

Improper Sources of Authority

(by Bob Pulliam)

When you were little, did your parents every give you something to do, and you knew they meant business? What if your friend had told you that you could play instead, and so you did? Would your parents have said, "Oh, well, if your friend told you to play instead, then you had every right not to obey us."? Many people in religion today are listening to voices other than that of our heavenly Father. Here are some of the most common reference points for people's authority in religion:

The Old Testament...

Many practices in the religious world are justified by going to the Old Testament as a standard of authority. A good example is a separate priesthood, creating a clergy/laity distinction. But are we under the Old Testament law?

The first thing most people miss is that the law of Moses (Old Testament) was never given to all mankind. It was the law delivered to the Israelites at mount Sinai. In Deuteronomy 5:2ff we read: "The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, those who are here today, all of us who are alive. The Lord talked with you face to face on the mountain from the midst of the fire." Gentiles were only obligated to keep the Old Testament law when they were among the Israelites. Incidentally, Israelites were never commanded to convert other people to their religion. In fact, the law of Moses created a very distinct separation in customs and laws that made them very different from the gentiles. What specific law the gentiles were to keep is irrelevant to the Bible story, and never fully defined. We do know, however, that other people did serve God during those times.

The second thing that must be considered is that fact that the Old Testament law is no longer in effect for those to whom it was given. Paul told the Galatians that it was a "schoolmaster" (tutor, guardian), but that they were no longer under that schoolmaster (Gal 3:23ff). He also told them (Gal 5:1-3) that keeping part of the law made one a debtor to keep the whole law (Sabbath, blood sacrifices, stoning sinners, etc...) In Colossians 2:14 we read that Jesus nailed it to the cross. According to Hebrews 10:1-10, the law could not provide what was needed, so it was taken away and another established.

Does this mean that the Old Testament has no value? Certainly not! We can learn much from the way God interacted with people of Old. Many prophecies in the Old Testament validate the New Testament, and give us strong faith in Jesus as the Christ. Much wisdom can be gleaned from general principles taught in books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. In fact, some of our understanding of the New Testament has to come from a knowledge of the Old (especially for Romans, Galatians and Hebrews). But none of this involves our looking to the Old Testament law to see what God demands of us. Here is the bottom line: we cannot authorize practices by a law under which we do not live.

The Creeds...

The word creed means "I believe". A creed is a statement of beliefs organized and written. When I speak of creeds, most people think of the Apostles Creed, or some such short statement of faith. I actually have creeds upon which churches are built in mind. Most denominations follow some form of creed, although the members of those denominations

often don't realize it. The Baptists have Hiscox's Manual (some follow the Philadelphia Confession of Faith); the Lutherans follow the Augsburg Confession; Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, and scores of others have their creeds. These creeds claim to follow the Bible, and are usually not mentioned because they are primarily used by the clergy. When asked about a creed, the clergy will usually downplay its role, but that answer denies the purpose for its existence. The denomination with a creed is founded on that creed. When one preacher was asked about which took top priority (the Bible or the creed), he didn't hesitate to answer, "The creed." Is one following the Bible, when he is following the creed? You can claim that the creed follows the Bible; but why does it exist if it is precisely what the Bible is? And if it is less, it is too little. If it is more, it is too much. The Bible does not need for man to come along and produce another authoritative work. The Bible is all the authority God intended for us in serving Him!

The creed really amounts to nothing more than tradition. The same problem existed in the first century. The Jews had written a type of creed which was to be followed. It was supposed to interpret the law. It was the tradition of the elders. You can read about it in Matthew 15:1-9. Here is how Jesus concluded that section of scripture:

"And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

The Preacher (Priest, Pastor, Father, etc...)...

It is not uncommon for the preacher to be elevated to the plane of infallibility. The assumption is that amount of time studied multiplied by fancy position equals accuracy. Wisdom and knowledge are not always in the hands of those who seem to have spent much time in books. For one thing, it is often only an assumption that the Bible is what has been studied. Some preachers rarely ever open a Bible. Their lessons are passed down to them from the church, and they deliver them. They study alright; but their study is devoted to the teachings of that denomination. That is the problem with religious Seminaries. They teach a great deal, alright. But the Bible is not the basis. Creed is basis, and an effort is made to make the Bible fit the creed. And then there are the preachers who spend the greater amount of their time driving around visiting folks. People think they study a lot, but they don't have time!

