

Establishing Authority in Religion

(by Bob Pulliam)

All that our study has entailed to this point leaves us with an important question. How does one use the Bible to establish authority? To say, "Just follow the Bible!" is not enough. Judas hanged himself. Should we do the same? Paul never drove a car. Does this prohibit motor vehicles? There is a logical way of discerning what applies to us in the scriptures; and we will study this means in the next few weeks. In this lesson we will see the three methods of establishing authority (which could actually apply to any area of life).

There Are Three Means of Establishing Authority...

Command, or Express Statement...

Someone is told to do something, or that something is necessary to please God. These do not always apply to us today (see section on Interpreting the Bible), but many times do and people deny it. Acts 22:16 says, "And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord." This applies to those who have not yet become Christians. It does not apply to a Christian who has sinned and needs forgiveness because it was not spoken to such a person. In Luke 13:3, Jesus said, "I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." But this only applies to one who has sinned. A baby does not need to repent, because a baby has not sinned.

Approved Example...

Someone does something that is pleasing to God, and therefore we do such as well. In Acts 11:27-30, we find the church sending relief to needy saints in a time of natural disaster. Acts 8:36-39 gives us an example of how baptism was carried out.

As with commands, circumstances must be viewed carefully to determine whether the example is binding on us today. There are times when it is binding, but certain aspects are incidental to the obedience seen in the passage. For example, when the Lord's Supper was observed in the first century, we always see it taking place in an upper room. Is the location of a room in a building vital to the example given? Baptism in scriptures is only seen in outdoor locations. Is its location vital or incidental. What about the amount of water? It was always enough to get into. Was that incidental? In this case, it is not, because the subject must be immersed in the water to carry out the command!

Necessary Implication (or logical conclusion)...

An implication is something that is concluded by a statement, but not spelled out as such. "Close the door." implies that the door is open. "Turn off the light" implies that... the light is on. "Jack took off his hair" must imply what?.....

The Bible is full of implications. Matthew 3:13 - 16 never says that Jesus went down into the water; but isn't such implied? How did He get there if He didn't? In Acts 8:38, who baptized whom? Such is determined naturally by the implication of the context.

Now, beware of inferring things that are not necessarily implied by a passage... Some would tell us that Acts 16:33 teaches that infants were baptized by Paul. Since the whole family

was baptized, then infants were baptized. But this passage does not necessarily imply that infants were baptized. How many families can you name off the top of your head that do not have infants in them?

A Practical Example...

Let's look at an examples of these three means in use. In Acts 15 we have a problem in the first century church. We are about to see how the subject of authority solved it.

The command, or express statement was used by James in his argument (Acts 15:16f). James quoted from the Old Testament to show that God had expressly stated His will concerning the Gentiles. The divinely approved example was used by Paul in his argument (Acts 15:12). God had shown his approval of the Gentiles in their labors abroad. A necessary implication (or logical conclusion) let Peter to the truth on this matter. In Acts 10:17 we find Peter wondering about a vision that God had given. It did not say the Gentiles were acceptable, but it said something. Peter did not know what it was. By the time we come to Acts 10:34, Peter has drawn the conclusion that God has accepted the Gentiles. How? He perceive the implication of the vision he saw.

In The Name Of...

Before we leave this topic, we need to consider a phrase found in the Bible: "In the name of..." It is easily misunderstood when one looks at it's use today. It is taken to be a 'magic formula' for making something authoritative. As long as you say you are doing something in the name of the Lord, it is validated. But you never find the phrase given this meaning in scripture.

In Colossians 3:17 we are told, "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus,..." This doesn't mean that we are to go around saying, "I do this in the name of the Lord." The truth of it's intention can be seen in the peace officer's command: "Stop, in the name of the law!" Is he telling the person to stop while saying, "I am now stopping in the name of the law."? We know that he is using this phrase to specify his authority for commanding someone to stop. So Paul is saying that we must act by the authority of the Lord in all that we do... In other words be obedient to Jesus in all. To accomplish this, we must establish what is, and is not, lawful.

Conclusion...

Three means of establishing authority are seen in scripture. These means are not complicated. There are commands, examples and implications that must be discerned in their application to us. The only true challenge comes in our willingness to put personal desires aside and follow the Lord as He commanded.