

Teaching Sound Doctrine Lessons on Clearing The Confusion

How To Establish Bible Authority

There is no more important question to ask when studying the Bible than “how do we establish Bible authority?” It is a question about which there is much disagreement in the modern religious world including the Church of Christ. In this article we simply want to look at the Bible to seek the answer to this most important question.

The Need for Bible Authority

1. *We are commanded to do everything in the name of Jesus Christ.* The apostle Paul wrote in Colossians 3:17, “*And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.*” To do everything in the name of Christ means to do everything by his authority. In a similar passage the apostle Paul told the Corinthians to be careful “*not to think beyond what is written*” (1 Cor. 4:6). Both of these passages suggest the great importance of having Bible authority for what we practice in religion.

2. *Examples that suggest the importance of having authority for what we do.* There are many examples of men in the Bible who acted without having authority from God and they paid the price for their disobedience. One such example is Cain. Cain and his brother Abel both offered sacrifices to God (Gen. 4:3-4). God accepted Abel’s sacrifice, but he rejected Cain’s sacrifice (Gen. 4:4b-5). The reason God accepted Abel’s sacrifice was that it was offered by faith (Heb. 11:4). This means that Abel obeyed God’s instructions for offering the sacrifice. Cain did not follow God’s instruction and his sacrifice was rejected. Nadab and Abihu also acted without God’s authority and were destroyed. The text says that they offered “*profane fire which the Lord had not commanded*” (Lev. 10:1). These are just a couple of the examples that suggest the importance of having authority for what we do.

Ways We Don’t Establish Bible Authority

1. *We don’t establish authority by the silence of the Scriptures.* Some believe that one way to establish authority is by the silence of the Scriptures. Some have said that where the Scriptures are silent that we are free to act. Some have written tracts and delivered sermons on what to do when there is no pattern. We

must understand, however, that the silence of the Scriptures is not a means by which we establish authority. The silence of the Scriptures is not permissive. The Hebrew writer argued that Jesus could not serve as a priest under the law of Moses, not because the Scriptures said that he couldn't, but because it never authorized it. Listen to the words of the Hebrew writer, "For it is evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning the priesthood" (Heb. 7:14). Some of our brethren today still act like the silence of Scripture is permissive. I hear brethren asking questions like "where does the Scripture say that we can't do this or that?" When we ask questions like this we are asking the wrong question. We need to be asking "Where does the Scripture authorize it?"

2. We do not establish authority by expediency. Some brethren want to list expediency as a means for establishing authority. An expedient is simply a means or method that one may use to accomplish a goal. We must recognize that for a thing to be an expediency it must first be lawful or authorized. Paul made this point in 1 Corinthians 6:12 when he said, "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any." We cannot claim an addition to God's word or a substitution for God's way as an expedient and think that it is then authorized.

3. We do not establish authority in a way different from first century Christians. Many of our liberal brethren are now calling for a new hermeneutics. We are told that the old hermeneutics is outdated and we need one for the twentieth century. We must recognize that Jesus and God have not changed (Heb. 13:8). We must establish authority today in the same way that the first century Christians did.

Three Ways to Establish Bible Authority

1. Direct Statement/Command. The first way that we can establish Bible authority is by direct command. This is when the Bible directly makes a statement or a positive command. One example of a direct command would be the apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost. Peter directly told the people to "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). All three ways to establish authority can be illustrated by the Lord's supper. The observance of the Lord's supper is authorized by direct command or precept. Jesus directly commanded the observance of the Lord's supper in Matthew 26 when he said, "take eat; this is My body" and "drink from it, all of you." Paul also directly commanded the observance of the Lord's supper in 1 Corinthians 11:25. We can also find all three ways of establishing authority illustrated in the controversy of Acts 15 over circumcision. James in discussing the subject of

circumcision of Gentiles appealed to a direct statement of Scriptures. He quoted from Amos 9:11-12 (Acts 15:16-17). After appealing to direct statement James had established that “we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19).

2. Example. The second way we want to look at to establish authority is by an example.

An example can also be illustrated by the Lord’s supper. We know the time of its observance because we have an example of early Christians observing the Lord’s supper. In Acts 20:7 Luke records, “and upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread” (Acts 20:7). We do not have a direct command telling us to take the Lord’s supper on the first day of the week, but we find this example of early Christians coming together on Sunday for that purpose. We also find an approved example appealed to in Acts 15 to help solve the circumcision problem. Peter and Barnabas “declared how many miracles and wonders God had worked among the Gentiles” (v.12). This is a case of establishing authority by an example. God had approved the work of Paul and Barnabas in converting Gentiles by the miracles and wonders he performed through them. These examples proved that God approved the salvation of the Gentiles and that circumcision should not be bound on them.

3. Implication. The third and final way of establishing authority we want to discuss is implication. Implication is found in Acts 15. Peter related to the brethren at Jerusalem how God had acknowledged the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit (v. 8). Peter then concluded or inferred that God “made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith” (v.9). These are the only three ways that we can find in the Scriptures for establishing Bible authority.

Also we can imply in the process of becoming a Christian, Saul of Tarsus repented of his sins. Yet, the Scriptures never state that Saul repented. How do we know he repented? Because to become a Christian, one must repent. Saul became a Christian, therefore we know that Saul repented of his sins.

Two Kinds Of Authority — Specific And Generic

1. Specific Authority. Specific authority is when God has specified what he wants us to do, or the method we are to use in obeying him. Specific statements exclude everything outside of that which is specified. The silence of God prohibits the use of anything other than that specified. The silence of God does not permit. The type of wood that Noah was to use in building the ark is an example of specific authority. God specified gopher wood but did not specify any

other types of wood (Gen. 6:14). Because God did not authorize any other types of wood, they are excluded. The elements of the Lord's supper is another example of specific authority. God has specified the elements of the Lord's supper are to be unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine. This excludes the use of any other elements on the Lord's table. The New Testament specifies that we are to sing in worship to God (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Since God specified singing but God didn't authorize any other kind of music like instrumental music or humming.

