

D, E and P

A three-legged stool is of no use without a leg. Take one away and it cannot function as a seat. A wise man has described the Christian life as being like a three-legged stool. Its legs are doctrine, experience and practice. Each needs to be in place.

Doctrine is God's truth. It is the truth about who he is, what he has created, and what he has done, is doing and will do. We discover these things infallibly in the Bible. Of all writings, it alone will never lead us astray or into error. Instead those who, under the guidance and instruction of the Holy Spirit discover its message, find its truth sets us free.

Experience refers to a Christian's encounter with God. It is the fellowship that he or she personally enjoys with God. It includes all the ways God deals with the believer: how he convinces him of sin; how he assures him of forgiveness; how the Holy Spirit indwells; and how God enables him to have a sure hope of heaven.

Practice includes the way believers respond to God. Having heard God's word they know that as Jesus obeyed God so must they. Moreover, they know they are to discover and do God's will in every sphere of life.

There are countless Christians who endorse this advice. They believe it represents a fair summary of what the Bible teaches about living as a Christian. If it does - and we believe it does - then it teaches us two vital truths. First, that all three legs need to be in place. And secondly, that each leg needs to be looked after with care.

First, each leg needs to be in place. A Christian whose knowledge of the truth is defective will face problems. He or she will struggle to understand who God is and what he is doing - especially in their own life.

A Christian whose experience of God is found wanting will likewise face trouble. He or she will lack assurance and find it very difficult to live the Christian life. Without Christ we can do nothing. Being a Christian entails being led by the Holy Spirit of the living God.

A Christian who fails to live as God wants will also find it hard to live the Christian life. Instead of knowing God's blessing and help, he or she will feel God's displeasure.

So each leg, be it doctrine, experience or practice, needs to be in place.

Secondly, each leg needs to be nursed and nurtured. Being a Christian is never a static experience. We either grow or backslide; go forward or slip backwards. We never stand still. But how do we enjoy growth? By looking after doctrine, experience and practice.

We are to grow in *wisdom*. We do mean general knowledge, nor even the specialist knowledge of a particular subject. Instead we refer to the knowledge of God, and to his ways with and for us. If we are to mature in such knowledge it is essential we hear and rehear the message of the Bible. From first to last each believer needs to hear God's written word so that we may know the living word, the Lord Jesus Christ. We therefore need to hear God's word read and taught. And we need to think over what we hear, working out how it applies to us and in our everyday living.

We are to learn from *experience*. Sometimes we make mistakes. We are to discover what God teaches us through them. Sometimes God takes us through painful and sad events or suffering. We can find God helping us in and through them. Sometimes we are perplexed. We are to cast our cares onto him and God will show us his care and love for us.

We are to *practice* what we believe and proclaim. Our witness will count for little if we tell someone that God wants us to keep his commands and yet fail to honour them! That is to play the part of a hypocrite. As the chorus puts it, there is no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey.

Those ignorant of God's truth; those who do not know him or his love for us; and those who fail to obey him will not go far. Those who thwart his purposes will find it impossible to live the Christian life. Those who nurture these things flourish.