The Community of God, pt. 7 The Apostles' Doctrine

1. There are times when the simplest answer is the best. In First Peter 3:15, we are called to be ready to give an answer…but what is that answer? (The story of OCUSA lectureship). Our answer, in its entirety, is "Jesus."

2. When the community of God was being formed early in the Book of Acts (yes, there was an earlier community among the Jews), they were said to have devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42). What was that teaching?

3. In the church in which I was raised, it was everything! Music, hair, clothes, food and drink, games, diversions, church organization, and more. Much, much more. And yet, in Acts 2 we are looking at a people who are just beginning to become the community of God as reorganized by the reality of Jesus and the adoption of all by faith in Him. No books had been written. Paul was not a Christian yet.

4. I was told that the apostles taught them everything about everything, though we see no evidence for that. I was told that they were hammered into conformity by these teachings, though history doesn't show us that and neither do the books of the NT when they were eventually written (the churches in Corinth and Philippi would barely recognize each other). Too many assumptions are made when one makes everything "the apostles' doctrine."

5. When we try to shoehorn everything we believe about anything into a box called "the apostles' doctrine," we end up with a huge, long list of do's and don'ts which is exactly what the Bible says NOT to do. (Colossians 2:20-23)

6. And each new reader of scripture, each new denomination comes along and "finds" that its list of do's and don'ts IS the apostles doctrine. How do we deal with this and, more important, how do we discover what the apostles' doctrine really is? By forensic examination! We backwards engineer our way to it by looking at the effect of it.

7. We do this all the time in science. Our belief in dark matter and dark energy is entirely based on the effects they have on what we can see and the usefulness of those theories when it comes to making predictions in physics or astronomy (among others).

8. What was the effect of living in the apostles' doctrine? Acts 2:42-47. It is here that we see how a divided community in an unprepared world saw itself, survived and, against all odds, thrived against the odds.

9. Let's look at the sermon itself in Acts 2:17-21. This would be a summary, a Cliffs Notes, of a much longer series of sermons and dialogues held between apostles and groups all day long. People were witnessing the fulfillment of prophecy, but they had to be told about it or they would have missed it (we rarely see what is happening because we live in the past and future, not the present).

10. The Spirit came…as foretold. Young and old, men and women will all play a part. God did wonders on the earth. God is upsetting the way the world does things. Our entire universe is being upended. And everyone is invited to join in the story.

11. Our answer to all things is: Jesus is the Son of God. He proved himself by miracles, wisdom, and the testimony of a holy life. Even after being rejected and killed, He was raised from the dead, conquering death and offering us eternal life.

12. He has "made known to [us] the paths of life and we will find joy in His presence."

13. We already know that the Holy Spirit has arrived in power on that Day of Pentecost. We have seen the apostles tell all in attendance to be baptized for the remission of their sins and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (not "gifts of" as in miraculous powers, but the actual presence of the Spirit in us).

14. In 2:40, we see that the apostles understood all too well that the world they were entering, and that the converts were entering, was new and hostile to Jesus and this new kingdom. It still is! How did they survive and how did they react to this new reality? See vv.42-47.

15. They devoted themselves to being in each other's lives. Jesus came to same us all. He never intended for us to live in isolation. It takes all of our talents, abilities and possessions to make this work. Sharing life is the first thing mentioned in the list of effects the apostles' doctrine had on the people.

16. Sharing meals is next and it is quickly followed by mutual caring and sharing of all goods. They did not expect the world and its governments to supply their needs; they took care of each other. We know from later books that this was quite a draw to outsiders. While none of us are likely to become Amish, we admire the way they work with each other so that no farm or business goes under, no family goes without food or care. What if Christians decided to be do the same but, rather than in isolation, we did so in our open communities (like St. Patrick) where people could see the difference between us and the world?

17. The breaking of bread is mentioned twice as meals are very important in Christian culture. Eating together means something as does the sharing of food (and Corinth came in for a kicking when they forgot that).

18. There was not a hint of the scarcity mindset that so plagues us to this very day, even when we are surrounded by goods to the point where many of them are wasted, rot, rust, or are forgotten. They could give freely to each other because they believed in the Christ community. They believed in the generosity of God and they wanted to model that to each other.

19. What would it be like if the commercials about our money, our health, our medications, gold, retirement savings, and Medicare didn't frighten us at all? What would it be like if we knew we could rely on each other and others knew they could rely on us?

20. This other-worldly transformation is because our answer to fears of the future or present or regrets of the past is: Jesus. THAT is the apostles' doctrine, and ours.