2. Generic Authority. Generic authority is when God has not specified the action or method by which we are to obey a command. In the case of generic authority we may use any action or method that comes within the realm of the general command. The most common example of generic authority is the command to go teach the world (Mark 16:16; Matt. 28:19-20). In the great commission God commanded us to go and teach the world, but he did not specify the method we are to use when we go. Therefore, we are free to use any method that falls within the general command to go. We may go by car, airplane, bus, or we may walk. All of these are authorized because they are all means of going. God commanded us to sing in worship (Eph. 5:19). God did not specify what part we are to sing or whether we are to sing by book or from memory. We are, therefore, free to choose what part we are going to sing and whether or not we are going to use a book, or what book we are going to use. When we make these decisions, we are still obeying the command to sing. This is not parallel to instrumental music. God specified singing, and instrumental music is another kind of music.

Conclusion

There is no more important question than "how do we establish Bible authority?" We need to be sure that we are teaching the younger generations these basic principles. I believe that most of the doctrinal problems in the Lord's church could be solved if we simply learned how to establish Bible authority and then learned to respect what God authorized.

False Standards of Authority

The only standard of authority for the church of Christ is the words of Christ and the apostles as revealed in the New Testament. However, from time to time, we hear various "false standards" advanced as authority for certain acts. Sectarians have been using these "standards" all along. It is not difficult to find brethren aping them. Acting on the basis of anyone of these "standards" would be unlawful. Notice now a brief discussion of some false standards:

Does Good-Must Be Right

We often hear people say of some religious practice: "It does good, or it is good, therefore it must be right (lawful, scriptural). This is the theory that the end justifies the means. We cannot do "evil" (unscriptural things) that good may result. (Rom. 3:3-8.) To be scriptural or lawful a thing must be good, but not all morally good things are right for the church to do. Mechanical music is right in the home; but not in the church. Ham is good at the breakfast table, but not on the Lord's Table. Too, some things may be right for an individual or a secular institution to do and not lawful for the church to perform. The P.T.A. or some civic club might have an auction or a box supper, but it would not be right (scriptural) for the church to engage in such practices. One man argued with me that the Nazarene church must be right (lawful), because of the good it was doing and the growth it was making. He was using this false "standard." Because some human institution does a "good work" does not mean that it is right for the church to do this thing. Schools, P.T.A.'s, and other human institutions have human authority for their practices. We must have Divine authority for our practices in the church.

Great, Wise Men Favor This

Denominational people often quote some "great" religious leader to prove their point. When, for example, shown from the Bible that baptism is immersion, they quote Barnes, and Clarke, or some other scholar to "prove" that these great men taught differently and then they will say, "Do you think you are smarter than these men?" They are using a false "standard." Our faith must not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. (1 Cor. 2:5.) There has been only one Who didn't make mistakes--Jesus Christ. Even Peter, an apostle, practiced error at one time. (Gal. 2:11ff.) We should never have so much confidence in one man or group of men, but that we can remain faithful to God even though they go astray. Brethren are often found using this "standard" by saying:

The Practice of Brethren

"Faithful brethren" have practiced this for many years. The statements of the "pioneers," of even some more recent persons, or the activities of some congregation are often cited as authority. One can "prove" the Missionary Society "right" by such pioneers as Campbell, Lard, and McGarvey. Practices of churches today can be "proved" right and wrong by the writings of preachers now alive. Some practices can be "proved" right and wrong in the writings of the same man. Men change: Our faith should not stand in them. Some things may be wrong, but if practiced consistently for a long period of time become traditions. The Book of God warns against this. (Matt. 15:1-14; Col. 2:8.) Suppose a man or a congregation has practiced something for as many years as they can remember. Does that make the practice right? No-- emphatically! The authority of God is the only thing that makes a religious practice right. Have you noticed that when brethren use this false "standard" they are begging the question? When one says that "faithful" brethren have practiced a certain thing, that is assuming the thing to be proved. Were the brethren "faithful" in practicing the particular thing? Again: Our faith must not stand in the wisdom of men--not even our brethren.

Rather Do Wrong Than Nothing

When those of us who are content to do God's work in God's way speak out against some practice of our brethren we often hear this false "standard": "I had rather do wrong than do nothing at all." Inactivity is not right, to be sure. One who makes this statement is guilty of fallacious reasoning. He is assuming that the only choices are wrong or nothing. This is not true. We have the choice of (1) doing nothing and being wrong, (2) doing wrong, or (3) doing right. Of course we should do the latter.

Denominations Are Doing It

Sometimes when contemplating the doing of something, brethren will say: "The denominations are doing this and we need to do it," or "We must make a good impression on the people of our community." God's people have always been warned about pride, and trying to please men rather than God. If in pleasing God, it pleases men--good, but we are not to please men at the expense of displeasing God. (1 Thess. 2:4; Gal. 1:10.) The Old Testament was written for our learning. We can learn from Israel the danger of wanting to be like the "nations about us." To have a building, radio program, orphanage, hospital, or an advertising program because the denominations have something similar (and usually much better, so far as the mechanics of the thing is concerned) is to act by false authority.

Let those of us who have named the name of Christ be content to do God's will not on the authority of any of these "standards." They, in and of themselves, are not sufficient reason or us to do anything. Let us do God's will because GOD WANTS IT THAT WAY.