

Understanding and Applying the Examples/Precedents of the Bible

Text:

Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices. Therefore it is necessary that this one also have something to offer. For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law; who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, "See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises (Hebrews 8:1-6, NKJV).

Introduction

Once we understand that commands of Scripture are significant for us today, we need to consider the examples or precedents of Scripture. Following Bible examples is an important part of honoring Bible authority for faith and practice. Our goal is to do all, in word or in deed, in the name of Jesus, according to Colossians 3:17.

The teaching of the church has often encouraged us to maintain faithfulness to Bible authority with various slogans, mottos and tag-lines that emphasize Bible examples. We "speak where the Bible speaks, and we are silent where the Bible is silent." We do not "add to, or take away" from the Book. Such platitudes often include Scriptural language. For example, we are warned "not to think beyond what is written" (1 Corinthians 4:6). These mottos are important for securing an identity and a sense of certainty in matters of faith.

Unfortunately, the sense of certainty we feel from these mottos is less than helpful whenever we get down to the real business of understanding and applying Bible examples. After all, which examples are "binding" and which are not? How do we know when we have gone "beyond" or when we have "added to"? Just because one may cite book, chapter and verse does

not necessarily mean that a Bible example is “binding” or that we have found a Bible precedent that must be followed.

How many people have strained at the gnat and swallowed the camel when it comes to Bible examples (Matthew 23:24)? For example, must a person be baptized in running water? Must the church meet in an upper room to observe the Lord’s Supper? Must we extend our preaching to the mid-night hour as Paul did in Acts 20? Or, must we sing a hymn after the Lord’s Supper? Must the church assemble “from house to house” or may we purchase a building for the purpose of meeting together? Must the church send a messenger to deliver aid to other churches, or may we use the United States Postal Service? In some cases, the answer may seem obvious. But the answer is not always obvious in every case; at least, it is not obvious to everyone in every case.

Clearly, some examples in the Bible are not examples or precedents at all. Sometimes, a Bible writer will include incidental information in his narration of events that is merely part of telling the story. In Acts 21, Luke tells us that Paul took a vow with four other men in the temple. Is this an example for all Christians to follow? Or, is it merely an incidental part of the story? Must we follow every example found in the Bible, including the wearing of robes and sandals? Obviously, this is not the intent of the Bible message. Some examples are merely incidental while others hold a spiritual significance that requires faithful obedience. In our study, we hope to provide some tools for determining when an incident in the Bible is an example for us to follow today. Of course, once an example is discovered in the Scriptures, we must then ask whether that example is “binding”; that is, whether the example is required or only optional.

For example, the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) is an example for us today in the sense that he demonstrates what it means to care for others in need. The Good Samaritan dressed the victim’s wounds and paid for his recuperation. Today, we may follow his example exactly when the occasion presents itself, or we may follow the principle of caring for others without exactly following his example. For instance, we may take the man to a doctor to get his wounds dressed instead of doing it ourselves. The point is that many times an example shows us one way something may be done without requiring that it always be done that way. Only when a background rule or express command of Scripture supports an example are we required to follow the exact details of the example. Moses knew that the pattern for the tabernacle shown to by God

was to be followed exactly—a binding pattern example—because God said, “*See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain*” (Hebrews 8:5).

Generally, examples in the Bible do not require, but permit an action. We rightly acknowledge that whenever apostolic authority was present, actions taken by the early church are “approved precedents” that we may safely follow. However, these approved precedents do not prohibit alternative actions, unless there is strong propositional support to require following the example.

Discussion

- I. Moral examples are the most common Bible examples.
 - A. Jesus’ example of washing feet (John 13:15, “I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you”).
 - B. The example of Paul’s conduct (1 Corinthians 11:1, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ”).
 1. “Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame -- who set their mind on earthly things” (Philippians 3:17-19, NKJV)
 2. “For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you; nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, not because we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us” (2 Thessalonians 3:7-9).
 - C. Timothy and Titus are to be examples.
 1. “Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (1 Timothy 4:12)

2. “Likewise, exhort the young men to be sober-minded, in all things showing yourself to be a pattern of good works; in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, incorruptibility, sound speech that cannot be condemned, that one who is an opponent may be ashamed, having nothing evil to say of you” (Titus 2:6-8).

