

# ***Teaching Sound Doctrine***

## **How God Makes Known His Will**

To put the matter in question form, Are we limited to what is authorized or are we free to do whatever is not expressly forbidden?

Granting that the Bible may authorize a practice by direct commandment or statement, by an approved example, by a necessary inference, or by a conditional promise or warning, the question still remains-are we confined to what has been authorized by whatever method God may have chosen to authorize it, or are we free to do whatever is not expressly forbidden?

For the sake of brevity and clarity, let us confine our study at this time to God's will concerning his people in their congregational capacity. Is the church, congregation, limited to what it is expressly authorized to do or is it free to do whatever is not expressly condemned? It seems to me that much depends upon the answer which we give to this question.

Something like a hundred and one hundred years ago, the leaders of a great movement which took place in America at that time, known as the Restoration Movement, adopted the slogan, "Where the Bible speaks we speak and where the Bible is silent we are silent." By that slogan evidently they meant, "We are confined to that which the Bible authorizes, and we dare not, as a group of religious people, do anything that cannot be found expressly authorized in the Bible."

They proposed to give a "Thus saith the Lord" for everything they did and taught in matters religious.

Some have now changed the interpretation of that slogan and take it to mean that nothing should be disallowed or opposed which the Bible does not expressly condemn. These opposite points of view or attitudes lead to quite divergent practices in the work, worship and organization of the church. This old slogan, which has been hailed by so many as a guide to interpretation and has almost become a creed with some, being of human origin, is itself ambiguous and may lead to confusion rather than unity.

But the question still remains, are we as a congregation, free to do whatever God has not told us not to do or are we confined to that which has been expressly authorized?

Those who hold the former point of view are heard frequently to say when some practice is called in question, "Well the Bible doesn't tell us not to do it." Those who attempt to justify a practice by the statement, "The Bible doesn't tell us not to do it," are implying that we are free to do whatever the Bible doesn't tell us not to do. On the other hand we hear people ask, "Where is your authority for it?" They are implying that we are permitted to do only that which is expressly authorized. In the light of the Bible, which is the correct point of view?

It has been generally assumed by our brethren that with reference to the organization of the church we are confined to what the Bible expressly authorizes. That's the ground upon which we contend for congregational independence. The Bible authorizes the assembly. We are commanded not to forsake it. (Heb. 10:24-26.) So we have express authority for coming together in a group for the purpose of worshiping God. (I Cor. 11:23-34.)

We have express authority for elders and deacons in a congregation where there are men qualified to serve as such. (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-10.) Beyond that the Bible does not go. There is no such authority for two congregations being tied together by any sort of inter-congregational organization whatsoever.

If we hold the point of view that we are limited to what is expressly authorized then we'll have to stop with the congregation and have no organization beyond that. If we are free to do whatever is not expressly condemned then we can organize all the congregations of Nashville under one common head and have some man or a board of some sort, to administer the affairs of all the congregations in the city.

By the same method of interpretation, we could then have a meeting of representatives from each county and each city in the state and have a statewide organization. The Bible doesn't say, 'Don't do it.' By the same token we could then have a national organization and finally a world-wide organization. The Bible doesn't say, 'Don't do it.' Some who used to be counted among us, but who have interpreted the old slogan to mean that one is free to do whatever the Bible does not expressly condemn, have done just what I have outlined First, there was a county-wide, then state-wide, then nation-wide and now a world-wide organization to administer certain affairs.

I have mentioned this application of our question to illustrate what depends upon the answer to it.

We can make a similar application to the worship. Can we have in the worship only what God tells us to have or can we bring into it whatever God doesn't say don't have? With reference to any other activity proposed for the church-social,

benevolent, recreational, or whatever it might be -- are we confined to what God tells us not to do, or are we free to do whatever he doesn't tell us not to do?

Let me ask you this, don't you believe that we ought to apply the same method of interpretation all the way across the board? If the church is free in one area to do whatever is not expressly condemned, would it not be free in every other area to do whatever is not expressly condemned? Would we have to apply the same principle to the work of the church that we do to the worship and organization of the church?

Whatever our answer be to the question under discussion, surely it ought to be a consistent one. There are people who loudly defend what is known as congregational independence and yet with reference to other matters of congregational activities are heard to say, "Well, the Bible doesn't tell us not to do it." If you operate on that basis, then you can find no fault with the world-wide organization of those to whom we refer as our digressive brethren. If you operate on that basis, you cannot successfully oppose the conference of the Methodists, the synod of the Presbyterians, or the Sunday School Board of the Baptists.

You see how much depends upon the answer to our question: can we do only that which is expressly authorized or are we free to do whatever is not expressly condemned?

Without giving you what I think to be the answer, I shall rather call your attention to some Bible statements with which you are already familiar, ask you to think of them in connection with this question, and then give your own answer.

For instance in Dent. 4:2, "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish aught from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you." In the twelfth chapter of this same book and the thirty-second verse, "What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it."

Coming now to the New Testament, we learn from Hebrews 8:5 that Moses, when he was about to make the tabernacle, was admonished to make all things according to the pattern showed him in the mount. In I Tim. 1:16 we read these words, "Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting." And in 2 Tim. 1:13, "Hold fast the pattern of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ

Jesus." In the light of such texts as these we conclude that the New Testament presents a pattern for God's people to follow.

