

The Whole Counsel of God
Study 1

STUDYING BIBLICAL DOCTRINE

(G. T. Tabert)

*“They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching...
(Ac 2.42).*

*“For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.”
(Acts 20.27).*

*In Christ “...are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”
(Col 2.3).*

To embark on a study of the full scope of biblical doctrine may seem quite ambitious. When we reflect on what such a study means, however, we see that it is really a task that is true to the nature of our faith as Christians. Rather than reaching for things too wonderful or high for us, we are submitting our minds to all that God has revealed in Christ, and this is indeed is higher and more wonderful than what we could imagine, for God is fully revealed in Christ.

We will begin by establishing the biblical basis for our study and derive our approach to doctrine from scripture. The Bible is not simply the source from which we take our doctrines. It also opens up the way into the scriptures and guides us in the way we are to learn its doctrine.

A. DOCTRINE AND THE FAITH: ESTABLISHING A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

1. The first mark of the Christian community

The true Christian position is first of all doctrinal. The formation of the first community of Christians bore clear witness to this fact. On the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit came down on the 120 disciples. The phenomenon arrested the attention of the crowds at the feast in Jerusalem, and Peter explained what was happening with a powerful presentation of the gospel. The people listened and were convicted. Three thousand repented, were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ and were added to the disciples that had just been made spiritually one by the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The 3120 believers immediately took on a well defined shape as community. Luke reported that “they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Ac 2.42). Notice, that the first point in the list is the devotion to the apostles’ teaching. The word *teaching* here is a noun and refers to what the apostles taught. It was not the case that they were first a fellowship and then as such devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching. No, it was the other way around. The teaching came first, and the fellowship was the result of the teaching. The apostles’ teaching here was that which formed the basis of the community. Now, teaching that is believed, to which a community is devoted and that defines the community, is doctrine. The Christianity of the first church was in this sense doctrinal.

The new community described in Acts 2.42 did not have a constitution by which to organize itself. This prompts the question, why did the new believers immediately take the shape of a community devoted to the apostles’ teaching? The answer lies in the formation of the first church. The phenomena accompanying the baptism of the Spirit at best puzzled the people and only arrested their attention. It was Peter’s word, speaking as the spokesman of the group of 12 who stood with him (v 14), that brought them to faith. Those who received Peter’s word were baptized and added to the disciples (v 41). The first converts had their entrance into the new life in the Spirit through the apostles’ word so that it was quite natural that they would first of all devote themselves to the apostles’ teaching. Everyone who becomes a true Christian does so through the word of the gospel and so is first oriented towards what the gospel teaches. This

commitment to what the Bible teaches should be fostered as the first devotion. It is an utter tragedy if the church turns new believers away from their fresh devotion to the biblical doctrine.

The Lord established the priority of doctrine for believers. Jesus died and rose again, and he is the subject of the good news. But, the risen Lord did not remain on earth to proclaim the news of salvation to the world. He appeared to the disciples that he chose, made them the eyewitnesses of his resurrection and commissioned them with the good news through which he would speak to people (Acts 3.26; Eph 2.17). He also promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower their witness (Luke 24.46-49; Acts 1.8). The word *apostle* means *a sent one*, and it refers in the NT to those who were commissioned by the risen Lord to preach the gospel and establish its truth (see 1Cor 15.5-11). Through their message true faith is brought about (Rom 10.17), and through this faith the Spirit is received and continues to work among God's people (Gal 3.1-5; Eph 1.13). Jesus relates to us through the gospel taught by the apostles and so made faith's first commitment to the teaching.

2. Appreciating the doctrinal character of the Christian faith

Today there is a widespread allergic reaction to the idea of doctrinal Christianity. The feeling is that doctrine ruins and kills vital faith. It is argued that true Christianity is about the high ethical ideals Jesus presented epitomized in love. Biblical Christianity is seen more as a way of life and service to mankind than as a faith that is doctrinally defined. Others contend that doctrine takes away or detracts from inner spiritual devotion to God and Jesus. Christianity is seen as a spirituality with which doctrine interferes. Doctrine is also seen as divisive. Such views are wrong and dangerous. They subvert the very truth, foundation and power of true Christianity.

The priority of doctrine in the Christian faith is rooted in the very nature of the gospel and the objection to a doctrinally oriented faith involves a shift away from the foundation of faith. The Greek word used for *gospel* in the NT is *euaggelion* (from which we get our word evangelical), and it means good news. The news is set in contrast to law. Law tells us what human beings must do, but the good news of God announces what God has done in Christ. It declares that he has done all to accomplish complete salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and our spiritual life is found in this work of God in Christ. This means that the essential truth is the teaching that sets forth who Christ is, what he has done and what we are in him, and this is by its very nature doctrinal.

In light of the doctrinal nature of the gospel, we can answer the criticisms of a doctrine faith. Doctrine shapes and nurtures faith rather than killing it. Without doctrine, we are left with the mere believing that has its root in human subjectivity and is not what the Bible calls faith. While human nature does not work with the doctrine of the gospel (it is spiritually dead and hostile to the will of God, see Rom 8.5-8), the important thing is that the Spirit will only work through the truth proclaimed and taught as doctrine. Living out the ethical ideals of Jesus is only the practical fruit of the faith formed by the gospel and nurtured by its teaching. The truth of grace is ever doctrine, and the opposite is the scheme of works as a religion of human behaviour. The heart's inner communion with Christ is not left in the fog of an undefined deity who must be perceived by feeling and imagination. God is not revealed subjectively in the human heart but objectively in the Son. He is revealed once and for all in Christ, and all must come to the historically and publicly given revelation. Only there does the Spirit make us personally know the Lord and make all one. To turn from the public revelation given to us in biblical doctrine is to enter into the darkness of the heart that defines God from within itself (the very incubator of idolatry, Rom 1.21-23). We will never find the basis of unity in ourselves. Doctrine defines our identity and our unity in Christ. Having said this, we must add that the doctrine only has that vital power as the truth that leads us out of what we are by nature and shapes us according to Christ's character by the power of Christ's work. The moment this dynamic is lost, the doctrine will expose our error and our hold of it becomes downright ugly in its nature and fruit.

We can say that doctrine is correlated to true faith.

