

The Apostolic Foundation

Why it is vital to understand that apostolic NT doctrine is the foundation of Scripture and the key to doctrine.

There are increasing numbers of people who are so foolish as to believe that the NT is almost worthless. There are others who would not go this far but, nevertheless, consider that the NT is much less important than the OT, which they interpret literally. Amongst these would be the many and various Jewish Root groups. I have read articles by church leaders in this group who have said that we do not need the NT, everything we need is in the OT. This is folly of the first order. In fact, it is close to blasphemy since Christ is only revealed directly in the NT.¹ This identification with Jewishness thus becomes as tragic as the Jews themselves who have no Messiah and never will have (unless they repent and believe in Christ).

The truth is that the OT is looking forward to a conclusion from start to finish, and not getting there. It begins with a curse and ends with a double curse (Gen 3:14; Mal 3:9). From the very beginning (Gen 3:15) it points forward to a coming Deliverer who will be the fulfilment of all the OT prophecies and who would usher in a new covenant and a new kingdom, fulfilling the law and manifesting God in human form. Though God was often gracious in the OT to the elect, grace proper only came with the revelation of Christ (Jn 1:14-17).

So, we first need the NT in order to read the life story and resurrection history of the Messiah, the Christ, the inheritor of all that is promised in the OT. This is so important that we need to read it from four different viewpoints. We cannot understand grace without the NT revelation.

Then we need to read the history of what happened afterwards, what the effect of the Christ's ministry was and how the church came to be built and expanded. This is necessary to show the truth about how the church begins, grows and develops and to show how different it is from the misshapen churches that followed the apostolic age in history.

But most importantly we need the didactic teaching of the apostles. These men were chosen by the Christ himself in order to spread his message. They knew him, lived with him, suffered with him and were trained by him. These are the men whom we can trust to give us the true message of the Gospel of God, delivered from heaven by God's Son. They are the prime witnesses to Christ.

We can learn a certain amount from the shadows of the OT which point to Christ in various ways, but what we really need is to see the reality and not the shadow.² It is the NT that gives us the reality; the OT only contains the shadow, the type, the symbolic, the historic pointing forth, the hope. It has been truly said that the NT is the OT revealed; the OT is the NT concealed.³

But more than that even, the apostles gave us the final words of Christ when he had ascended to heaven; we need to discuss this further.

¹ This is the key issue with Jewish Root theology, it redirects the attention of supposed believers away from Christ, to concentrate on a fleshly nation. This is blasphemy in itself.

² Col 2:16-17; Heb 8:5, 10:1.

³ By Augustine and Justin Martyr, or words to that effect.

The apostles as messengers of the truth from heaven; the executors of the last testament of Christ

Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. ... I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear *them* now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own *authority*, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare *it* to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare *it* to you. Jn 16:7-15

Jesus could only give a certain level of teaching while he was on earth; but even this was too much for his disciples. Time and again Jesus complained that they were too slow to understand what he was telling them. This was so much the case that when he died on the cross they were not expecting him to be raised,⁴ despite his clearly telling them that this would happen.⁵

It was impossible for Jesus to fully expound doctrines which flowed from the cross, resurrection and ascension since they could not even grasp the principles of atonement at that time. It took the filling with the Spirit for them to be able to fully grasp what had happened as well as the teaching that the risen Christ gave them in the forty days before the ascension.

The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. Acts 1:1-3

However, after the apostles were baptised in the Spirit at Pentecost, they were able to digest and comprehend all that Jesus had said and begin to receive new revelations from heaven as the Spirit brought the things of Christ to them and guided them into all truth.

Under the inspiration of God they were then able to write Scripture, which became the apostolic teaching contained in the whole NT.

Thus, as Jesus promised in John 16, through the gift of the Spirit of Christ, the apostles received the final words of Jesus from heaven. This is the final testament (witness) of Christ to the church, which is vitally important to understand.

Christ is God. He is equal with God and is God manifest. In his glory at the Father's right hand, being King of the Universe, Christ sends the Holy Spirit with what remains of his teaching that the apostles need to understand for the church. Thus, what the apostles write down under divine inspiration are the final words of Christ from heaven; the final part of the whole divine revelation that we call Scripture.

