

Playing By The Rules: Our Religious Authority

Ephesians 3:1-5

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- I. I attended an elementary little league competition. Two teams were playing, but only one could win. After the game a common complaint was voiced by one on the losing team – "They cheated! It's not fair!" Although the accusation was unfounded it does present an interesting question – How can you decide what is "fair"? How are you able to determine if one is "cheating"? In order to make such judgements you have to appeal to an authority standard, a rule book.

- II. The dictionary defines "authority" as the source of power to influence or command thought, practice, or opinion; a convincing force in life.
 1. We are surrounded by various authority standards.
 - a. Civil authorities maintain peace and legality.
 - b. Authority standards are found in homes, at school, on the job, and in sports.
 - c. Can you imagine what life would be without these authorities? W/o the proper "authority" we will be destroyed! (ie. Drill Sergeants must be tough but our society has caused them to require "sensitivity training.")
 - d. Some wish we had no authority standard in life. In the political realm these are referred to as "libertines." They campaign for "personal freedom" and a total elimination of "restricting" laws. What would American life be like without the authority standards to govern our behavior? It would be like the society described in Judges 17:6 – "Every man did what was right in his own eyes." A casual reading of the book of Judges will convince anyone that he does not want to live in a libertine society!
 2. Why do we believe certain things? Practice certain things? Exclude certain things? Because of the "authority" we follow. Some in the Lord's Church do not understand WHY they do/do not do certain things.

- III. Most will agree on the necessity of an authority standard in society but then say we do not need an authority standard in religion. They feel that everyone should be able to "believe whatever they want to believe." But is this really a reasonable philosophy?
 1. Just as it is dangerous for every man to govern life by his own authority of right and wrong in civil matters it is also deadly in religious matters!
 2. We need an objective authority standard that governs religious beliefs, practices, and teachings.

- IV. What can be an authority in religion? A survey among various religious groups will reveal they appeal to a number of different "authorities."

1. Some appeal to a single man for the final authority in their religion.
2. Others convene councils or synods to debate issues and announce the general policy.
3. Many hold conferences on a yearly basis to decide what their Church will teach and believe.
4. Many in our day appeal to the authority of "feelings" & emotions.
5. These share the same fault – they rest upon the decision of mortal minds for their authority. And, mortal minds are capable of many faults.

V. There is only one authority for religion. It is the Holy Bible (Ep 3:1-5).

1. This is a wonderful thought.
2. We can read the Bible and have the same understanding as to what we ought to practice, teach, and believe just as the inspired Apostles!
3. With the Bible as our authority we can decide what is right or wrong; we can judge what is fair or foul.

VI. As we consider authority in religion we must understand that there are two possible authorities that can guide our religious practices (Mt 21:25).

1. We can rest upon the "authority of God" or upon the "authority of man."
2. These authorities are in constant conflict with one another.
3. Satan is striving to regain the souls redeemed by Christ.
 - a. One of the most effective deceptions of Satan is "religious" error.
 - b. He fashions a religious doctrine or practice in such a way that it is appealing.
 - c. Many follow the appeal and begin to submit to the "authority of man." These are not deliberate rebels to God, they do not think they are turning their backs upon the heavenly Father. But they are doing just that! The end result is most tragic! (2 Thess 2:9-12).

VII. The Scriptures urge believers to guard their lives by following the right authority in religion:

Joshua called upon Israel to choose the authority of God (Josh 24:15)

Elijah challenged those on Mt. Carmel to follow God's authority (1 Ki 18:21)

Hymenaeus and Alexander followed the authority of men (1 Ti 1:18-20)

Demas forsook God's authority (2 Ti 4:10)

Paul warned Timothy about the danger of forsaking God's authority (1 Ti 4:1-7a)

VIII. The point is very clear. If we do not follow God's authority in religious matters we will find tragedy and turmoil!

