

First Principles Of The Oracles Of God

Lesson 7

“By What Authority Do You Do These Things?” (Mt. 21:23) — Defining & Establishing New Testament Authority —

Defining New Testament Authority

Having covered the “underlying principles” relating to Biblical authority, let’s now apply what we have learned. This is putting Biblical knowledge and understanding into practice in everyday situations, both *in* and *out* of the public assembly.

One more time, let’s review what we have established thus far:

- ◆ The Bible is God’s *only* revealed word and our pattern for all we are to do religiously. All other “sources” come from the minds of men, and are to be rejected.
- ◆ The Bible contains 2 different covenants. The 1st one was for O.T. Israel while the 2nd one is for us today. The 2nd covenant is superior to the 1st covenant.
- ◆ The New Covenant, or Testament, contains the *inherent* authority of Jesus Christ and the *delegated* authority of His chosen apostles. To follow the apostles is to follow Christ and the Father. To reject them is to reject Christ and the Father.
- ◆ We have a definite need for authority in all realms of life. Without authority, especially in our relationship with God and others, life would be one big chaotic mess.

Grasping how authority is defined in the New Testament is necessary before one can truly understand how the 2nd Covenant (*the New Testament*) directs us in everyday living. This requires knowing the difference between *general* New Testament authority and *specific* New Testament authority. It also means we must have an understanding of expediencies.

General Authority vs. Specific Authority

Those in various realms of authority (civil rulers, teachers, employers, etc.) do not always express their right to command or direct in the same way. This is not shocking to us; we’ve learned to understand how to recognize and respond to the different ways these authoritative figures reveal their intentions for us. Similarly, the authority of the New Testament is not defined always in the same way. Sometimes we read of something authorized in a *general* sense. On other occasions, we notice it to be more *specified*. Until we recognize this difference, we cannot properly establish New Testament authority for anything we may want or need to do religiously. This is important because of passages like **Mt. 7:21-23**.

This concept can be seen from the Old Testament as well. While we will use a couple of examples, we will primarily focus on how the New Testament portrays the difference. Using a regular English dictionary, define the following:

General _____

Specific _____

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The law which governs this concept of general and specific authority is the *law of exclusion*. Admittedly, this is a human term; it is not found in the Scripture. Its premise is that the statement or command to do one thing authorizes only the doing of the thing specified. That necessarily means the doing of other things is automatically forbidden, or “excluded.”

To illustrate this, notice the following common secular examples. In the space provided, list what is specified and what is excluded by the law of exclusion.

- ◆ A last will & testament _____

- ◆ A property deed _____

- ◆ A physician's prescription _____

Expediencies

An expedient is a suitable, profitable, or advantageous way to accomplish an end. Anything necessary which can be used to comply with a command, as long as it is *not* prohibited somewhere else in the Scripture, can be labeled an expedient, and thus be used in carrying out a command of God.

Only those things which are lawful are expedient. Expediencies *always* fall into the category of general authority. Specified authority allows no room for expediencies because everything is specified.

Any means or methods that are not generally authorized are not expediencies; they are *substitutions* for what God has commanded. Sometimes what is claimed as an expedient is actually a substitution.

The place in the Scripture that deals with expediencies is **1 Cor. 10:23-33**. Read this text carefully a few times and answer the following questions:

1. What is the context? _____
2. What must something be before it can be an expedient? (v. 23) _____
3. What must the expedient always do? (vv. 23b-24, 33; cp. 14:26b) _____
4. What must the expedient never do? (v. 32; cp. 8:7-13) _____

When the issues of institutionalism were plaguing the church 50 to 60 years ago, some brethren sought to justify sinful practices by the so-called “rule of expediency.” The basic tenet of this “law” was that if something worked, it was expedient. Read the lengthy quote on the following page very carefully.

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Notice the following quotes from Foy E. Wallace, Jr. during the debates over institutionalism:

Somewhat has been said of a New Testament law of expediency. Where is any such law found in the New Testament? Expediency is not a law. "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient," is the way it reads in **1 Cor. 10:23 [ASV]**. Of course, Paul was not making the blanket affirmation that everything is lawful (see **1 Cor. 6:9-10**). Obviously, it means only the things that are lawful can be expedient; but some things that are lawful are not expedient. Therefore to prove that anything is expedient, it must first be proven to be lawful. The brethren are in reverse, attempting to prove that a thing is lawful by trying to prove that it is expedient, which is an inversion of the New Testament principle. Nothing is expedient that is not lawful.

Now when authority is wanted for a practice for which no authority exists – presto! The "**law of expediency**" is invoked! If it can be called a law at all, it is a human law altogether, it is not divine. Take these examples:

Assembling is authorized => the meeting house is the expedient

Giving is authorized => the collection basket is the expedient

Baptism is authorized => the baptistery is the expedient

Singing is authorized => the song books are the expedients

Collection baskets could not be expedient if there were no law on giving. A baptistery could not be expedient if there was no command for baptism.