This is God's last word to man. As a man's last will and testament is the man's last words to his relatives on earth, and his most important, having legal authority, so the NT is God's last words to his people. It is thus the most important thing that he has to say. Not only that but it required the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out to the church before these words could even be sent.

⁴ E.g. Lk 24:6-11.

⁵ E.g. Matt 16:21, 'From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day'.

Apostolic teaching is, therefore, the most important words in written Scripture.

It is only by first understanding apostolic teaching that we can understand and interpret the difficult doctrines in the OT. We must never reverse this order; we must understand NT teaching first and then use that to explain complex thoughts in the OT. To reverse that principle (as Dispensationalists do) is to play havoc and cause damage to theology.

Apostolic revelation and doctrine is fundamental to Biblical understanding.

To affirm that the apostles have a prime place in Biblical revelation, Scripture itself reveals them in certain key positions of authority in history, didactic teaching and apocalyptic symbolism.

The apostles as having the keys of the kingdom

Jesus the prime key owner

I will clothe him with your robe and strengthen him with your belt; I will commit your responsibility into his hand. He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem And to the house of Judah. The key of the house of David I will lay on his shoulder; So he shall open, and no one shall shut; And he shall shut, and no one shall open. Isa 22:21-22

I *am* He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death. Rev 1:18

And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, 'These things says He who is holy, He who is true, He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens'. Rev 3:7

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. Rev 20:1

Then Jesus said to them again, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who *ever* came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.' Jn 10:7-9

Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.' Jn 14:6

Jesus is, without doubt, the one who controls the doors / gates of the kingdom. He not only controls the door but he is the door. The access to the kingdom is through Christ alone.

However, Christ has delegated the power to open and shut the door to the apostles. That is, the preaching of the Gospel to bring people into the kingdom was allotted to the apostles. Thus it is by their teaching that people come in and by their discipline that people are cast out. Apostolic teaching determines who is in and who is out of the kingdom.

In simple terms, this means that the apostles finalised the doctrinal details of salvation and the whole counsel of God. Ends that appeared to be loose in the OT are sewn together in NT doctrine. The theology of the NT forms the foundation that undergirds and explains all Biblical theology.

Didactic texts regarding apostles

Simon Peter answered and said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of

the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ. Matt 16:16-20

The power of the keys is the power to open and shut the gate. Thus Peter (standing for the apostles) is the gatekeeper, the door of the church. This is the role the apostles had in the early church, establishing who would come in to the kingdom.⁶ The power of the keys lies in the preaching of the pure Gospel.

The real gate (entrance) is Christ himself, the door of the sheepfold, but he delegates that power to the preaching of the Gospel through his body on earth. It is the apostles who are initially responsible for teaching the future generations of the church what the Gospel is. The NT apostolic teaching is nothing but a commentary on the Gospel.

The basis of people getting through the door is whether they have the revelation that Christ is the Son of the living God, as Peter did. This is the rock on which the church is established.

The Apostles as a foundation of the church

Jesus the prime foundation

For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 1 Cor 3:11

Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. Eph 2:20-21

Clearly everything in God's kingdom is predicated upon Christ; thus the chief foundation of God's work is Christ. Without the Lord there is nothing.

However, in his wisdom, the Lord chose the 12 apostles to be delegated authorities of the kingdom under him. These have a foundational impact amongst the Lord's people; they have a great importance.

Didactic texts

According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 1 Cor 3:10-11

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. Eph 2:19-21

In the Corinthian text, Paul is saying that when he planted the church in Corinth, he acted like an architect laying the right foundation, which is Christ himself. This is one aspect of the connection of church foundations with the apostles; churches planted according to apostolic teaching are founded directly upon Christ and not a man or a teaching.