D. Jesus’ Example (1 Peter 2:21, “For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps).

E. Bad Examples.

1. Sodom and Gomorrah (2 Peter 2:6, Jude 7).
2. Wandering Israelites—example of disobedience (Hebrews 4:11).

II. Some Positive Examples—Examples that involve worship, salvation, and the church.

A. Communion

1. Jesus says, “Do this in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24).
 - a. “Do this” is a clear command to follow the example set by Jesus when He instituted the Lord’s Supper.
 - b. This is further emphasized by the fact that Paul corrects the Corinthians corruption of the Lord’s Supper by referring back to the original example set by Jesus.
2. What is included in Jesus’ command “Do this.”
 - a. Eating and Drinking the elements of the Lord’s Supper is all that is included—not the location of the upper room.
 - b. Jesus attaches spiritual significance to the elements of the Lord’s Supper, but no significance is attached to the upper room.

- B. Sunday observance of the Lord's Supper is an example packed with Spiritual Significance. The fact that the early church met on Sunday, the first day of the week is documented both in Scripture and in secular history.
1. Jesus' resurrection was on the first day (Mark 16:9-14)
 2. The church began on the first day, according to Acts 2.
 3. Taking up the collection for the needy saints was to be done on Sunday, according to 1 Corinthians 16:1-2.
 4. The Troas church assembled on the first day (Acts 20:7).
 5. The early church fathers concur.
 6. How often? (1 Corinthians 11:26)
 7. Hebrews 10:25
- III. Similar to a circumstantial case in a court of law, consistency and frequency of New Testament examples adds the weight and force of a command or direct statement.
- A. The mode of Christian baptism is immersion.
1. This is indicated by some of the information included in Luke's account of the Ethiopian's baptism. This account might appear to be pattern authority for immersion as opposed to sprinkling or pouring.
 2. Nevertheless, the reason we know that the mode of baptism is immersion is by the very definition of the Greek word, and not from any examples of baptism in the Bible—however helpful those examples might be in support of the case. The New Testament teaches that sinners are baptized for the remission of sins by command and direct statement (Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Galatians 3:26-27; Ephesians 5:26; Colossians 2:12; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 3:21).
 3. The consistency and frequency of examples of baptism connected with the forgiveness of sins in every conversion account recorded in The Book of Acts is more than simply supportive evidence.

- B. The Scriptures teach that congregations must appoint a plurality of elders and not a single elder or pastor.
1. Several passages indicate that apostolic churches had a plurality of elders: Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1.
 - a. In fact, there is no indication that any church functioned without a plurality of elders.
 - b. The consistent and frequent mention of a plurality of church elders in the New Testament is a compelling case against the one-man pastor system.
 2. Passages concerning a church's responsibility to submit to/obey those who rule suggest a plurality of elders (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24).
 3. Nevertheless, one New Testament command concerning elders provides a conclusive case for a plurality of elders.
 - a. The Apostle Paul directly command Titus to "appoint elders in every city as I commanded you" (Titus 1:5).
 - b. The words "every city" may seem to suggest a different arrangement than elders ruling over one congregation only. But this is an unnecessary inference.
 - 1) Considering Acts 14:23 a parallel passage resolves the issue a little too easily.
 - 2) The Apostle Peter commands the elders "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers" (1 Peter 5:2).

Conclusion

Understanding and applying Bible examples/precedents usually requires little more than diligent study of the Scriptures and basic logical reasoning. In some cases, understand and applying Bible examples/precedents can be a difficult enterprise (See 2 Peter 3:14-18). Nevertheless, we are assured of the fact that we can understand the Bible if we approach our study openly and honestly with a desire to bend our will to God's will (John 7:17; Ephesians 3:3-5; 5:17).