On the same principle, the employment of mechanized music in the church not being authorized, instruments of music are not expedients, and cannot be paralleled with song books. Mechanical music is not authorized; therefore, instruments for that kind of music cannot be classed with expedients.

Before arguing the "law of expediency" for putting colleges in the budgets of the churches, let the authority be cited for the church to support human institutions. If such can be shown to be lawful, then it will be time enough to discuss whether it is expedient or not.

The once famous Henry Ward Beecher said, "Infant baptism is like an ox yoke... it works." So, it is argued that a thing is expedient if it works...The whole institutional proposition has been predicated on a law that does not exist – the so-called but non-existent "New Testament Law of Expediency."

Torch (August, 1950, pp. 8-11)

Questions

Using the charts on the following pages, complete the examples that illustrate general and specific authority, expedencies, and the law of exclusion.

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GENERAL AUTHORITY	
The General Command	Expediencies That Are Allowed
<p><u>Noah</u> "Make an ark..." (Gen. 6:14)</p>	
<p><u>The Red Heifer</u> "Bring a red heifer..." (Num. 19:2-10)</p>	
<p><u>The Great Commission</u> "Go..." (Mt. 28:19) "Baptize..." (Mt. 28:19) "Teach..." (Mt. 28:20)</p>	
<p><u>Assembling</u> "...not forsaking the assembling..." (Heb. 10:25)</p>	
<p><u>The Lord's Supper</u> "...first day of the week..." (Acts 20:7) "take this...cup..." (Mt. 26:27-29; Lk. 22:17)</p>	
<p><u>Benevolence</u> "...relieve...widows indeed." (1 Tim. 5:16) "...visit orphans and widows..." (Jas. 1:27)</p>	

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SPECIFIC AUTHORITY	
The Specific Command	Substitutions Not Allowed (Not Expediencies)
<p><u>The Passover Lamb</u> "On the 10th day of the month, take a lamb for yourselves..." (Ex. 12:2-5)</p>	
<p><u>Abraham & Isaac</u> "Offer him...as a burnt offering..." (Gen. 22:2)</p>	
<p><u>The Worship of the Church</u> Preaching (Mk. 16:15) Giving (1 Cor. 16:1-2) Prayer (Acts 2:42) Singing (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) The Lord's Supper (Mk. 14:12-25; Acts 20:7)</p>	
<p><u>Baptism</u> "...buried with Him through baptism" (Rom. 6:4) "Can anyone forbid water..." (Acts 10:47)</p>	
<p><u>The Way of Salvation</u> Belief (Heb. 11:6; Rom. 10:13-14; Mk. 16:16) Repentance (Lk. 13:3,5; Acts 2:38; 17:30) Confession (Mt. 10:32-33; Rom. 10:9-10) Baptism (Rom. 6:3-5; 1 Pet. 3:21) Faithfulness (Rev. 2:10)</p>	
<p><u>Collective Activity</u> A local congregation (Acts 11:27-30; 14:23; 20:28; Phil. 1:1)</p>	

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Establishing New Testament Authority

The New Testament defines the authority that guides us. Either it is expressed *generally* (allowing for the use of expediencies to accomplish our compliance), or it is expressed *specifically* (where the law of exclusion automatically excludes everything else that is not specified).

Now it is time to see how the New Testament establishes authority that is expressed either generally or specifically. It is in this lesson that we will learn exactly how heaven's will is articulated. If all are going to agree to be bound by this New Covenant which contains the inherent authority of Jesus Christ and the delegated authority of His apostles, then all are going to have to know how the New Testament teaches or guides us.

When we talk about the New Testament teaching or guiding us, we refer to how the authority contained in the New Testament is established. It is established in 3 different, yet equal ways:

- ◆ *By a command or precept*
A direct statement from God that can be either positive or negative. It either commands the doing of something or prohibits the doing of something.
- ◆ *By an approved example*
Action(s) of 1st century believers under the guidance of the Holy Spirit-led apostles of Jesus. Such actions are deemed "approved" because upon our examination of them, we can see they met with the Lord's approval, and were therefore authorized. However, not every example found in the New Testament is authoritative in nature.
- ◆ *By a necessary inference*
An inescapable conclusion one reaches when considering a given context. The inference is neither expressly stated nor specifically illustrated, but it is necessarily implied by the clear import and meaning of the passage in context.

A word of caution is in order...

We must be careful not to elevate this "approach" of command, approved example, and necessary inference above where it should be. Sometimes brethren quote these 3 methods as if they were equal to "Matthew, Mark, Luke, & John." They are only methods to employ in understanding the Bible; they are not actual words from heaven!!

The first consideration in establishing New Testament authority is God Himself!! Without God, His nature, character, and holiness, all the commands, examples, and inferences we could collectively stack on top of one another would be absolutely meaningless.

Because of Who God is, and because of what God expects of us, that is why we must have respect for His word, be able to establish authority for all we teach and practice. We must also do it the only ways the New Testament reveals. Those methods are...

