



David K. Bernard

A
HISTORY
of
CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

ABRIDGED IN ONE VOLUME



WORD AFLAME PRESS
8855 Dunn Road, Hazelwood, MO 63042
www.pentecostalphublishing.com

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All Scriptures taken from the King James Version unless otherwise identified.

Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bernard, David K., 1956- author.

Title: A history of Christian doctrine : abridged in one volume /
David K. Bernard.

Description: Hazelwood : Word Aflame Press, 2016. | Includes
bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016028212 (print) | LCCN 2016028591 (ebook)
| ISBN 9780757750052 (alk. paper) | ISBN 9780757752001 ()

Subjects: LCSH: Theology, Doctrinal--History. | Church history. |
Oneness doctrine (Pentecostalism)--History.

Classification: LCC BT21.3 .B47 2016 (print) | LCC BT21.3 (ebook)
| DDC 230.09--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016028212>

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Preface

This book surveys the history of Christian doctrine from approximately AD 100 through the twentieth century. It generally follows chronological order and identifies the most significant events in church history, but the emphasis is on tracing doctrinal developments. To further this purpose, it discusses some events thematically rather than in strict chronological sequence.

We will use the words *church* and *Christian* in the most general sense, recognizing that the visible church structure is not necessarily the New Testament church as defined by message and experience. We will discuss the major groups of people who have identified themselves as Christian.

Occasionally material in this book may seem complex and foreign, but some treatment of details is necessary to provide background and to impart a feel for significant issues and problems. The main objective is to introduce the leading historical figures and movements in Christendom and to convey a basic understanding of their doctrines.

This information will provide various perspectives on biblical issues and will aid in dialogue with people of different backgrounds. The reader will see when, how, and why certain biblical doctrines were abandoned and

certain unbiblical doctrines embraced, and will see how God has worked to restore and revive fundamental truths that were largely forgotten.

This book is an abridgement of three volumes on church history published by Word Aflame Press between 1995 and 1999. The material for these books was derived from teaching church history for five years at Jackson College of Ministries in Jackson, Mississippi. The rough drafts were transcribed from lectures taped for the extension program of Kent Christian College in Dover, Delaware. Special thanks goes to Karla Christian, Vita Sharpe, Ruth Patrick, Connie Bernard, and especially Claire Borne for transcribing this material.

It is important to remember that only the Bible is our authority for doctrine. We cannot establish spiritual truth by history, tradition, majority opinion, great leaders, or personal experiences, but only by the Word of God.

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The Study of Doctrine in Church History

Why is it important to study the history of doctrine in Christianity? We can identify several reasons. First, a study of this nature can help to confirm the apostolic doctrine as revealed in Scripture and to analyze the teachings of God's Word in light of discussions in church history.

A second purpose is to trace the development of false doctrines. If we conclude that some doctrines taught in Christendom today are erroneous, the question arises, Where did these false doctrines begin? Church history can help show us which doctrines were original, which were not, how false doctrines entered Christendom, and how they became, in some cases, part of the mainstream of historic Christendom.

A third benefit of this study is learning about the major denominations and movements, thereby providing a context for dialogue today. The goal is to identify each major category of Christendom and learn where it began, why it began, and what its distinctive, characteristic doctrines are.

Scope of Study

At the outset, let us define the boundaries of our study. We will start with the death of the apostles, or the end of the apostolic era; therefore, we will begin with the second century AD. By using the words *church* and *Christianity*, we will not make a value judgment as to the accuracy of the doctrines of various groups. Rather, we will use the words *church*, *Christian*, and *Christendom* in the most general sense, speaking of the visible structures known collectively as Christianity. When we speak of Christian doctrines we do not mean that a particular belief is correct or has been officially endorsed, only that some people within Christendom have believed and taught it.

We would expect to find true apostolic believers within the visible, historical church, or at least associated in some way with it at various times, but the visible church is not always identical to the invisible church, the true church, the church of God. We will focus on all those who have historically gone by the label of Christian, whether or not their experience and doctrine seem identical to that of the apostles in the first century.

Our study will be an overview, not an exhaustive investigation. We will not describe in great detail all the movements, personalities, and events in church history, but we will seek to give at least a survey of church history, particularly focusing on doctrinal history. We will not place heavy emphasis on names, places, and dates, but we will look primarily at the origins of various doctrines and movements throughout the history of Christianity.

Major Themes

1. *A great falling away.* It is evident when we study early church history that there was a great falling away, a great infusion of false doctrine. Indeed we find warnings and indications of this falling away in the New Testament itself. It contains admonitions to the early church not to embrace false doctrine

as well as warnings concerning false prophets, false teachers, and false doctrines that were already creeping in among the churches. (See Matthew 7:15; Romans 16:17–18; I Corinthians 11:19; Ephesians 4:14; II Timothy 4:3; Hebrews 13:9; II Peter 2:1; I John 4:1; II John 10; Revelation 2:14, 15, 24.) It also predicts that in the latter days would come a great falling away, seducing spirits, and doctrines of demons. (See Matthew 24:11–12, 24; II Thessalonians 2:3; I Timothy 4:1.)

Even in the first-century church, then, problems had already begun to develop. In Revelation 2 and 3, letters to seven churches in Asia Minor reveal serious errors of doctrine and practice in various local assemblies in the first century. In the second century, this process of doctrinal corruption accelerated. In short, we find a great influx of false doctrines over the centuries. That is not to say these doctrines polluted everyone, but widespread heresies and doctrinal difficulties certainly existed in the first few centuries.

2. *A faithful remnant.* At least a few people in church history continued to hold onto the apostolic doctrine and the apostolic experience. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, “On this rock I will build my church,” speaking of the rock of the revelation of who He was, Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God. He said “the gates of hell will not prevail against” the church, so as a matter of faith we can affirm that God has always had a people throughout history. (See Romans 11:2–5.) He has always had a church. The apostolic church as defined by the experience and message of the Scriptures has never entirely faded away.

This belief does not mean that as a matter of history we can necessarily identify a fully apostolic group known by a particular name at every decade throughout the hundreds of years of church history. It does not mean we can trace an unbroken historical succession of an organization or series of organizations. It does not mean that at every point in time a group of

people taught every doctrine we believe to be biblical. We can find in various centuries, however, people who baptized in Jesus' name, people who received the Holy Spirit with the sign of tongues, and people who enunciated various doctrines that we think are important to being truly apostolic.

At some times, great numbers of people adhered to the apostolic faith; at other times, perhaps just a handful did so. For certain decades we may not have a historical record of anybody who was identical to the apostles in experience and teaching. But as a matter of faith, even when there may be historical gaps, we can affirm that God had a people born of water and the Spirit, believers who experienced biblical salvation.

3. *A circular pattern.* We can discern a trend of events in church history, and we can represent it by a circle. The church began with great evangelistic growth, with a great burst of power and fervor as recorded in the Book of Acts. Then came a gradual falling away into false doctrine, and as this falling away intensified, for the most part the visible church fell into apostasy, having little or no real experience with God.

This apostasy was not permanent, at least not in a historical sense. Over the centuries, particularly after the medieval period, we find a step-by-step restoration of various doctrines, beliefs, and experiences, returning closer to the original apostolic pattern.

It is not entirely accurate to say "the church" was restored, because the true church as defined by apostolic experience is what it is. The apostolic message has always been the same; the true church of God has always been defined in the same way. In that sense the church never needs to be restored. If there were people in a certain century who were filled with the Spirit, then they did not need restoration to that experience. When we speak about restoration, we mean a renewed understanding of certain doctrines and a widespread acceptance of certain works