

Bible Authority

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It has been said that most religious errors stem from a lack of respect for Bible authority. This is true, but there is the added problem of a general lack of *understanding* of how authority is established. Many people do not know how to use the Bible to determine right from wrong and approved practice from unapproved practice. They don't understand the basic methods of communication that are used in the Bible. This article explains those methods.

God's *will* is expressed in the Scriptures. God "*breathed*" the Scriptures and they were spoken and recorded by Spirit-guided men (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21). As a result of the process of divine revelation, we can know the things "*that pertain to life and godliness*" (2 Peter 1:3). We can know what are "*good works*" (2 Timothy 3:17). We have access to "*the mind of Christ*" (1 Corinthians 2:16). God revealed His will to humans so that they might *know and obey* Him (Deuteronomy 29:29; 2 Thessalonians 1:8), thus saving their souls and helping them to avoid eternal punishment (Mark 16:16; 2 Thessalonians 1:9).

Bible believers understand that God's will is expressed in Scripture, but *how* is it expressed? What methods of communication did He use? How do we know what God wants us to know and do? It is important that we understand the basic *methods of communication* that have been used by God. A study about "Bible authority" is really a study about *how God teaches*.

One might assume that a supernatural being, like God, would have employed some strange and mystical methods of communication. However, He did not. He used the basic methods that are common to people of all places and times. Humans were designed in the spiritual likeness of God. This includes our cognitive and communicative abilities (Gen. 1:26, 27). We reason and think the way we do because God designed us that way. We were designed the ability to understand, love and serve our Creator, and that Creator has the perfect ability to express His will to man.

God's Methods of Communication:

God's will is expressed in the Bible by four basic methods of communication and explanation. These methods are also the methods by

which we discover and determine the will of God. We sometimes refer to these as the *methods of establishing scriptural authority*. The basic methods by which God's will is communicated (and by which, authority is found for all religious matters that are authorized by God) are:

- **Commands**
- **Statements**
- **Approved Examples**
- **Implications**

I have list four, while some people speak of only three. Those who speak of *three* methods classify *direct commands* with *express statements*. For the sake of accuracy and clarity, I prefer to separate the two, for they are not always the same. **Direct commands are always express statements, but express statements are not always direct commands.** Many Bible truths are expressly stated that contain no commands. In Acts 2:38 and 10:48, Peter *commanded* people to be baptized. Other passages make authorizing *statements* about baptism, but do not command it. For example, Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12 expressly state that we are "*buried*" with Christ in baptism. 1 Peter 3:21 states that baptism *saves us*. Galatians 3:27 states that those who are *baptized into Christ* have *put on Christ*. In this particular passage, Paul *commanded* no one to be baptized, but he did state the purpose and result of baptism. There is a difference between a *command* and a *statement*, and truth expressed by statement is just as authoritative as truth expressed by command.

Direct Commands are sometimes used to express God's will. A command is an authoritative order that must be obeyed. One knows what he is authorized to do because he is told by God to do it:

- **Acts 2:38** - In response to the question, "*Men and brethren what shall we do,*" Peter replied, "*Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins...*" This constituted a command for them to obey.
- **Acts 10:48** - Cornelius was "*commanded*" to be baptized. Authority for baptism is easily obtained from these *command* passages.
- **Romans 13:1; Titus 3:1** - Men are commanded to be in subjection to civil authority. Thus, civil obedience is authorized.

- **Romans 16:17** – Saints are commanded to “mark and avoid” false teachers that may cause divisions among them. This passage authorizes the censuring of errorists.
- **1 Corinthians 16:1, 2** – Saints are commanded to make a financial contribution to the church treasury upon the first day of each week.
- **2 Thessalonians 3:6** – Saints are commanded to discipline unruly church members.
- **Hebrews 13:17** – Submission of church members to the rule of local church elders is established by direct command.
- **1 John 3:7-10** – John commanded brethren to “love one another.”

The New Testament contains many other commands, but these suffice to make the point. We are obviously authorized to do the things that God *commands* us to do.

Express Statements are statements in which truth is *definitely* and *explicitly* stated, not merely implied. As noted above, they may contain commands, but not necessarily:

- **Marriage** is nowhere *commanded* in the New Testament, but it is nonetheless authorized by express statement (Matthew 19:4-6; Hebrews 13:4).
- **Divorce**, not for sexual immorality, leads to adultery by both the divorcer and the divorcee when they marry other people. We know this from a direct statement in Matthew 19:9.
Note: It is by implication that this same verse teaches that an innocent spouse may divorce his mate for fornication and marry another without committing adultery.
- **Remarriage:** By express statement we know that one may marry another upon the death of his mate (Romans 7:2). By express statement we know that it is unlawful to marry another person while your bound mate still lives (Mark 6:17-18; Romans 7:3). *Note that remarriage is authorized in certain situations, but that it is nowhere “commanded” in the New Testament. This illustrates the difference between an “express statement” and a “command.”*
- **Baptism** is commanded (Acts 10:48), but the action, purpose and benefits of baptism are learned by express statement (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12; Acts 2:38; Mk. 16:16; 1 Pet. 3:21; Acts 2:47; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:26-27).
- The **Lord’s Supper** is commanded (Matt. 26:26-27; 1 Cor. 11:24-25), but the nature of the Supper and of its observance are learned from express statements (Matt. 26:26-28; 1 Cor. 10:16; 11:26-33).