3. Seeing the full scope of the gospel

We have tackled the error that divorces faith from doctrine. There is another mistake, however, that must be addressed. It is widely assumed among Christians that the gospel is limited to the message that is proclaimed to the world to bring people to faith. According to this understanding of the gospel, we have to go beyond the good news to teaching on God's will for us as believers. A closer look at the apostolic commission shows up this limitation of the gospel as defective. In fact, it leads to a spiritual fatality.

a. Preaching and teaching the gospel

Paul said, in 2Tim 1.10-11: "...the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle and a teacher for the gospel". (For a parallel passage, see 1Tim 2.4-7). The apostle uses three terms to describe his commission with the gospel.

1. *A preacher.* The word is *kerux* which refers to a herald. The image comes from the battle field. After the battle was won, the herald was sent to run and deliver the good news of the victory to the people for whom the battle was fought. Before the news reached the ears of the people, they lived in a state of war and under threatened defeat. The herald brought them into the victory. This role of the herald proclaiming the good news that God reigns to captive Zion is celebrated in Ish 52.7 (see also Ps 68.11). As a herald, Paul proclaimed the gospel to the world. This message was focused and designed to bring people into the victory of Christ's resurrection by bringing them to faith. The focus was not on the doctrine of the gospel but on the dynamic that brought people to faith and salvation.

2. *An apostle.* If the word *preacher* stresses the message carried, the word *apostle* stresses the office of the man carrying the message. As the apostle, he Paul had the role of establishing the truth of the gospel committed to him for the whole church so that we must take it from him.

3. *A teacher.* As a teacher Paul speaks to those who have come to faith through the proclamation. Notice that he was appointed a teacher as well as a preacher of the gospel. As teacher he is opening up what the gospel actually teaches. That the gospel contains teaching is seen in the way we learn from the gospel messages in Acts. For example, in Acts 2 Peter is proclaiming gospel with the effect of bringing 3000 to faith. While this is not the proclamation to us, we turn to it for what it teaches, and it teaches us much.

Paul uses another term to describe his ministry. It is the word from which we get our word *evangelize*, and it refers to the role of imparting the good news, the *evangel*. Paul uses this word to describe his apostolic commission in Gal 1.16 as follows: that I might *tell the good news of Christ* among the Gentiles. Why does Paul use the word for imparting the gospel in Galatians? What was at stake was the very content of the gospel (Gal 1.6-9). When Paul was setting the Christians straight on the gospel he was evangelizing. Yes, he was teaching, but he was teaching in order to communicate the good news.

The greatest example of this evangelistic teaching role is found in Paul's letter to the Romans. He said that he was eager to preach the gospel to the believers in Rome (Rom 1.15). Paul does not use the word that refers to the act of a herald, i.e., to proclaim, but to the act of *evangelizing*, i.e., to impart the good news. In Rom 15.16 Paul says that in writing this letter he was "ministering as a priest the gospel of God." A reading of this letter shows that it is not a message given to the world. It was teaching for believers, and Paul was confident that they were filled with all knowledge (Rom 15.14). The letter bears this out. Romans, actually, goes quite deep into doctrinal teaching. I have pointed this out to underscore the point that as a teacher Paul was a teacher of the gospel. The glorified Lord only gave Paul one commission—to preach (i.e., to tell the good news) Him among the Gentiles (Gal 1.16). Paul's teaching ministry was part of this work of telling the good news.

What Paul states explicitly about the gospel and teaching, is implied in the apostles' teaching in Acts 2.42. We are not told of a ministry of Peter and the 11 that is separate from Peter's proclamation of the gospel. What the apostles taught in the gospel the believers devoted themselves to. Doctrine is not something added to the gospel as if it were extraneous to the gospel. Likewise, learning doctrine is not something that is

added to faith. The doctrine of the apostles is only the teaching of the truth inherent in the gospel, and the process of learning the doctrine is the process of maturing in the faith brought about in us through the gospel.

The fact that the gospel with which the apostles were entrusted embraced all of their teaching challenges the common notion that the gospel is limited to that initial proclamation by which people are introduced to Christ. We must see the gospel as total and comprehensive. It is the foundation on which the church is built. Paul presses this point in 1Cor 3.10. All that is built into the church must be built on the foundation laid in the gospel, and that means that the apostolic gospel is large enough to sustain the whole church in its growth. The challenge for us is first of all to grasp the gospel in its full scope. At this point some might object and ask, “Is there not a difference between the message of the free forgiveness of sins through Christ, apart from works, announced to the world and the teaching on how to grow, live and do good works for Christians?” The answer is yes, but it is the difference between the proclamation of the gospel and the teaching of the gospel. The fact that both are the communication of the gospel (*evangelizing*) joins the two. This is important, for our life in Christ is not on a different footing than our conversion to Christ. We are justified (or forgiven) by faith, and we live, grow and mature by faith. The faith is in the one and the same Lord Jesus Christ.

b. Pressing the issue of consistency with the gospel

To split our growth and maturity from the gospel and our beginning in faith is fatal. Paul addresses this in Gal 3.1-5. Paul takes the Galatian Christians’ back to their beginning in Christ. Jesus Christ was openly portrayed as crucified before their very eyes. The apostle presented the gospel and the meaning of the cross with vivid clarity. There was no mistaking about the gospel (v 1). As they heard with faith (the faith brought about by hearing the gospel; see Rom 10.17) they received the Spirit (v 2). But, they made the fatal shift. Paul probes them on this with the following questions: Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected (or matured) by the flesh? (v 3). They began by the Spirit, and that means they began by hearing the gospel with faith. The Spirit made real in them what the gospel announced of God’s work in Christ. To be completed as a Christian by the flesh is to do it by works of the Law. To shift from the ground of the gospel in our growth as Christians is foolish. Paul goes on to make the Galatians realize that God continues to provide the Spirit and do his work among the Christians by the hearing of faith (v 5). What Paul is pressing is that Christian maturity is not to be split from the gospel. God ever works on the principle of the gospel—his Spirit only works through the hearing of faith that is brought about by the word of Christ, the gospel.

The Galatians show how fatal it is to limit the gospel to the initial conversion. They left the gospel behind in their experience and went on to a legalistic program. In Galatians we see that the attempt to go beyond the gospel in one’s quest for growth is fatal, a departure from the gospel. Rather than going beyond the gospel, Paul opened up the gospel to answer the questions about the function of the Law of Moses (Galatians 3 and 4) and about the way a believer is to overcome the flesh and be matured (Galatians 5). Let’s take out of this the point we need for our study. Earlier we saw that the gospel by its very nature yields doctrine. Now we see that it is the matrix within which the apostles formulated all their doctrine. We can say this in another way. The gospel is the paradigm for all doctrine.

c. The whole counsel of God

Paul, in his farewell address as he is leaving the field of his gospel labour, refers to the whole of his teaching as “the whole counsel God” (Acts 20.27). Here we have a biblical concept to grasp the whole of doctrine.

