

**THE
PRINCIPLE
OF
AUTHORITY**

Dave Miller

THE PRINCIPLE OF AUTHORITY

Perhaps no other doctrine is emphasized so frequently as the principle of authority. The Scriptures make clear that from the beginning of human history, God has required people to structure their behavior based upon God's will. We human beings have no **right** to formulate our own ideas concerning religious truth. We must have God's approval for everything we do. Paul articulated this extremely important principle clearly in Colossians 3:17--"And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus." What did the apostle mean by that statement? What is the meaning of the expression "in the name of the Lord"?

Luke provides the answer. The religious authorities were extremely upset that the apostles were advocating Christian concepts. They brought Peter and John into their assembly and demanded to know, "By what power or by what name have you done this?" (Acts 4:7). The word "power" refers to **authority**. The Jewish leaders were demanding to know by what authority they were acting. Who was giving them the **right** to teach what they were teaching? What authoritative source **approved** or **sanctioned** their particular actions? Peter's answer was "by the name of Jesus Christ." In other words, the apostles had not been advocating their own ideas. They were simply presenting what Jesus had previously authorized them to present (cf., Matt. 16:19; 18:18).

Think for a moment about the enormous implications of this biblical principle. No human being has the **right** to introduce into religious practice an activity for which the Scriptures provide no approval. We human beings are simply not free in God's sight to fashion religion and morality according to our own desires. Cain learned that the hard way when he did not offer the precise sacrifice which God had designated (Gen. 4:5-7; Heb. 11:4; 1 John 3:12). The lives of Nadab and Abihu were snuffed out by God because of a minor adjustment in their offering (Lev. 10:1-2). This minor deviation from God's precise specifications was "unauthorized." The change failed to show God as **holy** and give Him the **respect** He deserves (Lev. 10:3).

Saul was rejected by God when he presumed to offer a sacrifice he was not authorized to offer (1 Sam. 13:8-14). He was censured a second time for making slight adjustments in God's instructions (1 Sam. 15:22-23). He lost His crown and the approval of God. Justifying his adjustments on the grounds that he was merely attempting to be "culturally relevant" would not have altered his status in God's sight.

Uzzah was struck dead simply because he touched the ark of the covenant--though his apparent motive was to protect the ark (2 Sam. 6:6-7). David admitted that they had deserved the Lord's displeasure because they were not seeking God "after the due order" (1 Chron. 15:13). In other words, God had given previous information concerning proper or **authorized** transportation of the ark, but these instructions were not followed. Their handling of the ark was not done "in the name of the Lord" in that they did it their way instead of according to the divine prescription.

Notice that these cases involved people who were engaged in **religious** activities. These people were religious! They were not pagans, skeptics, or atheists. They were attempting to worship the one true God. They were **believers**! Yet their failure to conform precisely to divine instructions elicited the disapproval of God for the simple reason that their actions were not **authorized**.

The New Testament illustrates this principle repeatedly. Authority begins with God. He delegated authority to Jesus (Matt. 28:18; John 5:27). Only Jesus, therefore, has the authority to define and designate the parameters of human behavior in general and religious practice in particular. Consequently, no human being on earth has the right to do **anything** without the prior approval of Christ. John said that those who believe on Christ's **name** (i.e., those who accept His **authority**) have the power or right to become children of God. In other words, faith is a necessary prerequisite that gives a person

divine authority to become a child of God. All other human beings lack divine sanction to become children of God.

A Roman military man, an officer who commanded one hundred men, understood the principle of authority. He said to Jesus: For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, "Go," and he goes; and to another, "Come," and he comes; and to my servant, "Do this," and he does it (Matt. 8:9). This centurion recognized that individuals who are subject to the authority of a higher power must receive permission for everything they do. They must conform themselves precisely to the will of their superior.

Even the religious enemies of Jesus understood and acknowledged the principle of authority. One day when Jesus was teaching in the temple, the chief priest and elders confronted Him with this question: "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority" (Matt. 21:23). Even these religiously warped opponents of our Lord at least grasped correctly the concept that one must have prior approval from a legitimate authoritative source before one can advocate religious viewpoints. If Jesus agreed with the change agents of our day, He would have said, "What do you mean 'by what authority'? God doesn't require us to have authority for what we do in religion as long as we do not violate a direct command."

But Jesus was not in sympathy with today's change agents. In fact, His response to the Jewish leaders shows that He fully agreed with the principle of authority. He proceeded to show them that His teaching was authorized by the same source that authorized the teaching of John the Immerser. Yet, these hardhearted religious leaders rejected John and, by implication, his source of authority. So neither would they accept Jesus who received His authority from the same source, i.e., Heaven. In any case, both Jesus and His enemies agreed that one must have God's prior permission for what one advocates in religion.

What did Peter mean when he wrote, "If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God" (1 Pet. 4:11)? He meant that whatever a person advocates in religion must be found in God's word. We all know that dedicating babies, handclapping, instrumental music and choir groups are not found in God's word. Their use violates the principle of authority--failing to "speak as the oracles of God."