- 1) **Divine commands;** 2) **Approved examples;** and 3) **Necessary inferences.**

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This section of the lesson will have 3 parts:

- a) We will learn how each of the above methods are illustrated in the Scripture.
- b) We will apply all 3 methods to one Biblical issue => the Lord's Supper.
- c) We will show that Christians in the 1st century used these 3 methods to settle divisive issues that confronted and troubled them.

Establishing Authority Using Each Method

◆ Direct Commands

- what was commanded in **Gen. 12:1**? _____
- what is commanded in **Acts 2:38**? _____
- what was prohibited in **Ex. 20:13**? _____
- what is prohibited in **Eph. 4:29**? _____

Compare the one who would show respect for these Divine precepts with the one Jesus described in **Mt. 15:8-9**. What is the obvious difference?

◆ Approved Examples

- what example is recorded in **Acts 20:7**? _____
- what example is recorded in **Acts 25:10-11**? _____

There are some, even among the Lord's church today, who say that examples found in the New Testament are not binding. Such thinking is without understanding. However, not every example found in the New Testament is binding. We must be able to make the distinction.

The ability to determine whether or not an example is authoritative, and therefore binding, rests on whether or not the example itself is incidental or essential. If it is incidental to the doing of something, it is *not* binding and authoritative. If it is essential to the doing of something, it is binding and authoritative.

- *The command to "go preach the gospel" (Mk. 16:15)*
 - how did Paul go? (**Acts 13:4-5**) _____
 - how did Philip go? (**Acts 8:29-35**) _____
 - how did Peter go? (**Acts 10:23-24, 33-43**) => trip ~ 35 miles _____
- *The command to care for brethren in need (1 Jn. 3:16-18)*
 - what did some believers do? (**Acts 2:44-45; 4:34-37**) _____
 - what did other believers do? (**1 Tim. 6:17-18**) _____

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- *The number of overseers in a local church (Acts 14:23)*
 - how was their appointment accomplished? (Titus 1:5) _____
 - how do we know ***how many*** ought to be in each church?

- *Who may be helped from the Lord's treasury (1 Tim 5:16)*
 - how may we know ***who*** may be helped? (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35; 6:1-6; 11:27-30; Rom. 15:25-31; 1 Cor. 16:1-3; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:1, 12-13)

◆ Necessary Inferences

- what is inferred in 1 Cor. 16:1-2? _____
- what is inferred in Acts 8:35-37? _____

Not all inferences are necessary. Therefore, we must watch what we label "necessary."

- What is necessarily inferred in Heb. 10:25? _____
- What is not necessarily inferred? _____

All 3 Methods Applied To One Biblical Issue

No single command gives all the details regarding our observance of the Lord's Supper on the first day of every week. Therefore, we must study everything revealed on this topic to ensure that we have all the truth, and that we are complying with God's demands (cp. Psa. 119:160).

- what aspect of the Supper is authorized by command? (Mt. 26:26-29; 1 Cor. 11:23-25)
- what aspect of the Supper is authorized by example? (Acts 20:7)
- what aspect of the Supper is authorized by a necessary conclusion? (Acts 20:7)
 - compare to Ex. 20:8
 - if observance was to be yearly, what was specified? (Lev. 23:27)
 - if observance was to be monthly, what was specified? (Num. 10:10)
 - if observance was to be weekly, what was specified?

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All 3 Methods Used By Early Christians To Settle Controversies

It is also encouraging to note that the 1st century Christians undertook the task of deciding authority on given issues as we do today. That alone tells us that truth is the same today as it was when the kingdom began. It also emphasizes that we can be what the early believers were (simply Christians) when we do what they did (Bible things in Bible ways).

The controversy over whether or not Gentile Christians should be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses troubled the early church. Judaizing teachers roamed all over the ancient world, following the Lord's apostles around in attempts to circumvent the plain teaching the gospel. It finally reached a decisive point when Gentile converts were "troubled" and their souls were "unsettled" (**Acts 15:24**). This was an issue that had to be settled. The Christians had to understand the authority of heaven. How they went about establishing it is exactly the focus of this lesson. In deciding the issue, the apostles and elders made their appeal to this same three-fold rule of command, example, and necessary inference.

The text »»» Acts 15

The issue »»» The necessity of Gentile Christians keeping the Law of Moses (circumcision)?

The solution »»» Establishing authority

Authority was established by an approved example (vv. 7-11)

- Peter shows how the Lord sent him to the uncircumcised Gentiles
 - what does Peter mention? (vv. 8-9)
- of what was all this an example?

Authority was established by a necessary inference or conclusion (v. 12)

- Paul & Barnabas show how God used them among the Gentiles
 - what do Paul & Barnabas mention?
- what is the only conclusion one can come to?

Authority was established by a direct command from God (vv. 13-19)

- James reminds the brethren what God had already stated about the salvation of the Gentiles
 - who does James quote? (vv. 16-17)
- because of what God said, what shouldn't be done to the Gentiles? (v. 19)

What 2 very important things were accomplished with this 3-fold approach?

- 1) _____
- 2) _____