The word translated counsel is *boule*, and this term refers to a planned course of action. The counsel of God takes in God’s purpose and the planned course of action and events which God works out and through which he achieves his purpose. This counsel of God is the subject of the gospel. It is worked out in Christ through the cross (Lk 7.30; Acts 2.23; 4.28) and takes in the eternal purpose realized through Christ in our participation in him (Eph 1.11). The message of the whole counsel of God in Acts 20.27 is the kingdom (v 25). In Acts, as was the case in Jesus teaching, the kingdom of God is the subject of the gospel in its

entirety (Acts 1.3 and 28.31). This kingdom is God's reign, realized in man through God's Son as the Son of Man, and it takes in all of God's work from the beginning to the end. God's purpose for man was declared in the divine act of creating man: as the image of God man was to reign over the earth (Gen 1.26). Salvation in its largest sense is the purpose and work of God by which he will fulfill his decree by bringing mankind into his reign. The gospel shows that this involves the Godhead, the eternal relationships within the trinity, and God's eternal purposes. All of the purposes of God and his planned course of action are given the whole of the apostolic teaching. Paul states this momentous truth in other words in Col 2.3: in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." The reason for this is, "For in Him dwells all the fullness of Deity in bodily form, and in him you have been filled up" (Col 2.9-10; literal translation). All truth is found in him as taught by the apostles. We betray true faith if we look elsewhere to fill in our understanding of God and his ways and of our salvation and life. Paul left the church with the apostolic doctrine as meeting every spiritual need and presenting the whole truth.

To help us grasp the nature of the whole of doctrine, we will use the illustration of a circle. The center is Christ. All is in him. The radius that draws the circle around the center is the counsel of God. The circumference that marks off what is in the circle of truth is the apostolic teaching, given in the NT as a whole, and this takes in the OT as the scriptures used by the apostles. The whole of doctrine must be found in scripture, be centered in Christ and be seen dynamically as setting forth God's plan of action as he works out his purpose in Christ.

B. THE GOSPEL AS THE PARADIGM FOR DOCTRINE

What does the gospel message consist of? What themes make up the gospel? Take a minute and answer these questions and then proceed to find the answers from the NT. It is good to check what we bring to the study of the Bible against what we learn from the Bible. We will find that we have things to clean up and improve.

Jot down your answer here:

1. The outline of the apostolic gospel

The outline of the apostolic gospel is stated in three passages in the NT. An analysis of these passages shows that the gospel has a well defined outline and is made up of a fixed set of themes.

a. A formal statement of the gospel (1Cor 15.1-11)

1Corinthians 15.1-11 is the one passage in which Paul makes a formal statement of the gospel. The formal tone is set in vv 1-2. He begins, "Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which you are saved...." He covers all sides of the communication and reception of the gospel: he preached it (the word is *to evangelize* or tell the good news) and they received it (in the faith brought about by hearing, Rom 10.17). This transaction of the gospel is not left in the past. Paul moves to the present by saying, "in which also you stand." The believer has his whole stand in the gospel, and there is no thought of the believer moving beyond it. Paul underlines this in the condition of v 2: they are saved by the gospel, if they hold fast the word which he preached to them. This does not imply that a true believer will lose his salvation. What Paul is pressing is suggested in his closing remark in v 2, "unless you believed in vain." To truly believe with effect is to take one's permanent stand in the gospel. To step in and out is not to believe. Paul is drawing on the Hebrew word for faith and the OT concept of faith as steadfastness in response to God and his word. Paul's point is clear. The gospel is one in the preaching, the reception and in the ongoing stand of the believer, and this gospel was delivered "as of first importance" (v 3).

We might ask, why does Paul have to make known the gospel to believers who already had heard, received and stood in it? The discussion of 1Corinthians 15 shows that some of the Corinthians were questioning the bodily resurrection of the believer. They did not deny the resurrection of Jesus but questioned the resurrection of the believers. Paul does not appeal to some source of knowledge or doctrinal authority beyond the gospel. He takes his answer from the gospel, and as the teacher of the gospel he takes the detailed doctrine out of the gospel.

We modern Evangelical Christians readily recognize the gospel in the statements, "...that Christ died for our sins...and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day..." But, notice that we have taken these statements out of Paul's statement. They do not represent the full statement of the gospel. Included in Paul's statement of the gospel are the following:

i. That Christ died for our sins, was buried and was raised on the third day;

ii. That his death and resurrection were according to the scriptures;

iii. That he appeared to Peter and then to the twelve (v 5). Notice that v 5 is part of one sentence with vv 3-4. To the appearance of the risen Christ to the 12, Paul adds other appearances, all of which ended with the Lord's appearance to Paul as the last of the apostles. What part did these appearances of the risen Lord to the apostles play in the gospel? The answer is given in v 11: "Whether it was I or they, so we preach and so you believe." The point is that by appearing to the chosen men, the Lord commissioned them to preach the gospel, and the way they proclaimed it was what brought about the true faith in the believers.

At this point we should underscore the theme of the apostolic commission in the gospel. The good news itself does not end with the resurrection of Christ. The commission of the news is part of the news of the risen Lord. Through the word commissioned the Lord continues to work and puts into effect what he achieved through his death and resurrection. That the apostolic ministry was part of the gospel message is seen in 2Cor 4.5. Paul begins with the disclaimer, "For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord..." The subject of the good news is not the apostles but Christ Jesus as Lord. Yet, Paul's sentence goes on, "...and ourselves as your bondservants for Jesus sake." In other words, the apostolic commission from the risen Lord was part of the good news. The apostolic preaching of the news is part of the news, for without the preaching there would be no news. We do not simply believe in Christ, we believe in Christ as he is presented through his apostles.

We should also notice that Paul was carrying out the commission to communicate the gospel in 1Corinthians 15. This means that by including the apostolic commission the gospel takes in the NT given through the apostles.

There is one more element of the gospel.

iv. That by the gospel we are brought to faith. The gospel call to faith is built into Paul's opening and closing statements in vv 1-2 and v 11. The gospel is presented to bring people to faith.