What did Paul mean when he wrote, "...that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written" (1 Cor. 4:6)? He meant that whatever we do in religion must be found first in Scripture. We all know that "sacred drama," swaying arms, and religious observance of Christmas and Easter are not found in Scripture. Their use violates the principle of authority--thinking and going "beyond what is written."

Interestingly enough, even secular society acknowledges the principle of authority. An average American citizen will walk into a restaurant and see two doors. The first door has the word "Restrooms" on it while the second door has the words "Authorized Personnel Only." He immediately interprets these messages to mean that he has authority to enter the door that reads "Restrooms" while he is not permitted to enter the other door. He instantly knows he has no **authority** to enter the second door--even though the sign does not explicitly command him to not enter the door. The sign does not indicate who may **NOT** enter. It only specifies who **may** enter--who has permission or authority to enter. The individual is under obligation to use his reasoning powers and deduce that he has no authority to pass through the second door.

Entering the first door, he encounters two additional doors. The first door has a stick figure of a woman on it while the second door has a stick figure of a man. Once again, the citizen is expected to understand that only women are authorized to enter the first door and only men have permission to pass through the second door. People fathom the principle of authority so easily and so thoroughly that they can ascertain what they may or may not do even from pictures--stick figures! But when it comes to religion and the change agents in the church, recognition of the principle of authority is set aside in exchange for irrational, emotional desire to do what one wants to do.

When a person purchases a new vacuum cleaner or a new car, the product comes with a factory warranty. This warranty provides the customer with free repair service for the specified warranty period. However, should a malfunction occur, the customer is instructed to take the product to a "Factory Authorized Representative." Failure to do so will void the warranty. Does the average person understand the principle of authority in this case? Of course he does. He understands that the manufacturer has given prior approval to a select group of repair persons who are authorized to repair the product. He understands that he has authority to take the product to any of those places and that he is not authorized to take the product anywhere else--even though other repair persons are not specifically singled out as inappropriate repair persons.

When a person enters the hospital for surgery, he or she signs a document authorizing the physician to operate on the patient. What would you think of a doctor, whom you have authorized to perform surgery on you, if he were to go out into the waiting room where your child is awaiting your return and commence to operate on the child? In addition to thinking he may be mentally ill, you would protest his lack of authority for his action. What if he justified his action by insisting that you did not specifically forbid his performing surgery on your child? Neither you--nor the medical and legal professions--would put up with such nonsense. Why? Because normal people understand and live by the principle of authority. But religion is different.

What if your doctor wrote you a prescription for antibiotics and you took the prescription to the pharmacist who then filled the prescription by giving you antibiotic laced with strychnine? Upon reading the label, you would immediately protest the pharmacist's action and demand an explanation. Would the pharmacist be considered in his right mind if he offered as his explanation, "The doctor did not say I was not to give you the poison. I interpreted his silence to be permissive"?

Suppose you send your child to the grocery store to purchase a gallon of two percent milk and a one pound loaf of wheat bread. He returns with a gallon of two percent, a one pound loaf of white bread, and a box of Twinkies. Do you pat him on the head and compliment him for his faithful obedience? Do you praise him for his effort and sincerity? Or do you challenge his behavior as being unauthorized? What if he justifies his actions by insisting that you said nothing about the purchase of white bread and Twinkies? In any case, both you and he would know that he had engaged in unauthorized behavior. He did not have your **permission** to purchase white bread or Twinkies even though you did not specifically forbid it.

When you place an order with a catalog company or a fast food restaurant, you expect them to conform to your instructions precisely, neither adding to nor subtracting from your order. They receive authority from you based upon what you say to them--not based upon what you do **not** say. You do not give them authority for their actions on the basis of your **silence**. You authorize them by your words, your instructions, your directions. If they go beyond the parameters of your words--though you do not specifically forbid such actions--they are proceeding without your authority.

Authority For EVERYTHING?

But are you saying that we must have authority for **everything** we do in religion? **Everything**? What about the many things we do that the Bible does not mention? For example, where is our authority for church buildings, pews, lighting, carpet, television programs, songbooks, and communion trays?

Consider the case of Noah. He was instructed by God to construct a large wooden boat. God's instructions included such details as dimensions, type of wood, the door and window, and decks (Gen. 6:14-16). The principle of authority applied to Noah in the following fashion. He was authorized to build a boat, but not authorized to build an alternative mode of transportation (e.g., car, plane, or balloon). He was authorized to

make the boat out of wood, but not authorized to make it out of some other material (e.g., plastic, steel, or fiberglass). He was authorized to use "gopherwood," but not authorized to use some other kind of wood (e.g., oak, poplar, or pine). He was authorized to utilize whatever tools and assistance were necessary to comply with God's command (e.g., hammers, nails, saws, hired help).

Consider the Great Commission. God commanded His emissaries to "Go" (Mark 16:15). The Bible describes with approval inspired preachers **going** by a variety of means, including by chariot (Acts 8:31), rope and basket (Acts 9:25), on foot (Acts 14:14), and by ship (Acts 16:11). Gathering together everything in the Scriptures pertaining to this matter, it becomes clear that the mode of transportation was optional. Therefore, I am forced to conclude that every mode is authorized today (including via television) as long as it does not violate some other biblical principle (e.g., the principle of stewardship).