1. When Bonaparte was overtaken in Egypt by the Red Sea's tide, his entire army was in danger of being drowned. No one knew the right way. He told the troops to ride in the direction each judged best. If they found the water to become deeper they were to turn back. If the water became shallower they were to shout to their comrades. In the same manner we must follow God's authority (the Bible) in religious matters. If we carelessly venture forth and follow what is right in our own

eyes, we could drown in error. If we are cautious and judge our way with the Holy Bible we will find safety. In finding the safe way we should try to urge others to reach safety through God's authority as well.

2. When it comes to religious matters we must choose to follow the traditions of God (2 Ths 2:13-15) or the traditions of men (Mt 15:1-20). We cannot say, "It really makes no difference."

IX. The choice to follow God's authority is not as simple as it seems.

1. We are surrounded by religious groups that claim they are following the Bible, but they disagree. How can they follow the same authority and disagree?
2. Our civil authority says that all must stop at a red light. All citizens recognize that authority and admit that you are to stop at a red light. The standard of authority is admitted and all agree. Uniformity in behavior demonstrates submission to the SAME authority. This is not seen in religion. To say, "I believe the Bible is the ultimate authority in religion" is not enough. We must apply that authority. In this application our desire to follow God's authority becomes clear.

The PURPOSE of Bible Authority

All standards of authority have an objective; a basic purpose to be achieved. Such is true regarding Bible authority. The Holy Scriptures reveal God's will for living (2 Ti 3:16,17). God provided us with the Bible so we could have the "rule-book" of Faith. Look at the following reasons why biblical authority is important to Christians.

I. Bible authority is the **only thing that will bring unity** among all Christians.

- A. In the Lord's prayer of unity (Jn 17:14-23), the emphasis was upon the "Truth" that would sanctify believers.
 1. "Truth" is God's Word.
 2. The root of Corinth's division was their "going beyond the things written" (1 Co 4:6).
- B. If all will decide to guide their teachings and practices by the New Testament a great unity will be found.

II. Bible authority **provides proper direction**.

- A. Past history verifies the impossibility for man to convene a council and pass a creed that mandates beliefs and practices.
 1. Man is inadequate to direct his own religion (Jere 10:23).
 2. The Psalmist trusted God's standard for proper direction (Ps 119:9, 101-104).
- B. Only God is able to provide an authority standard to direct our religious practices (cf Is 55:9).

III. Bible authority **guards us from vain wisdom**.

- A. The troubles at Corinth were attributed to a "vain wisdom" (cf 1 Co 1:18; 2:1-5).
- B. Those who do not follow the New Testament will follow vain speculations and impossible demands in their religion (cf Col 2:16-19). This is repulsive to God (Mal

1:10-14).

Here are three solid reasons for insisting that all believers hold to the Bible as the only authority telling us what to practice, preach, and believe! ***Anyone failing to follow biblical authority contributes to religious division, immoral living, and vain religion! Can you say that such a person is "saved"?***

The PRINCIPLES of Bible Authority

As we strive to follow God's authority in the Bible we come to a crucial question – "How does biblical authority apply to me? How am I to know God's will in the New Testament?" Many claim to follow God's will but we observe division. How can we apply biblical authority so that a general agreement can be reached? Four principles will enable us to find agreement and unity on biblical authority.

#1 Examples of how the first century Church obeyed God.

As the New Testament is studied it becomes clear that our brethren in the first century did certain things in order to obey God's commands. These examples must be studied so believers will understand obedience to God's will. As you consider examples in the New Testament you will find that most fall into three categories:

- A. Examples that are binding actions which we must do.
- B. Examples that present optional actions.
- C. Examples that reflect a temporary duty or a cultural practice.

The key to understanding examples in the New Testament is to determine what the command/will of God is and how the example illustrates the obedience that God requires of believers today. Some examples reveal attitudes that must be developed but not actions that must be practiced. Some reveal actions that must be practiced.