Paul's formal statement of the gospel contains four elements: (1) Christ Jesus and his saving work (death, burial and resurrection); (2) the OT scriptures as the word which Christ fulfilled; (3) the apostolic commission to impart the gospel; and (4) the gospel call to faith. Faith involves our participation in Christ and his whole work, and it takes in our entire life and salvation.

b. The ground plan for apostolic teaching (Rom 1.1-6)

We have already seen that in his letter to the Romans Paul is imparting the gospel in the form of teaching for the relatively mature Christians in Rome (1.15 and 15.14-16). The apostle begins this course of teaching with a statement of the gospel that fits the pattern we saw in 1Cor 15.1-11.

i. The subject: the gospel of God (v 1b) concerning his Son (v 3a), Jesus Christ our Lord (v 4b) who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh (v 3b) and was declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead according to the Spirit of holiness (v 4). In this

statement, Paul expands on “Jesus Christ.” He is the Christ (i.e., the Anointed One) both as the Son of David and as the Son of God. As Son of David he was born according to the flesh. He was Jesus of Nazareth, truly human. As a man he was the heir of the Davidic covenant, and the title of the heir was Messiah or Christ.

As Son of God, Jesus carried out the divine role of being the source of resurrection life. Jesus did not become but was only declared to be the Son of God through the resurrection. As the source of resurrection life, and that means eternal life, Jesus stands on the side of God. He is divine and so is the object of faith.

ii. The scriptures. Part of the gospel is that God promised the good news through his holy prophets in the Holy Scriptures (Rom 1.2).

iii. The apostolic commission. Paul includes the apostolic commission as follows: “...through whom we have received grace and apostleship...” (v 5). Notice, that this is a continuation of the sentence begun in v 1. It is all one with the gospel. The commission is presented as the work of the risen Son.

iv. Finally, the commission has the purpose of bringing about the obedience of faith among all Gentiles (v 5). The obedience of faith is a key theme in Romans. It is more than the initial act of believing when a person turns to Christ. It refers to the believers’ obedience as faith-obedience. In Romans, faith is seen as obedience and so takes in the whole Christian life. Again we should notice that Paul regards his ministry in writing the letter to the Romans as included in the apostolic commission.

The whole teaching of the gospel in Romans is built on this ground plan provided in the pattern of the gospel.

c. The gospel that the risen Lord commissioned (Lk 24.46-49)

In Acts we have the record of the apostles preaching the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome. The commission to preach this gospel is given in Lk 24.46-49 (remember that Luke and Acts are 2 volumes of one work). Here the Lord gives the apostles the message that they must preach, and this message has the same four elements we found in Paul’s statement of the gospel.

i. The subject: “that Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day” (v 46).

ii. The OT scriptures fulfilled: “thus it is written” (v 46a). In Luke 24 this point is put at the head. The reason is found in the account of the appearances of the risen Lord to the disciples in this chapter. The disciples could not fathom the reality of the risen Christ, and their minds were only opened to understand and believe as the Lord explained the scriptures to them (vv 25-27) and opened their minds to understand the scriptures (vv 44-45). We should notice that the Lord affirmed that all parts of the OT scriptures speak of him and had to be fulfilled in his death and resurrection. Luke 24 shows that the OT scriptures can only be understood in light of the risen Christ and that Christ’s death and resurrection can only be understood as that which is necessary according to these scriptures. Outside of the context of the OT we cannot understand the gospel, and the gospel takes in all of the OT.

iii. The proclamation commissioned: part of the fulfilment of the scriptures in Christ was the fact that the message had to be proclaimed to all nations (v 47). The Lord ordained his chosen disciples, the apostles, to be his witnesses (v 48). In this commission, the Lord adds the role of the Spirit in the work of the gospel (v 49; see 1Pt 1.12). Through the word spoken by the human witness the Spirit of God works.

iv. The gospel call: “that repentance for the forgiveness of sins be proclaimed in His name to all nations” (v 47). When writing to believers, the apostles stated the gospel call in terms of faith, for believers are in a state of believing. In this commission to preach the gospel to the world, however, the focus is on repentance in his name, for the gospel calls them to faith in Christ as an act of repentance.

2. The paradigm of the gospel filled in (Acts)

We see in Acts that the apostles did not simply repeat a memorized message. They proclaimed the gospel in a way that addressed the specific audiences in their situation before God, but the messages were formulated according to the paradigm of the gospel set forth by the Lord in Luke 24. We will see this in the two messages given by Paul. The first was spoken to the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13 and the second to the Athenian pagans in Acts 17. In the Gentile mission, Paul had to proclaim the gospel to two audiences: the first was the Jews of the Diaspora gathered in synagogues with Gentile converts (proselytes) and adherents (the God-fearers), and the second was the pagans who had no affiliation with the Jews and no knowledge of the Jewish scriptures. Luke gives us a record of the way Paul preached the gospel to each audience. We will analyse the speeches according to the pattern of the gospel which we have learned.

a. The gospel preached in the synagogue (Acts 13.16-47)

i. The subject of the gospel (vv 23-37). Paul preached Jesus as the descendent of David (vv 22-23) who was crucified and raised from the dead (vv 29-30) and declared by God to be his Son (v 33). This was the message of what God has done (vv 16, 30, 33). Notice that Paul opens up with the God of Israel as the subject of his narrative. The message he preached was as much about God as about Jesus, for if God declared Jesus to be his Son then through Jesus God is revealed as the Father of the divine Son.

ii. The OT scriptures (vv 16-23 and vv 33-37). Paul begins with a review of Israel's history from God's choice of the patriarchs (v 17) to David (v 22). From there he moves on to the theme of the descendent of David as promised by God to Israel (v 23). Paul sets up the scene to introduce Jesus as the fulfilment of the OT promise. Then he gives scriptures that were fulfilled in his resurrection (vv 33-37).

iii. The apostolic witness to Jesus (vv 31-32). Paul gives a report of the witnesses of Jesus among the Jewish people (v 31) and presents himself and Barnabas as the ones who are bringing the good news (the word here is *evangelize*) to the Jews of the Diaspora (v 32). In vv 46-47 Paul announces the full commission of Lk 24.47: that it is written that the gospel must be preached to all nations.

iv. The gospel call (vv 38-39). Through the risen Christ, forgiveness of sins is proclaimed and all who believe are justified (declared to be righteous and cleared of all sin) from sins.

b. The gospel addressed to pagans (Acts 17.22-32)

i. The subject of the gospel: Paul announces his subject as follows: "Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you" (v 23). Paul uses the neuter *what* because he is referring to the Godhead or the divine nature (v 29). While Gentiles did not know God, they knew there was a divine nature but were mistaken in the way they related to it. So, Paul is declaring the nature of God. There is an instructive point here. The need to know the Godhead is the most basic need, and the apostle saw the gospel meeting this need. There is no spiritual need that it does not meet.