This process of gathering biblical evidence and drawing only warranted conclusions is divinely mandatory for every human being. We are under obligation to weigh the biblical data on every subject and conclude only what God wants us to conclude.¹

The Bible enjoins upon us the act of assembling together for worship (e.g., Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 5:4; 11:17-18; Heb. 10:25). But it is physically impossible for a plurality of individuals to assemble together without an assembly place. To obey the requirement to assemble, one must assemble **somewhere**. We have approved instances of the early church assembling together in a third story room (Acts 20:8-9), in private residences as well as in nonprivate settings (1 Cor. 16:19; 11:22; cf., Acts 20:20). We are forced to conclude that the location is optional and authorized as long as it does not violate other biblical principles (cf., John 4:21). Hence, the Scriptures authorize church buildings and the necessary furnishings (e.g., carpet, chairs, and lights).

The same may be said of songbooks. We are commanded to sing (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). We are commanded to worship in an orderly manner (1 Cor. 14:40). God wants us to sing the same song together (as opposed to singing different songs at the same time). The only way to comply with these stipulations is to use songbooks, or sheet music, or overhead projectors that give the entire assembly access to the same song at the same time. Therefore, all such tools are authorized as expedient ways to comply with the command to sing.

Instrumental music in worship is not authorized. While some people may think it qualifies as an expedient--an aid to their singing--it does not. It may drown out their singing or so overshadow their singing that they think it sounds better, but in actuality a musical instrument merely supplements singing. It is another form of music in the same way that seeing and hearing are two distinct ways to perceive. Seeing does not aid hearing; it supplements one form of perception/observation with another. **Singing** with the voice and **playing** on a mechanical instrument are two separate ways of making music. Singing is authorized because the New Testament enjoins it (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). God has told us He wants us to sing. Instrumental music is not authorized--not because Ephesians and Colossians exclude it or don't mention it--but because no New Testament passage enjoins it. No where does God inform us that He wants us to play on an instrument.

The Lord's Supper is to be eaten when the church is assembled for worship (Matt. 26:29; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:20). God wants each worshipper to partake of both the bread and the grape juice. How may this be accomplished? Containers or trays are necessarily required--unless grapes are handcarried to each person who would then squeeze the juice into his own mouth. We do have the account of Jesus instituting the Lord's Supper and

¹ For concise, definitive analyses of the principle of authority, see Thomas B. Warren, *When Is An "Example" Binding?* (Jonesboro, AR: National Christian Press, Inc., 1975) and Roy Deaver, *Ascertaining Bible Authority* (Austin, TX: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1987).

apparently using a single cup. However, the context makes clear that the container was incidental. The contents--the juice--was what they were to drink and reflect symbolically upon. I am forced to conclude that the manner of distribution of the elements of the Lord's Supper is optional.

Conclusion

Every single facet of our behavior, in and out of worship, may be determined in the same way. God so requires. He expects us to give heed to His word, studying it carefully and consistently in order to know how to live life in harmony with His will. For true Christianity to be practiced, we must be true to God's directions. We must be faithful to the book. Hezekiah "did what was good and right and true before the Lord his God" (2 Chron. 31:20). To what do the words "good," "right," and "true" refer? The next verse explains: "And in every work that he began in the service of the house of God, in the law and in the commandment, to seek his God, he did it with all his heart" (2 Chron. 31:32). Hezekiah was faithful to God, doing what was good, right and true in the sense that he obeyed precisely the law and commandment of God and did so from the heart (cf., John 4:24).

Many churches of Christ are introducing into their practice all sorts of activities and programs. Upon what basis are these innovations justified? "Well, it meets our needs"; "It gets more people involved"; "It brings in lots of people"; "It generates enthusiasm"; "It allows us to get things done"; "We really like it"; "It stimulates interest"; "It keeps our young people's attention"; "It creates a warm, accepting environment"; etc. It is absolutely incredible that so many Christians could drift so far from their biblical moorings. Their failure to recognize the principle of Bible authority will not exempt them from God's disfavor.

When all is said and done, when we've gone through all the rationalizing as to why we do what we want to do in religion, we are still faced with whether what we do is, in fact, in accordance with God's instructions. By definition, being faithful to God entails conformity to divine directives--right doing (1 John 3:7; Acts 10:35). When one "transgresses (i.e., goes ahead) and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ" (2 John 9), he becomes **unfaithful** and removes himself from the benefits of God's grace (2 Pet. 2:20-22; Heb. 10:26-31; Gal. 5:4). Remaining within the grace and favor of God is dependent upon our compliance with the all-important, God-ordained principle of authority.

Must we conform ourselves to **the name** of Christ? That is, in order to be saved, must I have His previous approval, His sanction, His authorization, for everything I do in religion? Listen to Peter: "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is **no other name** under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

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