In the Ephesians text Paul is making a different point. Jesus is (of course) the chief foundation stone, the most vital thing in confirming the church. However, the apostles are likened to adjacent foundations along with the prophets. What this means is that it is the teaching of the apostles and the OT prophets (i.e. all the OT) that forms the basis of the

⁶ In this passage the kingdom and the church are synonymous. 'Ekklesia' (church) refers to God's people called out of the world; 'basileia' (kingdom) refers to the rule of God in his people shut in to his reign. 'Kingdom' is the scope of divine reign; 'church' is the scope of God's mercy.

church. It is the word of God that founds the church and this word is expressed first by the OT prophets, and this is then interpreted and codified into NT doctrine by the apostles.

Thus we have two things:

The first is that apostles found new churches upon Christ himself and nothing else. The basis of all genuine local churches is Christ. He is the centre of all that the church stands for. When a modern church planter founds a church according to apostolic teaching, that church is centred upon Christ.

The second is that the practical basis of church life is the exposition into doctrine of the word of God. This was first by the prophets of the OT, and all the teaching that is contained in the OT. These truths, which contain the shadows and principles of the full exposition, must be interpreted according to the doctrine of the apostles. Apostolic doctrine moulds the teaching of OT prophets into conformity with the final words of Christ. It is this apostolic truth that is the foundation of the church because it is the teaching of Christ himself.

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine. Acts 2:42

Symbolic texts

The city coming down from heaven is a picture of the church:

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife.' And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. Rev 21:9-11

The symbol of the city had long been used by prophets to describe the realm of God's kingdom and people, going back at least as far as Abraham. So the city as a whole is the bride of Christ, the people of God: "Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife." ... and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem.'

However, certain aspects are picked out in this city and given some importance. Chief among these are the apostles.

The apostles as gates

Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are *the names* of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel. Rev 21:12

So Jesus said to them, 'Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.' Matt 19:28

And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed *one* upon Me, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Lk 22:29-

30

In the first instance we have the gates of the city, which number 12. This is the number of covenant, of divine governance in men, the sphere of those related to God. To show the continuity with the Old Covenant, the 12 tribes of Israel are mentioned. However, apostolic teaching throughout the NT shows that this is not a reference to the literal 12 tribes since the kingdom is not earthly, material, fleshly or Jewish. There is nothing distinctly Jewish or earthly in the new world, in the resurrection. Just one text demonstrating that Israel

was finished at the cross is Matthew 21:43.⁷ The 12 tribes are mentioned because they are symbolic of God's covenant with mankind.

To show that the fleshly 12 tribes are not important, we see Jesus' clear statement that in the resurrection (the time when the symbolic city comes down), when Jesus is revealed in glory, the apostles sit on thrones judging fleshly Israel's 12 tribes. Clearly the apostles are far more important than the 12 tribes; indeed, the tribes are being judged for their sin.

So, although the 12 tribes are mentioned as the gates to emphasise connection with the OT and covenant, above them are the 12 apostles. The names of the gates relate to the 12 tribes but the authority above the tribes are the 12 apostles.

The gates (12 tribes) represent the fulness of the elect, those who have come in through the gate to the church. However, the role of judging the actual 12 tribes belongs to the apostles. Again the apostles are singled out as having special (foundational) authority amongst the elect.

The apostles as foundation stones

Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. Rev 21:14

More important than the gates are the foundation stones. Without these the city walls would fall down and there would be no protection for the people. There are 12 foundations and these are named as the apostles of the Lamb.⁸

This means that the weight of the city walls (that which protects and encompasses the people) rests upon the apostles. In symbolic terms, the apostles are foundational to God's kingdom.

The apostles have understanding of the mysteries of the kingdom (the keys of Biblical interpretation)

Then His disciples asked Him, saying, 'What does this parable mean?' And He said, 'To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest *it is given* in parables, that "Seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand."' Lk 8:9-10

He answered and said to them, 'Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.' Matt 13:11-13

Jesus answered and said **to** him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven.' Matt 16:17

We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden *wisdom* which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 1 Cor 2:7-8

By revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ). Eph 3:3-4

⁷ Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.

⁸ Apostles of the Lamb (Peter, John, James etc.) are so named to distinguish them from apostles of the church (Barnabas [Acts 14:14], Andronicus or Junia [Rm 16:7] etc.)