Note: Interestingly, the Lord's Supper can be used for examples of all 4 methods of divine communication and authorization. Along with being explained and commanded, the observance of the Lord's Supper is exemplified in Acts 20:7 in an approved apostolic example of observance upon the first day of the week, and this same passage also contains an implication for the frequency of observance.

Approved Examples also instruct and authorize. An example provides a pattern and illustration of conduct and procedure for doing a particular thing. Some people prefer the term "approved *apostolic* examples," but "approved" examples are not limited to just the apostles. Jesus said, "I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done" (John 13:15). That is, practice humility! Furthermore, Peter cited Jesus as an "example" of not sinning, speaking with deceit, reviling or threatening (1 Peter 2:22-23). Paul tells us to "be imitators of God" (Eph. 5:1).

Some people deny that approved examples authorize or bind any religious activity. However, the New Testament teaches that approved examples carry just as much authoritative force as do direct commands and express statements. This is seen from Paul's instructions to the Philippians:

"Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you" (Phil. 4:9).

"Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample" (Phil. 3:17).

By commanding that authorized examples be followed, Paul attached command force to approved examples. Some say that we must obey Bible commands, but are not required to follow Bible examples. They should take a careful look at Philippians 4:9. Paul told the Corinthians to follow his example (because he also followed Christ, 1 Cor. 11:1).

Why Must We Specify "Approved" Examples?

Because, not *all* "apostolic" examples are *approved*! Some apostolic examples contain unapproved and sinful conduct:

- Luke 22:24-27 records a time during Jesus' public ministry when *strife* brewed between the apostles over which one should be considered to be the greatest. Does this "apostolic" example *authorize* jealousy and strife among disciples? No. Jesus rebuked their behavior. The example is cited in order to teach us what NOT to do, and how NOT to behave in the kingdom of God.

- Judas was an “apostle” when he betrayed Christ for 30 pieces of silver (Matt. 26:14-16). Peter later explained that, at that time, Judas was “numbered” with the apostles, and “had part in the ministry” (Acts 1:17). His example of betraying Christ, however, is not one that Bible readers are *encouraged* to follow: it is an example of wicked behavior that is to be avoided. Judas was the “son of perdition” (Jn. 17:12).
- The Bible also contains the example of the “apostle” Peter’s betrayal of Christ (Matt. 26:69-75). Are we to *follow* Peter’s example in this passage? Are we to follow Jesus from afar off? Are we to *deny* Jesus? Are we to *curse and swear* when people accuse us of being once associated with Jesus? No. In *this* instance, Peter’s example is one to avoid, not follow.
- Galatians 2:11-14 contains another example of sinful conduct by the apostle Peter. He acted hypocritically when he disassociated from the Gentiles upon the arrival of the Jews. This is not an example that should be followed. It does not *authorize* the behavior that is depicted in the example.

These are “apostolic examples,” but they are examples of unapproved conduct. One must look for *approval* before citing an apostolic example for religious authority.

The New Testament contains examples of approved action relating to many significant subjects:

- **Plan of Salvation: Acts 2:38, 41, 47; 8:12, 36-38; 9:6,18; 10:47, 48; 16:14,15, 30-33; 18:8** - These examples show people meeting gospel conditions of salvation.
- **Elders: Acts 11:29, 30; 14:23; Titus 1:5; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2** - These examples show that *every* church is to have its own elders; there must be a *plurality* of elders in each church; the elders superintend the affairs of the local where they are members.
- **Support of Preachers: 1 Corinthians 9:1-14; 2 Cor. 11:8; Phil. 4:14-17; Galatians 6:6; Acts 20:34; 2 Thess. 3:8** - These examples provide authority for a preacher to be supported by his own labor or by churches or individuals. They also show how preachers are to be directly supported by churches, not through church-supported societies or church-supported churches.
- **Singing: Matt. 26:30; Acts 16:25; Rom. 15:9; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Heb. 2:12; Jas. 5:13** - Authority is provided for vocal music, not instrumental; for reciprocal singing, not choirs.

Implications are truths that are not *explicitly* stated. Not all details are provided, but enough information is given to allow one to reach a conclusion through deductive reasoning. Some implications lead to an unavoidable conclusion, or *necessary inference*. I remind the reader that God does the implying and we do the inferring.

The word “imply” contains the word “ply,” which is used of materials that are layered upon each other. For example, “plywood” is wood that is made of several layers of wood and glue. “Multi-ply” tires are made of layers of steel cord and rubber. Similarly, “implied” truth is layered truth. It contains multiple premises that are combined to reach an inescapable conclusion.