What does Paul declare about the Godhead? He makes known the divine nature through three themes: God as creator, as judge and as God of resurrection.

1) God is the creator who made all things and gives life to all (vv 24-25), made every nation from one man and is the providence that rules over human history and placed on all the burden to seek him (vv 26-27), and he made man his offspring or his kind (this is the equivalent of the image and likeness of God in Gen 1.26; vv 28-29).

2) God is the judge who will judge the world in righteousness through a man (vv 30-31). The issue of concern in the judgment and righteousness is that of mankind's way of relating to God.

3) He is the God of resurrection who raised that Man from the dead (v 31). The audience knew that the radically distinctive message about the divine nature was the truth of resurrection from the dead (v 32). God is He who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead (Rom 4.24).

ii. The OT framework: Paul did not refer to the scriptures, for his audience did not have the scriptures. Yet he set the gospel in the framework of the OT. He began with creation (vv 24-25) and went to the division of nations at Babel (v 26). He also focused in where the Law set the point of departure from the nations, i.e., idolatry (see the first two of the Ten Commandments). In announcing that God would judge the world in righteousness, he took up the OT hope as it related to all nations (the phrase is taken from Psalm 96). So, Paul announced the message of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles within the framework of the OT history of God in relation to the whole world.

iii. The commission to proclaim the gospel: Paul announced his role as proclaiming the Godhead to them (v 23). Perhaps, had they not cut him off with their sneering (v 32) he would have filled them in on what happened after the resurrection of Jesus.

iv. The gospel call: the pivotal point of his message is the universal command to repent (v 30).

c. Taking the two messages together

The churches that Paul planted were made up of people who came from both audiences. Joined together they would come to understand the gospel on both sides of the proclamation, and this would provide the basis for their understanding as believers. If we put the themes of these two messages together, we see how the apostle provided a very comprehensive framework in his proclamation. The pattern we discerned from 1Cor 15 1-11 and the other passages we looked at provide the skeleton of the gospel. The proclamation in Acts gives us the flesh that gives the message its application and form.

i. The subject of the gospel: The message to the Jews brings out the truth of **the person of Christ**. He is a real historical person, born of a descendent of David. He takes up the purpose of God for mankind, and implied in this is the doctrine of mankind's total failure. The creator's decree that mankind rule over the earth (Gen 1.26) and the promise that the divine authority over the world would be given to the Son of David is fulfilled in Jesus. He is also the Son of God, declared by God in real power by the resurrection. The God who set up and directed Israel's history is thus revealed as the Father of the unique Son, and this Son is divine as the source of resurrection and eternal life. The whole doctrine of the person of Christ as both human and divine is set up through this proclamation.

The message to the pagans is parallel to this. The preaching of Jesus and the resurrection (v 18) is really announcing the divine nature (v 23). God's role as the source of life is carried out in history in the one Man whom he raised from the dead. This man carries out the divine judgment in righteousness on earth and so is identified with God.

In the subject of the gospel, Paul also opened up the truth of **the work of Christ**. Jesus' resurrection established the fact that justification from all sins come through him instead of through the work of the Law of Moses (13.38-39). The built in logic is that death is due to sin and resurrection means that forgiveness has been secured. That resurrection from the dead comes through Jesus who died means that his death was for our sins. When Paul told the pagans that the world would be judged in righteousness through this man, he indicated that in this one man righteousness or justice (the removal of unrighteousness and establishing of a right relationship with God) was established. He pointed out that this is seen in the fact that God raised him from the dead.

ii. The whole OT: The message to the Gentiles took in creation to Babel (Gen 1-11) and the message to the Jews embraced the history from Abraham to John the Baptist (Gen 12 to Malachi and the last prophet given to Israel). The backbone of the OT that ties all together is the history. The great message of the OT is that God is the one who directs history to work out his relationship with mankind, and the gospel shows that all is fulfilled in Christ. Through his preaching, Paul gave his converts a comprehensive understanding of the whole of history as set up by God and embraced in Christ.

iii. The apostolic commission was included in the message. We see the apostles' role was not to reiterate a fixed message. They had the gift of the Spirit to work out and fill in the message in the context in which the Spirit worked through them.

iv. The gospel call: The call is applied to the real life situation. For Jews it is presented in terms of the doctrine of justification by faith apart from works. For Gentiles faith carries through the act of repentance, i.e., turning from idols to God. In both cases the gospel calls people out of the spiritual structure of their world. Conversion was not limited to private matters. The Law provided the spiritual structure of Jewish society as the gods and idolatry did for pagan society. To grasp this we must pause and grasp the significance of idolatry for pagans. The gods were seen as the forces that upheld the world order both cosmically and socially and their favour had to be secured by the pagan cult. To abandon the gods was seen as contributing to the ruin of the world order and stability. When the Jews heard the gospel as a call to leave the covenant of the Law, they felt the deepest threat to their religious community. To come to faith in God through Christ, one left his spiritual world and this went deep. Now we can see why persecution was so swift and why the believers immediately knew themselves to be a new society, a new people in Christ.

We have already seen how Paul regarded the gospel ministry as taking in both proclamation and teaching. Our analysis of the apostolic gospel adds the substance to this. The gospel is a comprehensive paradigm that embraces the whole truth of God in Christ and all of biblical doctrine. More, it provides the foundation of the believers as a new community.

C. AN OVERVIEW OF DOCTRINAL SUBJECTS.

The gospel paradigm that we have been analysing covers three main areas of doctrine. We will arrange these as follows:

- 1) God in Christ: the whole relationship between God and man. This is brought into focus in the subject of the gospel, the person and work of Christ.
- 2) From God to us: Christ through the scriptures. This takes in the scriptures on both sides of Christ, the OT leading up to Christ and the NT issuing from him.
- 3) In Christ: Our participation in Christ and the way creation is brought into the effect of Christ's work. This area is opened up by the gospel in the call to faith and the good news of salvation.

Now we will lay out the subjects in the order in which they will be taken up. The subject headings will not simply be listed. Rather, we will unfold the plan and indicate the logic of the arrangement. The subjects are numbered so that we can keep track of the sequence.

The first area: God in Christ

Doctrines based on the person of Christ.

The good news is focused by the resurrection of Jesus through which his full divine sonship is seen. This sets the first theme of the nature of God as revealed in Christ.