ILLUSTRATION: Most religious people believe that observing the Lord's Supper (Communion) is commanded by God. The debate arises over the frequency of the observance – should it be daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, or annually? How can we use biblical authority to decide this issue?

1. The examples of 1 Corinthians 11:24-25 and Acts 20:7 show us that it is to be observed every first day of the week – no option.
2. The example of Acts 20:7 we find that the Church observed the Lord's Supper with "many lights" and gathered in an "upper room."
3. The basic command of God is for believers to observe Communion – that is the key to the example.
4. The "many lights" or the "upper room" is incidental. As long as we observe Communion every first day of the week it does not matter about the lights or location.

#2 IMPLICATIONS (REASONING) of how the first century Church obeyed God.

God expects us to "reason" (Is 1:18). Common sense has trained us to "reason" ("Your 'head' is designed for more than a hat rack!" "God gave you a brain for some other

purpose than keeping your ears apart!")

If you read a biblical account that does not portray the "whole" narrative, we must reason that it speaks to the whole by mentioning parts.

ILLUSTRATION: This principle of biblical authority is illustrated with the conversion of Saul of Tarsus.

1. In his conversion account the Bible only mentions immersion (cf Ac 22:16) as the prerequisite of salvation. We know that "baptism alone" will never save one's soul. We understand the "whole" of Scripture to state that conversion results from belief (Jn 8:24), repentance (Ac 17:30,31), confession (Ro 10:9,10), and immersion (Ac 2:38; 22:16).
2. By using reason to look at Scripture we understand that Saul of Tarsus was saved as he did all of these things.

#3 DIRECT STATEMENTS of how the first century Church obeyed God.

When Scripture makes a clear statement regarding actions, there is no stronger reason for immediate action.

ILLUSTRATION: The words to Nicodemus are an example (John 3:7). Some direct statements are error and are not to be taught (Gn 3:4). We must be careful to follow a sensible understanding that includes ALL biblical parts of the command.

#4 EXPEDIENCY of how the first century Church obeyed God.

This involves a common sense approach on how to obey accurately God's commands in a way that does not violate God's direct commands, approved examples, or clear implications.

ILLUSTRATION: The issue of immersion is clear. There are direct statements, approved examples, and sound reasoning which establish the action as part of God's essential will for salvation. There is no option regarding baptism. How are we to be immersed? Some were immersed in cow ponds, water troughs, concrete baptistries, or swimming pools. Who was correctly baptized? All who obeyed the New Testament. Expediency compels us to do the immersing in the most convenient manner.

ILLUSTRATION: Several verses reveal our obligation to make music that praises God in worship assemblies. There are two kinds of music – vocal or vocal with a mechanical instrument accompaniment. Which shall we use?

1. The biblical authority is for vocal music. We have the direct statements, approved example, and the implications for such (Mk 14:26; 1 Co 14:15; Ep 5:19; Col 3:16; Hb 2:12).
2. There is no option here! Expediency requires us to use whatever means are available that will help us obey this command in a way that God's Will is not violated. Thus we have a song leader, words provided so that ALL can sing the song (songbooks, words

- projected, song sheets, etc.), pitch pipes & tuning forks.
3. Some appeal to "expediency" to bring in the piano or organ. Is that a justified expedient? An expedient is right as long as it does not lead to one "going beyond what is written." The mechanical instrument DOES GO BEYOND what is written. When we add the mechanical instrument we are adding an entirely different kind of music that can never be found in the New Testament's examples, statements, or implied practices.

These four principles of biblical authority will enable all to understand how the will of God should be obeyed in our lives. Everyone must be careful to use these principles so he will not be guilty of fueling division over religious beliefs and practices as the Corinthians did (1 Co 4:6).

The PRACTICE Of Bible Authority

The first two points are of little value if we do not apply them. We must strive for the "understanding" of Ephesians 3:4 in daily life. What will we do if we really want to practice biblical authority in our religion?