May I ask, what is the very nature of a pattern? When you ladies make a dress by a pattern, do you add whatever your wishes suggest? When you add, or include something in the dress which the pattern does not include, do you go by the pattern or do you make your own pattern? When a contractor builds a house by a blueprint, may he add a room or a closet or a door wherever he wishes, and still claim that he has followed the blueprint or is he allowed to include only that which the blueprint expressly calls for?

Next, which one of these points of view is more conducive to unity? Confining ourselves to what is expressly authorized or considering ourselves free to do whatever is not expressly condemned?

While you think about that question, remember that in I Cor. 1:10 we are commanded to be united. "Brethren, I beseech you by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same things and that there be no divisions among you but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." There is a command. We know we must obey that command. I ask you which would be most conducive to obeying this command. to attaining and maintaining unity-confining ourselves to that which is expressly authorized or considering ourselves free to do whatever is not expressly condemned?

For instance, in reference to organization, if we confine ourselves to the congregation with its elders and deacons expressly authorized in the Bible, that is one thing. And on that basis we can have unity. But suppose we consider ourselves free to do whatever is not expressly condemned, then what sort of organization shall God's church assume? Shall it be presbyterian, or episcopal? State-wide, nationwide, or world-wide? How could unity on those matters be attained if we considered ourselves free to do whatever the Bible did not expressly condemn?

Suppose you send a child on an errand to the grocery store to buy some articles. Is he free to buy whatever you don't tell him not to buy or is his authority restricted to that which you tell him to buy?

If we assume the point of view that we are at liberty to go beyond that which is expressly authorized and do whatever is not expressly condemned, then man's opinion becomes the guide in this wide area.

"O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps." (Jer. 10:23.) "Thus have ye made the commandment

of God of none effect by your tradition. Ye hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoreth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." (Matt. 15:6-9.)

The traditions of the Jews were rules and regulations which they had established beyond what the law of Moses required. Consequently, Jesus, said that they were worshiping in vain, teaching for

doctrines the commandments or the traditions of men

Some other scriptures which I would like for you to think about in working out your own answer to the question under discussion are these: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed." (Gal. 1:8, 9.)

"For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book." (Rev. 22:18-19.)

"Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God . . ." (2 John 9.)

"And these things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and to Apollos for your sakes; that in us ye might learn not to go beyond the things which are written; . . ." (I Cor. 4:6, ASV)

One more scripture which I remember hearing the brethren emphasize a great deal when I was a boy, but about which we hear very little today. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." (2 Tim. 3:16, 17.) This tells us that the Scriptures furnish us completely unto every good work. Do you take that to mean that God has expressly authorized everything he wants his church to do or do you take it to mean that he has left us free to do whatever he has not expressly forbidden? What is the natural interpretation of these words?

Now let us consider a statement in I Peter 4:11 (which I think is much better

than the slogan which my brethren coined a hundred and fifty years ago), "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth; that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ: to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever."

Anything that a congregation does has to be suggested and promoted by somebody. People have to be admonished to do most anything. There is a natural tendency toward indifference and inactivity. Suppose we started an organization of all the churches in Nashville, and through that organization began to operate certain activities or enterprises like our religious neighbors do. Few would contribute to it without being urged to do so. Selfishness, indifference, and the tendency to take it easy would keep most people from backing such a movement unless they were admonished to do so.

If I were to come before you promoting such an enterprise and urging you to have a part in it, and asking you to contribute freely to it or through it, would I be speaking as the oracles of God, as Peter commands? Suppose you met me in the aisle with this verse, and said, "Preacher, where does God's oracles say anything about the thing you are trying to get us to do?" Imagine my embarrassment.

"If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God." Not only let him speak that which is in God's word, but also give God credit for that which he speaks. Do you believe this statement throws any light upon the question which we are discussing?

Just one more Scripture and we will close this lesson. 'Whatsoever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.' (Col. 3:17.) As far as I know, nearly everybody understands this to mean that whatever you do must be done by the authority of the Lord Jesus. How can one do something by the authority of the Lord Jesus, unless Jesus somewhere, by precept, example, or necessary inference authorizes that activity? Would it meet the demands of this scripture to say, "Well, he didn't tell me not to do it?" Can you act in the name of another by doing what he didn't tell me not to do? Are you acting upon the authority of another when you allow your own opinion to guide you into a course of behavior on the basis that he didn't tell you not to do it?

If we do something here as a group, engage in an activity or any sort of practice for which God has given no express authority, how would we be able to prove that we were doing so in the name of Christ?

I hope that the Scriptures cited today will help each of us to reach the correct

answer to the question of the hour and to be consistent in applying that answer to all matters which may arise.

This Much we know, Jesus said, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned." (Mark 16: 16) We know the Holy Spirit commanded on the day of Pentecost that believers repent and be baptized for remission of sins. (Acts 2:38.) We know Ananias told Saul of Tarsus, "And now why tarriest thou? Arise and be baptized and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord." (Acts 22:16.)

Have you obeyed these commandments? If not, will you come and do so this morning? We sing this song urging you to come to Jesus.