1. *God as eternally related within himself.* This is the doctrine of the trinity revealed in Christ.
2. *God in relation to the world.* For human knowledge of the divine nature, the first principle is that God is the creator. The gospel proclaimed the divine nature on the principle that the creator is categorically set apart in his glory from the creature. The deity of Christ is presented in the NT within this framework (Col 1.15ff.; Heb 1.1ff.; Jn 1.1ff.). In the divide between the creator and the creature, the Son of God is on the divine side. Within the Bible, only in presenting the Son of God in his glory as creator is the whole creation, invisible and visible, contemplated in one view. We have this in Colossians 1. We will look at the total doctrine of creation: creation as the work within the trinity, creation by the word of God, and the orders of creation.

Doctrines brought into focus by the humanity of Christ

From the theme of deity we will turn to that of mankind as this is brought into complete light through the incarnation. So we move one to:

3. *The doctrine of man in creation and the doctrine of the incarnation.* Jesus became human to redeem us from sin, and this turns attention to the doctrine of sin. The first truth here is that Jesus was sinless, for this was a prerequisite for his role as redeemer. So, we move on to:

4. *The doctrine of sin and the sinlessness of Christ.*

Doctrine brought into focus by the death of Jesus Christ for our sins

In the apostolic proclamation, the resurrection of Jesus means that through him there is the forgiveness of sins. It is a truth of the gospel that Jesus died for our sins. So, we go on to:

5. *The doctrine of the death and resurrection of Christ.*

The second area: From God to us: Christ through the scriptures

The gospel comprehends the whole OT and NT and defines each in relation to Christ. The apostolic commission was not limited to their proclamation but was extended to their whole role in communicating and establishing the gospel, and out of this we have the NT. The OT is the word of God that must be fulfilled, and the NT is the word of God that is the power by which the work of Christ is put into effect in us. The gospel does not leave the word of God static, as a proposition that we must interpret and apply. It brings into focus the dynamic character of that word in its function in relation to Christ. From this point of view we will look at:

6. *The doctrine of revelation in view of the person and work of Christ.* Revelation is given fully and is complete only in the person of Christ as shown through his work. This must control our understanding of all divine revelation. This fact shows why we must understand God in Christ to fully understand the doctrine of revelation.

7. *The scriptures as the written word of God.* We will take up two subjects: (1) the inspiration and nature of scripture, (2) the function of the word as defined by the gospel.

8. *The scriptures as the complete word of God.* We will take up the unity and completeness of the Bible. This will take in the subject of the canon of scripture.

9. *Understanding scripture.* We will look at what the NT teaches about the process by which we come to comprehend the scriptures.

The third area: In Christ: Our participation in Christ and the way creation is brought into the effect of Christ's work

The gospel brings us by faith into all that God has achieved in Christ. This achievement is seen in his death, resurrection and exaltation and takes in all of salvation and all of God's purposes. All has been achieved by Christ, and all that remains is for God to apply it fully to mankind and to all creation through the redemption of man. This brings us to the various themes involved in our participation in Christ and the way creation is brought into the effect of Christ's work.

10. *Faith.* Our relationship with Christ is through faith produced by the word of God. So, we will begin by examining what the Bible teaches about faith and what faith involves. Here we will work through the triad of faith, love and hope that forms the substructure of much of the apostolic teaching in the NT letters.

The application of Christ's work to us is covered in three themes: the doctrine of salvation (soteriology), the doctrine of the church (ecclesiology) and the doctrine of last things (eschatology). These doctrines will be covered as follows:

The doctrine of salvation

11. The trinity and salvation. We will look at how faith in Christ brings us into the relational dynamics of the trinity. Here we will open up the doctrine of God as the Father.

12. Salvation in Christ. We will follow the pattern of Romans: justification, sanctification and glorification. We will see how the death and resurrection of Christ fixes all aspects of salvation for us and how we have our participation in Christ's accomplishment.

13. The Spirit's role in salvation. The truth of Christ provides the objective and once-and-for-all reality of our salvation. The Spirit's role concerns the subjective and experiential side of salvation.

The doctrine of our collective life in Christ

The doctrine of salvation presents what is true of each believer equally and what makes all one. The doctrine of the church opens up the collective side of our life in Christ which answers to our collective identity and social nature as human beings. So we move on to:

14. The doctrine of the church.

The doctrine of last things

In Christ, the end of all things is fixed and revealed, and this is covered in the theme of eschatology. The themes of eschatology are represented in the gospel in the theme of the kingdom and the subject of resurrection. The theme of the kingdom is covered in the proclamation of Jesus as the Son of David who is enthroned and has received the full divine authority over earth. This theme sets the course of all further history. Resurrection is the entrance into the eternal state, and the gospel announces that resurrection has already been achieved in Jesus. The eternal life we are entering has already been manifested. We will take up the theme of last things from the two perspectives opened up in the gospel.

15. The consummation of all things in history. Historical eschatology which is the subject of prophecy

16. The consummation of all things in eternity: the eternal state. Under this heading we must look at existence after death and the doctrines of resurrection, the final judgment and the eternal state of the saved and unsaved.

The fourth theme: God's sovereignty

So far we have looked within the gospel and focused on its elements. But, we must step back and also take in that dimension of the gospel that is expressed in the very word, *gospel*. In the words of Rom 1.1, the gospel is *the good news of God*. It announces what God has done in Christ. God's initiative and action is brought into focus through the cross and resurrection of Jesus, but this is only the centre from which we are made to see the divine initiative embracing all from eternity to eternity. We will close our study by looking at God's sovereignty in his eternal purposes and in his operations through history.

17. God's sovereignty from eternity to eternity: the eternal purpose, election and predestination.

18. God's sovereignty at work through history in his operations in people's experience. It is of crucial importance that we do not dislocate this doctrine from the gospel. We must keep our understanding of it true to the whole gospel with its command given to all to repent and believe.

19. Doxology: to God be the glory both now and forever, amen. Doxology is the final theology.

D. THE TASK ASSIGNED TO US

We have stressed the need to be true to the apostolic teaching in our study of doctrine, and yet as we look over the order of doctrines we have outlined it is clear that we are doing something the apostles did not do. They did not mark off and formulate the doctrines on the many different themes and then arrange them as a whole. What we are doing arises to a large extent out of the church's battle with heresies over its long career. To fully appreciate this, we have to look at the difference between the apostles' work and our task.