- I. We will take the New Testament as our only guide in religious matters.
 - A. We understand that the New Testament is the law of God which now directs our faith (Hb 10:9).
 1. We should not try to establish religious practices by the Old Testament. If we follow the New Testament's directions we will restrict our religious beliefs and practices by the New Testament (1 Co 4:6).
 2. The New Testament will be our only guide. We will be free to do only as it authorizes. Where we cannot find a command, implication, or practice we understand that we are forbidden from doing that act.

In 17th century Germany there was a theologian named Rupertus Meldenius. He struggled with the question of biblical authority and arrived at a formula for deciding what was authorized and what was not. He stated, "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity." His suggestion was biblical. May we follow it. Where the Bible speaks (in essentials) let us stand determined to obey God. In the areas where the Bible is silent (matters of opinion) let us allow the liberty of privately held beliefs. In all interaction we should strive to follow love!

- II. We will follow the New Testament carefully so we will not practice a "vain religion."
 - A. The **only right religion** is the New Testament way!
 1. Any changes to the religion described in the New Testament will bring tragic consequences (Ac 20:32).
 2. Two Old Testament examples illustrate how we are to follow God's will in a careful manner (cf Ro 15:4).
 - a. **Noah (Gn 6)**. God gave Noah specific details about building the ark. Noah was obligated to follow exactly and he did so (Gn 6:22). Would Noah have pleased God if he added one more window or modified the plans in some

other "small" way? No. Had he done so he would not have carefully followed God's will!

- b. **Moses (Ex 25)**. God gave specific commands regarding the construction of the Tabernacle. The specific details were accompanied with a "warning" (Ex 25:40; Hb 8:5). Moses was careful to follow exactly God's will and received the divine blessing (Ex 40:16).

These texts reveal that Moses and Noah had a pattern from God and were required to follow it exactly. We also have a pattern and are required to follow it exactly as well. Let us be careful to follow the New Testament pattern from our religious beliefs and practices!

III. We will do "all" in the name of Jesus (cf 1 Co 3:11; Col 3:17; Ac 4:7-10).

- A. Whatever we do in religion we will make sure it is authorized by God's divine will.
- B. Whatever we believe, teach, practice, and bind let it be supported by a New Testament example, implication, direct statement, or expedient.

IV. We will submit to the New Testament pattern even if we do not want to do so!

The Corinthians were commanded to submit to biblical authority (1 Co 15:58).

- A. Some did not want to do this. They preferred to follow their favorite man or teaching.
- B. Paul urged them to submit to God's will even when they did not want to do so (cf 1 Co 4:14-17).
- C. Many may "know" what the New Testament requires but they do not want to do it. If they really wanted to follow biblical authority (to "play by the rules") they would follow the New Testament pattern even when they disagreed with it!

The Emperor Adrian was always ambitious to be recognized as preeminent in all things. He once corrected Favorinus for using an improper word. The corrected submitted with patience, even though he knew he was right. When a friend asked why he complied, he replied, "Shall I not easily suffer him who has thirty legions at his command?" The attitude of Favorinus as commendable – why argue against such an imposing authority. God's authority is always right! We need to follow God's authority because it is foolish to do otherwise! Whoever counts the cost will quickly see that it is absurd to deny obedience to God's authority! (Luke 14:27-33).

Concluding Thoughts

The greatest enemy of New Testament Christianity is the one who fails to follow biblical authority. Often the cause for that refusal will be selfish pride. It requires a "death to self" before one is able to submit to God's authority (Gal 2:20).

May we understand the importance of biblical authority. We are not free to do more than the Scriptures say. We are not free to do less than the Scriptures say. For centuries God has urged his followers to respect His will and to restrict their beliefs and practices by His

will (Dt 4:2; Pr 30:6; Rv 22:18,19). God still expects this submission to His will. Let us be very careful and follow 1 Corinthians 4:6 and never go beyond what is written!