are human statements from human arguments, and we can be wrong. ( "We now know that it cannot be true ..." )

Because we are unsure of the premises : "The Bible is absolutely true"; "Aristotle is a reliable source".

Because we are unsure of the arguments : "It is unthinkable that ...".

Because your doctrine is different from mine.

Because your doctrine is different from yours of last year.

Because it seems in the highest degree unlikely that we can ever know the whole truth about God.

#### WHAT IF YOU DO DOUBT ?

You can go and check the arguments : they're all available ( though they might be not too easy to find or to read ). Christianity is NOT a secret society, with an inner circle that guards the secrets; NOTHING IS HIDDEN.

If you keep on doubting, then –

- An OLD VIEW : you are a heretic, or in a state of sin, or have cut yourself off from the church. You should be punished ( for the good of your soul ) – excommunicated, or expelled, or burnt at the stake.
- A NEWER VIEW : you might still be unpopular. "If this is a group where the creeds are going to be questioned, then it isn't a group for me" – said to me in this university not too many years ago. But you're unlikely to be disciplined.
- A THOUGHT : don't flash it about. You risk hurting people, and the principle at stake is unlikely to be worth it. People don't need educating – they need loving. They are more important than your opinions, which might even be mistaken.

#### DO WE REALLY NEED DOCTRINE ?

Well, we need some, if only to define a language to talk to each other. If a preacher had to start from scratch every Sunday, we'd be even worse off than we are now. Perhaps.

But DO WE REALLY LIVE BY DOCTRINE ? Is it really important to your everyday life that Jesus was born of a virgin ? What would you have to change if you became convinced that it was wrong ?

If you answer in terms such as "It would destroy my faith", then I would ask how it affects your day-to-day experience of living with God. That's one reason why I emphasised the importance of the evidence of the Christian life; you have a way of knowing about God which is independent of the traditional sources, and should survive even if you lose confidence in them.

In fact, the "standard" doctrine fits A PARTICULAR VIEW OF THE UNIVERSE AND GOD ( life, the universe, and everything ) which is STRONGLY BASED ON THE OLD TESTAMENT ( lots from St Paul – sin, judgment, etc. ) with some TWIDDLES ( stronger emphasis on forgiveness, atonement, but still legal ).

That's not the view I'd choose, but that doesn't make it wrong.

But the trouble with doctrine is that – like other views stated by respected people – most people tend simply to accept it as THE RIGHT WAY. Then they can get itchy if you suggest that there are alternatives.

#### DOES THAT MATTER ?

Well, yes, I think it does.

- It encourages people to believe that WE KNOW the right answers, so we don't need to ask questions any more. Perhaps we do know some of the right answers, but if they're right then asking the questions will confirm it anyway. ( So you get people taking dogmatic positions on whether the rapture comes before or after armageddon. )
- It discourages people from considering other possibilities. ( For example, that Jesus was concerned to get the Jews away from the pathological and unhealthy obsession with sin, not that it should carry on into the future. )

#### SO WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT IT ?

We have to make statements of some sort about what we believe, so we can't throw everything away.

( That was why I started off looking for assumptions. )

I don't think there's anything wrong with asking questions, though it's important not to be silly about how we do it. ( I'm not quite sure what I mean by that. ) Indeed, I'm sure it's important that we do ask questions.

I don't think there's anything wrong with publishing the answers and recommending them to other people.

I DO think that it's dangerous to pick some of the answers to be ossified and elevated to what we call doctrine. It's divisive, it's asking for discord, and we don't need it.