1. The church's task

The difference between the apostolic role and the church's task is brought out in Ephesians. The church has been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph 2.20). The apostolic and prophetic role was to give the revelation of the mystery "which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets" (3.5), and in this Paul was made the special minister "to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ" (3.8). The foundation is complete and the revelation is fully given. But, truth revealed must be comprehended by those for whom the revelation was given. There is a difference between revelation and comprehension. The former was given fully through the apostles and prophets, and we have it in the NT. The latter is the task of the church, and the apostle takes it up in his prayer in Eph 3.14-21. He prays that the believers would be given the divine grace to "be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to the fullness of God" (vv 18-19). After the full riches of Christ were revealed, the church has the task of comprehending the whole truth.

The apostolic revelation did not take place in abstract but occurred in the process of founding and forming the church. God gives his revelation in his powerful working in history (see Eph 3.7). The comprehension also does not occur in abstract. It takes place in the church's growth through deep struggle against error. This is outlined in Eph 4.7-16. The Christians begin as immature children cast on the storm tossed sea of the shifting winds of false doctrine (v 14). From here they must be raised up by the ministry of the word to grow up into the full stature of Christ. In this process, the church grows in the comprehension of the revealed truth.

Paul makes an important point for our study in his prayer for the Christians in Eph 3.18. He does not pray that each by himself can comprehend the whole of the truth but that we would be able to comprehend the truth in all of its dimensions "with all the saints." In Eph 4.13 he points out that the full attainment is reached through all of the church's history. Yes, each generation of believers, and every individual, must seek to grasp the truth directly from the Bible. But, we must grasp biblical truth in the fellowship of the universal church. This means that a proper study of doctrine will work within the struggle of the whole church throughout its history. In our work, we are the heirs of past generations of believers and have their gains as our heritage. In reaching up to growing up to the full stature of Christ, we are standing on the shoulders of those who contributed to the upward growth of the church before us. In our studies, we will not bring in the historical material. Our interest is in being directly biblical and concise. But, we do acknowledge that we are taking up the process from where others have left it off, and this does contribute to the shape of our study.

The church has been at this process of growth through conflict for two millennia now, and we can form a clear picture of what has been involved. False doctrines are like winds blowing from a certain direction that would move the believers from the faith. The winds shift so that the truth is assailed from different angles. The heretics or false teachers usually assault the faith on a given point of truth, trying to develop it in a way that leads away from the faith of the gospel. This presses the church to defend the whole faith from the point under attack. Through this a biblical subject is marked off and becomes carefully formulated. The church has always come out of the battle enriched with a clearer and more exact understanding of the truth, but as Eph 4.14 states the human mind is crafty and shifting so that the direction of the wind only changes. With the shifting winds, the church is made to go through the whole round of doctrines, and through it all believers emerge with a fuller range of biblically formulated doctrines.

After 2000 years in the arena of conflict, we can observe an interesting pattern. The progress in doctrinal formulation to a large degree follows the outline that we have sketched. The first great subject assaulted and then doctrinally formulated was the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the trinity. When this was settled, the focus shifted over to the humanity of Christ. From here church history went into the Middle Ages also known as the Dark Ages. True faith continued its quite struggle, and in this period the doctrinal understanding of divine grace and the atonement were incubated. The Dark Ages built up the pressure for the great eruption of doctrinal clarification in the Reformation where the doctrine of scripture was for the first time fully clarified along with the doctrine of justification by faith. The biblical understanding of faith was brought into clear view and the subject of soteriology was opened up. The revivals that followed the Reformation focused on the application of the doctrine of justification by faith to the vital personal experience of grace and by this added progressively to the understanding of the new birth and sanctification.

The spread of the gospel pressed the question of the nature and unity of the church. Wherever the nature of divine grace was grasped, it was seen that the church as God sees it is made up only of those who are truly called by God's grace and have real faith. But, the belief in the invisible and universal church was held in contrast to the assumption of the institutional catholic church, which grew up in earlier centuries. This organized church was seen as the visible church in which people lived, moved and had their Christian being. As the doctrine of salvation became more fully defined, salvation was increasingly disassociated from this visible church, and this pressed the issue of the biblical doctrine of the church. A shift in perspective has occurred. The nature of the church is not accepted on the basis of what it has become through history. Rather, it must be defined from the doctrine of salvation through the gospel. We should note that this doctrinal task has not been finished. For practical purposes, Christians still work with notions of the organized form of the church (in denominationalism, ecumenicalism and church growth) that are beyond and outside of the gospel. However, the subject of the church in light of the gospel has been pressed into the foreground. The breakdown of Christendom and the sense of historical crisis in the modern world has focused attention on what the bible teaches about last things, the subject of eschatology. But, the discussion on this subject needs to be reigned in and anchored solidly in the gospel.

In one sense we have presented an oversimplification. We must balance what we have said. In every era the church has been aware of the full round of doctrinal themes and sought to understand them biblically. However, specific themes were the special focus at certain times, and as we follow the development we see the church progressively maturing in its grasp of the doctrines of the faith. We must also take note of the fact that while past victories are true gains for the church the battle continues on these subjects. Actually, in the modern era, every doctrine that has been secured for the church has been challenged from new angles. The assault comes from liberal Protestantism and its children and from aberrant sects and movements, and some of these have gained strength within evangelical Christianity. All old heresies, once defeated, have arisen in new forms presenting new challenges. The winds of doctrine that began in Paul's day have gained hurricane strength. Today we find ourselves having to defend the faith from every angle and in the process we must keep our grasp of all doctrine as a whole.

The cumulative result of church history has been bequeathed upon us, and this has resulted in a rich array of formulated doctrines. We also have coming against us the cumulative result of the wild winds of doctrine that have assailed the church, and this means we need the whole array of biblical doctrine. We have to acknowledge our indebtedness to our heritage, and this accounts for the shape of our study. We have a whole array of doctrines to make our own and to use for our needs. What we are contending for is that we must process all the doctrinal subjects in the framework of the gospel.

2. The apostolic directive (2Tim 1.13)

Paul's last letter, 2 Timothy, gives apostolic direction for the growing doctrinal crisis that began to grow while the apostles were still alive. Paul left the work of the gospel in Ephesus with Timothy and gave him the directions to provide for its continuation. Timothy was to teach what he heard from Paul to others who would be able to teach others (2Tim 2.2). Paul ordered the process by which the faithful stewardship of the

apostolic teaching would continue, and we are part of that process. Timothy was only a link in the chain, and his first duty was given in the charge: “Hold the pattern of healthy words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, by the Holy Spirit who indwells us” (vv 13-14, lit. transl.). What Timothy heard was the apostle’s proclamation and teaching of the gospel, referred to in v 11. All that the apostle said in proclamation and teaching formed a pattern, and Timothy was to hold it and work with it in his ministry. We have attempted to secure this pattern of the apostolic gospel for our study of doctrine, and as we proceed we must hold it.