Thank God that through the apostolic revelation in the NT, the church now has access to these mysteries (Col 1:26). Without this revelation given to the apostles we would not understand most Biblical doctrines in their fulness and not understand some at all.

It is vital to remember that Jesus first gave his apostles the key to understand the depths of divine revelation, and particularly the mystery of God revealed in the flesh, in Christ. He opened their minds to understand how the OT Scriptures all pointed to Christ (and not to Israel; Lk 24:27) and subsequently sent his Spirit to further guide them into truth. They passed on that teaching in didactic instruction to individuals to pass it on to others, and also wrote down the NT under divine inspiration.

Without the apostolic foundation of theological teaching we would be blind to doctrine; everything would be a mystery, as it was in the OT.

The apostles as witnesses of Christ

You are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high. Lk 24:48-49

When the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning. Jn 15:26-27

You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. Acts 1:8

We are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, *even* to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God *to be* Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins. Acts 10:39-43

Then he said, 'The God of our fathers has chosen you [Paul] that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.' Acts 22:14-15

The following night the Lord stood by him and said, 'Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.' Acts 23:11

I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God. Acts 26:15-18

When Jesus had fulfilled his mission on earth to redeem men from their sins, he was taken back to heaven in order to be crowned king of the universe and to reign on high, awaiting the Father's time to reign on earth. Having trained the apostles he then promised the gift of the Spirit of Christ to empower them to understand God's word. Thus they were appointed to be the official witnesses of the Messiah.

Jesus is now in heaven; if anyone wants to know God and understand his word then they must consult the apostles who are the appointed witnesses of God's Son. These witnesses have legal authority, by the command of Jesus, to testify to all that Jesus did, said and taught, and explain what his will from heaven is now.

We must not go to any other source other than what the Lord Jesus commanded and appointed. This source is the apostles. Thus they taught the immediate generation of believers after the ascension. However, by divine inspiration they also wrote down all the necessary teaching of the risen Christ so that future generations of believers could access that knowledge.

It we wish to see the prime witness to Christ, the appointed witness, then we must study what the apostles wrote. It is worse than absolute folly to ignore what the apostles taught; indeed, if a person refuses to acknowledge that the apostles are the witnesses of Christ, that is tantamount to proving that one is an unbeliever, someone who does not submit to Christ's Lordship and will.

Conclusion

It is crucial that believers understand the vital importance of apostolic teaching. If they fail to give the apostles priority in determining the bounds of complex doctrines (only hinted at in the OT) then they will accept heterodox and even unorthodox ideas.

Many of the current heresies plaguing the church arise from failing to understand this principle. As such, people build up doctrines from a literal interpretation of the OT that are countermanded by apostolic teaching (which they ignore).⁹

This means that believers must take time to especially study what the apostles say.

In recent years it has been fashionable to downplay apostolic teaching or even suggest that Paul was opposed to Christ and introduced novel but wrong ideas.¹⁰ This is nonsense. People attack apostolic doctrine because it is so demanding and so important. The most important features of revelation will always attract hostile concentration because they threaten the enemy most.

If you want to be a good Biblical theologian, you must first be a good NT exegete.¹¹

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⁹ Examples of this are: Dispensationalism as a system. The whole of Jewish Root teaching (which ignores many plain things, such as Matt 21:43; Rm 2:28; Col 2:16-17; Gal 3:16, 29; Phil 3:2-3; Heb 8:13). Charismatic appropriation of Old Covenant forms and false hopes (e.g. a false type of OT prophetic office; utilising Old Covenant worship rituals). The Jews appropriated the covenant promises to Abraham to themselves alone (despite being commanded not to) but in the NT these promises are universalised in Christ and in the Spirit. Thus the promises about the land now extend far beyond Israel to include the whole world and the Gospel given to Abraham embraces people of every nation not just Jews.

¹⁰ Feminists often make this point, emphasising that Jesus supported women but Paul alienated them (not true he also had many female colleagues).

¹¹ Biblical exegesis is the study and explanation of the actual text of Scripture; determining what the text actually says.