Some Examples of Implication and Inference

- **Acts 10:9-16, 34, 35 – Peter’s Vision and the Scope of the Gospel:** In his vision, Peter was instructed to eat animals that were considered unclean by Jewish law. Upon reflection and consideration of all related facts and circumstances, Peter concluded that God was telling him that it was acceptable and right for him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. He said, “*God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean*” (Acts 10:28). But how did God “show” him? How did Peter know this to be true? Did God expressly and explicitly *show* him? No. Peter later said, “*In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted with Him*” (Acts 10:34, 35). Peter had learned that God accepted people upon the basis of their righteousness, and regardless of their ancestry. Peter’s conclusion was based upon implications from the vision. God “showed” Peter, but not by clear and express statements. Consider these important observations:
 - Even though God did not expressly state this truth, Peter’s conclusion was **unavoidable**. This example demonstrates the power and significance of inferences.
 - When later explaining his actions to the Jewish brethren in Jerusalem, Peter explained that rejection of the conclusion would have put him in the position of *withstanding God!* (Acts 11:17). By rejecting inferences, people of today “withstand God.” To Peter, truth derived by inference was just as relevant and just as binding as truth expressed by direct command.

- Peter would later act contrary to the truth that he had learned by necessary inference (Gal. 2:11-14). Doing so resulted in condemnation. This fact illustrates that disregard for truth that is learned by inference is just as consequential as disregard for Bible commands.
- **Acts 16:6-10 – The Macedonian Call:** After being forbidden to preach the gospel in Asia and Bithynia, Paul received a vision of a man of Macedonia who was pleading with him to *“Come over to Macedonia and help us.”* Keep in mind that Paul had previously been declined by the Spirit to go to places that he had planned to go. The Spirit did not prohibit Paul this time. Acts 16:10 says, *“Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, **concluding that the lord had called us to preach the gospel there** (emphasis mine, th).”* On the basis of the invitation of the Macedonian in the vision, Paul **concluded** or **inferred** that the Lord wanted them (Paul, Silas and Timothy) to preach in Macedonia.
- **Hebrews 9:6-8 – The Holy of Holies:** After describing the arrangement of the tabernacle, and the regular duties of the priests that were performed in the first compartment, the Hebrew writer turned his attention to the inner compartment. Into the holiest of all went the high priest once every year, at which time he offered blood for his own sins and for the sins of the people. Though obviously not considered by the average Jew, this yearly action of the High Priest contained certain implications. The Hebrew writer said, *“the Holy Spirit indicating that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing”* (Heb. 9:8). In other words, from these rites the Holy Spirit *implied* that access was not then available into the Holiest of All. This is an interesting example, in that the inspired writer is the one who states the inference! There can be no mistake in interpreting *these* particular implications! This example proves that God considers implication to be an effective method of teaching, and inference to be a legitimate method of learning.
- **Matthew 19:9 – The Exception Clause:** Jesus said, *“And I say unto you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery: and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.”* Jesus here *teaches* that an innocent spouse may divorce his mate for fornication and marry another without committing adultery, but how is this taught? It is not directly so stated. It is taught by *implication*. The

exception clause so affects the general divorce prohibition that it changes the outcome for the innocent spouse who puts away his mate for fornication. From Jesus' first statement in Matthew 19:9 we **infer** the that *whoever puts away his wife for fornication and marries another does not commit adultery*. People will often say, "How do you know that divorce is ever allowed by God?" I know it because Jesus implied it in Matthew 19:9. Incidentally, apart from necessary inference no one would be permitted to divorce for any reason.

- **Matthew 3:16 - Jesus' Baptism:** How can we know that Jesus went down into water in being baptized? The Scripture does not explicitly say that He did. We know by necessary inference. Matthew did state that Jesus "*came up out of the water,*" and it is impossible to come out of water that you have never gone into!
- **Acts 20:7 - Frequency of the Lord's Supper:** Paul told the Corinthians, "*For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till he comes*" (1 Cor. 11:26). But *how often?* Many say, "*As often as you like,*" but what does the Bible say? Does it even say anything at all on this question? Yes, it does. Acts 20:7 cites an occasion on which Paul arranged to meet with the disciples of Troas. The record says, "*And upon the first day of the week when the disciples came together to break bread...*" Since every week has a first day, then we must conclude that the disciples assembled upon the first day of *every* week. Exodus 20:8 is parallel to Acts 20:7 with respect to frequency. "Remember the Sabbath day" did not mean "pick just any Sabbath day;" it meant *every* Sabbath day, just as Acts 20:7 means that the Lord's Supper is to be observed upon *every* first day.

Conclusion

While it is good that people read the Bible and accept its inspiration, they need to do more — they need to learn how to apply its teaching to various situations and practices. Erroneous practices result from the failure or refusal to apply the principles of Bible authority. "*And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him*" (Colossians 3:17).