Notice that Paul stresses that it was the pattern of sound or healthy words. The whole pattern of words worked to bring people to faith, to grow in faith and make for healthy spiritual life. These healthy words stood in contrast to the words of those who erred in handling the truth. Their discussions were useless and led to the ruin of the hearers rather than bringing about faith (2Tim 2.14). Their teaching led to further ungodliness (v 16) and spread like cancer (v 17). What was the problem? They did not formally deny every point of the gospel. Rather, they dislocated the doctrine of the believers’ resurrection from the apostolic preaching and teaching and turned it into an idea that went contrary to the gospel. Paul was not prepared to declare them 90% or even 50% right. They were totally wrong. A doctrine dislocated from the gospel and formulated to go contrary to it is a cancer and makes the whole set of words sick.

Paul charged Timothy, in view of the problem presented by the false teachers, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not have to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (2Tim 2.15). Timothy was not to be complacent in thinking that since he was the beloved child of the apostle (1.1) and was entrusted with the gospel (1.14) he was safe. No! He had to be diligent in handling the word of truth accurately. By the word of truth, Paul refers to the gospel as the truth in contrast to error. In the letters of Paul, the expression, “the truth,” refers to the gospel. Heresies are schools of thought that claim to be biblical and Christian, but they depart from the one and common faith that defines the true church. They are not outright denials of all biblical and gospel truth. In fact, they may affirm the larger part of truth. Rather, they are the result of not handling the gospel accurately in all subjects and dislocating themes from the gospel and then developing theologies and agendas from the dislocation. They are insidious because they operate as serious interpretations of the Bible and as applications of the Christian faith and so can operate within the churches. The heresies arise because the human mind is rather unstable in its grasp of revealed truth, even restless and shifting in its attempt to master the truth. Timothy would have to hold to the pattern of sound words presented in the apostolic gospel within the endless and subtle shifting of the mind. For this, he had to be diligent to ever handle the word of truth accurately.

There is a twofold duty: to hold the pattern of sound words and to have a studied diligence in accurately handling the gospel for proclamation and teaching.

3. Equipped to face whatever may come

We have already looked at Paul’s farewell discourse in Acts 20.17-38 and drawn on the theme of the full counsel of God in v 27. Now in closing we will look at why it was so important for Paul to declare the whole counsel of God. Notice the apostle makes his affirmation as a protest that he is “innocent of the blood of all men” (v 26). Paul is drawing from Ezk 33.1-9. The prophet was set up by God as a watchman to be on the look out for approaching danger. If the watchman saw danger approaching but did not alert the people in the city, then he would be guilty of their blood; but if he did alert the people and they did not take action to save themselves from the impending danger, he would be cleared of any guilt. God showed the prophet the coming danger, and he had to tell the people so that they could turn from their ways and be spared. As a watchman, Paul saw the coming danger. He knew the dangers that lay ahead for the churches and the elders after his departure, and he pointed them out in vv 29-30. From outside of the church savage wolves would come in who will not spare the flock (v 29). From within the group of elders “men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (v 30). These men would arise and gain influence in the absence of the apostle. What was Paul’s responsibility towards the elders in light of this prophesied danger? He had to give them the full counsel of God (v 27), and in this he declared to them all that was profitable for them (v 20).

The elders were made overseers over the flock by the Holy Spirit (v 28). Their duty was, on the one hand, to watch or be on guard against dangers that would destroy the sheep and, on the other, to shepherd or feed the flock. To carry out this work, they had to be equipped with the whole counsel of God. To learn the truth as a whole is a prerequisite to being a shepherd in the church. They had to be able to teach the flock the whole range of truth, and they had to be able to defend the truth against any assaults. Paul does not predict what areas of truth would be the point of attack. False teachers can strike from any angle and lead away from the gospel via any given theme. The only way the shepherd could be equipped was by knowing the whole counsel of God.

The point we are making can be illustrated from the world of work. A person is trained to be a master of the trade. He must understand the whole. This enables him to diagnose, figure out and solve the problems that come up. Now the problems can be unusual and unforeseen, but by knowing his trade as a whole he should be able to figure them out. It would be useless to attempt to equip a man for his work by covering all possible problems that could come up. Problems and errors are limitless in their variations. Know the whole well and you are equipped to handle the details.

Our study of doctrine is designed to equip us so that we can deal with whatever may arise. No, we will not, and could not, cover all possible errors that may arise. It is not even important to go over the problems that have arisen in the past. The human mind is very dexterous and will ever raise old problems as in new and unfamiliar forms. What is needed is a map of the terrain of doctrine that will enable us to locate where the different questions and issues touch the field of biblical doctrine. Then we can present the positive truth and engage the people with their questions and agendas with the relevant biblical teaching on the subject. Such a map must be comprehensive and concise, but it must be detailed enough to give the biblical substance and basis for the doctrine. Our study will seek to provide such a map. However, pointing others to the truth or setting them straight is only the secondary need. We need this first of all for ourselves.

Paul gives the elders a double charge to watch. They were to be on guard for themselves and the flock. Paul put no confidence in the mere fact that they were a group of elders. He knew that even from among the elders men would arise who would speak perverse things. So, each elder had to first watch over himself and the other elders and secondly watch over the flock. For both watches, the elder had to faithfully hold to the whole counsel of God as the measure of his thoughts and of what others were saying.

The priority of watching over oneself in ministry is stressed in 1Tim 4.16. Paul says, "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you." The man who serves in the word must first attend to his own faithfulness and only then can he be faithful with the truth in his ministry. This raises an important point. Often people want to study doctrine to be equipped for ministry, and that is good, but we should first of all study it for our own safety and health. After all, even the teacher and shepherd are sheep, and the needs and dangers of the sheep are his own.

The charge that Paul gave to the elders is daunting, but he did not leave them in fear and doubt about their ministry. Rather, he left them with the assurance of that which would keep them. He said, "And now I commend you to God and the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Ac 20.32). This word, entrusted to them, is the word of God's grace that works in them. Paul as an apostle had to leave. He could not be their security. The very word he gave them is the divine agency that will work in them. So, let us be diligent to learn the whole counsel of God knowing that all of it is the word of God's grace that will build us up.