

Establishing Bible Authority – II

By David Phillips

From the time we are small children we are raised to understand the principles of commands, examples, and necessary inferences. When we are given a direct command or a statement we are expected to do exactly what it says. When someone shows us what to do by way of example while learning a new job we are expected to do the job the way it was shown to us. In everyday communication we are expected to make obvious conclusions from the information people give us. When the cashier says, “That’ll be five-ninety-five,” we are expected to make the necessary conclusion that she is referring to dollars because we are purchasing something.

In spite of this obvious and simple truth, there are many in the religious world who claim that God does not communicate with man in this way. They teach that God’s word is expressed in such a way that no two people can understand it alike. If this is true and there is no absolute truth when interpreting God’s word, then it would be impossible to misinterpret it. Yet, Peter says, there are some who “*twist the Scriptures to their own destruction*” (2 Pet. 3:16). The very fact that it is possible to “twist” God’s word means that there is a right way and a wrong way to interpret it.

The truth is, from Genesis to Revelation, God has expressed the need for man to understand His written word. He has both implied and commanded that we must come to understand His will according to Scripture. “...*God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*” (2 Tim. 2:3-4). “*Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is*” (Eph. 5:17). There is only one truth and God’s word is truth (John 17:17). Just as a math teacher expects all the students in the class to understand $2+2=4$, so God expects men to read His word and come to the proper understanding. Granted, there are some passages more difficult to grasp than others, but with diligent study (2 Tim. 2:15) and a love for the truth, “*You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*” (John 8:32).

How do we come to understand the will of the Lord through the Scriptures? The answer is quite simple. Through the Scriptures we are able to read and understand (Eph. 3:4), and reason what it says (Isa. 1:18). But the Bible is not merely a list of do’s and don’ts. It is a narrative, a record of how God dealt with men which provides direct commands, approved examples for us to follow, and information to cause us to make necessary conclusions. In other words, God expresses His will the same way we express ourselves on a day to day basis.

Nevertheless, as stated before, many have questioned whether or not the use of commands, examples, and necessary inferences is a valid approach to interpreting the Scriptures. They claim that this is a method invented by men and not God. On the contrary, according to the Scriptures God’s people have been using this method since the beginning. The apostles and elders in Jerusalem used this method to determine God’s will concerning the matter of circumcision.

In Acts 15:1, 2, Paul and Barnabas encountered certain men who claimed that Gentiles were required to be circumcised in order to be saved. Yet, as an apostle, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul knew that circumcision was not necessary for salvation and “*had no small dispute*” with them over the matter. But this doctrine had been spreading to other areas as well. In order for all the churches to know the truth on the matter, it was necessary for the apostles and leaders of the church in Jerusalem to consider the matter and establish once and for all whether or not God wanted all men to be circumcised. Acts 15:6-21 records the methods they used to determine the will of the Lord. It is recorded so that we may know how to determine the will of the Lord today.

Direct Command or statement (Acts 15:13-21): James reminded the council of the events recorded in Acts 10-11 according to which Peter was directed in a vision to preach the gospel to the household of Cornelius, who was a Gentile. As a result of that event, Peter declared by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that God had made salvation available to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. To back up the validity of that direct statement, James refers to a direct statement recorded in Amos 9:11-12 concerning the same matter—that the Gentiles would be built up as God’s people. The main distinction that separated Jew from Gentile was circumcision. Therefore, by direct statement, God expressed that Gentiles (uncircumcised) could be saved through Christ.

Approved Example (Acts 15:12): It was common understanding that the use of miracles in the first century was God’s way of showing approval of what was being taught or accomplished. “*God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will*” (Heb. 2:4). Prior to the council in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas had spent several years preaching to the Gentiles throughout the regions of Syria, Cilicia, and Galatia. Throughout their efforts to preach the gospel, God showed approval of everything they taught by working miracles through Paul and Barnabas, yet not once did they command a Gentile to be circumcised. In the council, Paul and Barnabas used their *example* to show that God approved of the gospel which they preached, even though that gospel did not command circumcision.

Necessary Inference (Acts 15:7-11): Peter stood up in the council and made a necessary conclusion. In Acts 10, when he preached to the household of Cornelius, God acknowledged that salvation had come to the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, even though they had never been circumcised. Peter put two and two together when he said, “*So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.*” In other words, God showed approval of the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, but when the Holy Spirit was given the Gentiles had not been circumcised. Therefore, circumcision was not necessary.

Establishing God’s Authority Today

Through commands, examples, and necessary inferences that God provides in the Scriptures, He tells us everything that He wants us to do and to believe. “*...that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.*” (2 Tim. 3:17). “*...as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue...*” (2 Pet. 1:3). There are many “good ideas” that men want to integrate into the work of the church but that God has not

told us that He wants us to do. On the surface, some human innovations may seem beneficial to the church, but in reality every time we add something to God’s plan, we are in fact hindering or removing something else. This was what happened with the traditions of the Pharisees in Jesus’ day, “*For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men...making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do*” (Mark 7:9-13). The Pharisees were in sin because they did not respect the guidelines and limitations of the authority of the Scriptures. If we are to avoid their mistake, we must learn to examine all things and cast out any works for which we have no express command, example, or necessary inference. We conclude with the following diagram to illustrate how simple this really is, if we are willing to accept the truth.

	Command	Example	Nec. Inference
Sing	Eph. 5:19	Acts 16:25	
Inst. Music	NO	NO	NO
Preach	2 Tim. 4:2	Acts 20:7	
Drama Perf.	NO	NO	NO

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