That we should be careful who we follow is driven home in the Bible continually. A good Old Testament example would be Solomon. Here is the wisest man who lived until Jesus came to earth. But he was still able to fall away from God (I Kgs 11:1-13). Peter is an excellent example from the New Testament. Not only did he deny the Lord three times, but after he had done much preaching in the church, he played the hypocrite and even drew Barnabas into his error (Gal 2:11ff). Should Barnabas have followed Peter in this matter? No, but then it's easy to follow someone else. Isn't that why this is such a problem today? People are what they are because someone else led them there. It may be parents religion, or a friend, or spouse. A very dangerous way to get to heaven.

Majority Rule...

Many people feel they are safe believing what a large number of people believe. After all, how could all of these people be wrong? Let me ask you: How could all of the Muslims be wrong? How could all of the Hindus be wrong? How could all of the _____ (pick any large religion) be wrong? Size means nothing!

It was Jesus who said: "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it." (Mt 7:13f) Now you can say He didn't mean that, but he did say it, didn't he? And what did He mean? He did not mean that only a handful of people are going to heaven. But He did mean that majorities mean nothing. Isn't He saying that you cannot look at numbers and say, "Here is safety."? Here is true point Jesus made: "You cannot be lazy about being saved. The truth and salvation must be sought diligently, but few are willing to make that effort." You see, it isn't few being saved because God doesn't want them to be saved (II Pt 3:9). Few are saved because they do not seek it.

The Emotions...

Many people determine what is right in religion by how they feel. If it feels good to them, then it must be acceptable to God! If they feel good, then they must be saved. Their salvation is subject to their own feelings (we call this subjective reasoning). It would be nice if one could just take his pulse and know that he is saved; but it doesn't work that way. We will look at some Bible passages on this in a moment; but first, let's use some common sense. There are many religions in the world that teach some form of salvation, and conflict with each other. They are not compatible, and each would deny that the other was following God. At the same time, they all feel like they're saved! You can just dismiss such by saying that both must be saved, but that cannot be. Let's take the Pentecostals and Muslims as an example of this. Both feel great about their religion and believe they are saved. The Muslim does not profess Christ (essential to the Pentecostal), and the Pentecostal does not profess Allah (essential to the Muslim). They cannot both be saved in the religions they follow, but they both feel saved!

The Bible verifies this. Solomon wrote, "There is a way that seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death." (Prov 14:12). Jeremiah wrote, "O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps." (Jer 10:23). Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (Mt 7:21ff) It is obvious that the people in Jesus' statement felt they would be saved. But they were not. Why? Because feelings are not the basis upon which we will inherit eternal life.

Grand Results...

Many people think that projects which reap great reaction, numbers and feelings must be right because of that result. The old saying, "the end justifies the means" is the motto of the day. The means of doing (whether authorized by God or not) must be right if the end is grand and glorious. Here are a few of the things people emphasize to justify practices that cannot be found in scripture:

A building full of people - It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that numbers is what it's all about. "Even if it isn't authorized in God's word, we know He would be pleased because it fills the building." This reasoning assumes a couple of things. First it assumes that the work of the church is to fill the building. It is not! Saving souls is infinitely more important than tacking a big number on the attendance board. It also assumes that God didn't have the

market savvy to put such gimmicks into the Bible. If filling building was the plan, then God could have given us the best of schemes to fulfill it.

A "stirring" worship service - The trend in religion is toward emphasizing people's senses, rather than the Lord's revelation on the matter. When you look at some worship services, you find all kinds of frills aimed at plucking heart-strings and being touchy-feely. Emotion is an important aspect of worship; but it can never be our guide. Remember what feels good?...

Solving social woes - "Look at all of the good this program is doing!" But is that program what God placed the church on earth to do? We have become a people of programs. Rather than individuals taking care of such responsibilities, we pay others to do so we can feel good about ourselves. This makes the church a bureaucratic social agency, rather than the blood-bought institution for the saving of souls.

The ox cart David used to move the ark (II Sam 6) may have been faster and easier than God's way, but a man ended up dying, and the ark put in storage. The fire Nadab and Abihu used may have been hotter, prettier, and easier to obtain; but they died for their error. We must beware the temptation of letting the end justify the means.

Conclusion...

There are plenty of places to look if we wish to justify our beliefs and actions. I've known people who went from church to church looking for someone who believed the way they did. They wanted someone to authorize their desired means of serving God.

We must allow God's word to determine the truth, and stand by it whether any others follow or not.

"And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Josh 24:15)