

One of the major differences between the church of Christ and other religious groups is a difference in attitudes toward the authority of the Scriptures, thus, how God's word authorizes. In the church of Christ, for example, many see the importance of God's authority in all that we practice. We understand that God accepts in religion only that which He authorizes.

The belief that God accepts in religion only that which He authorizes is a belief that is as old as God's first dealings with man. The religion of Able was accepted of God, but the religion of Canaan was rejected (Genesis 4:8). Two passages in the New Testament make it clear that God gave instructions concerning their worship. The first is Hebrews 11:4, "By faith Abel offered into God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh." The second is Romans 10:17, "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." What Abel did, he did by faith; but faith comes through the testimony of the word of God. It follows then, that what Abel did, he did because of the authority of the word of God.

This belief is also prominent in the Mosaic dispensation. The worship of Nadab and Abihu was rejected, and they lost their lives because they went beyond the authority of the word of God. Leviticus 10:1-2 states, "And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he had commanded them not. And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord." The fire which they offered was fire "which he had not commanded them." Their sin was not in doing that which they had been specifically forbidden to do, like the man who gathered sticks on the Sabbath day, and was stoned to death (Numbers 15:32-36). Their sin was in the performance of a religious act which God had not authorized. Would they have been justified by saying, "But God did not say not to offer this strange fire." They were given the death penalty for offering that which God had not authorized.

In the New Testament it is clear that God accepts in religion only that which He authorizes. Second John 9 says, "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he has both the father and the son." It seems it would be impossible for the writer to teach more clearly or emphatically than he does in this passage that God accepts in religion only that which

He authorizes.

Other religious groups, and we admit that some who have left the authority of God's word in the Lord's church, have the idea that if a thing is not specifically forbidden, then it must by that very fact be considered as having been authorized. It is usually stated in the question, "Where did God say not to?" We will discuss the authority issue in this lesson.

How God's Word Authorizes

God's word authorizes by direct statement. We find this illustrated in Acts 2:38 where God authorizes through a direct statement, or as we see it, a command.

God's word authorizes by implication. Some older preachers referred to the idea of implication as "necessary inference." Actually the Bible implies, and we draw a necessary inference from the implication. We need to take care that we don't use the idea of implication loosely. There are those who would say that implication means that if something is hinted at or assumed in the Scriptures it could be taken as authorized. That is not necessarily so. Make no mistake, but what the Bible teaches by implication it teaches just as surely and certainly as that which it teaches by direct statement. Through this kind of reasoning we infer that God told Abel and Cain what to offer as a sacrifice. Abel offered "by faith" (Heb. 11:4), but faith "cometh by hearing...the word of God" (Romans 10:17). These two passages teach by implication and we draw a "necessary inference" that God told the sons of Adam what to offer.

God's word authorizes by approved example. We must take note of the distinction between actions of the New Testament characters which illustrate matters that were optional and those which illustrate matters which were obligatory. Does the fact that New Testament characters did a certain thing in a certain way mean we are to do the same thing in the same way? You might answer, "Only in the essential elements." But that is the point, how do we determine what is an essential element and what is not essential? We are not required to do whatever the New Testament characters did; we are rather required to do what the New Testament characters were required to do. Jesus put it this way: "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you..." (Matthew 28:20). Note that Jesus did not say, "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever you observe." We are not required to do everything they did; but we are required to do what they were commanded to do.

"But God Didn't Say Not To..."

The idea that if a thing is not specifically forbidden then it must be authorized is an idea that people do not accept in any other facet of life.

- When you order a pepperoni pizza, that is what you expect to receive. If you received a supreme pizza you would not accept it because that is not what you ordered. Suppose the waiter said, "But you didn't say not to give you a supreme pizza." You would probably explain to the waiter that you did specifically order a pepperoni pizza and that eliminates all other kinds of pizzas.
- When you have a prescription from the doctor filled and the pharmacist adds other ingredients, and justifies himself by saying that the doctor did not say not to add such ingredients, do you continue using that pharmacist?
- When you order an item over the Internet or phone and give your credit card number to pay, would you accept a larger bill with the justification being that you did not say not to add other items to the order? Of course not. From pizza, to your medicines and to all other areas of life, we understand the concept of authorizing a given thing without having to state everything else that is not authorized. By stating what you authorize excludes everything else that is not authorized.

The fallacy of the idea that if God does not specifically forbid a given thing then it must be authorized is clearly shown by an argument stated in Hebrews 7. The writer to the Hebrews is showing that Jesus could not have been a priest under the Law of Moses, and his argument is this: "For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Judah; of which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priesthood" (verse 14). Did you catch it? "Moses spake nothing concerning priesthood." It was not necessary for Moses to specifically forbid one's being a priest from the tribe of Judah; the very fact that he said nothing was enough to let the Hebrew writer know that Jesus could not be a priest under the Law of Moses.

Many people try to get around the doctrine of accepting in religion only that which God authorizes by stating: "Well God didn't say not to." When God authorizes a specific thing in religion, does He then also have to mention everything that is not authorized? We do not expect that in any other area of life, why would we hold God to that concept? That usually only happens when people are trying to accept something which God does not authorize. In other words, God has

not authorized by a direct statement, nor has He implied in any way, nor can it be found to be something first century Christians were obligated to do, therefore, people will use the idea that, “God didn’t say not to,” for justification of something that they want to do.

Specific and Generic Authority

Sometimes the Bible authorizes something which it does not specifically mention. We are talking now about how the Bible contains both specific and generic authority. A classic illustration would be in the command God gave Noah in Genesis 6:14, “Make thee an ark of Gopher wood....” Though God gave Noah many specifics concerning the ark: height, width, length, one window, one door, pitch within and without, etc., there were some details which God left to the ingenuity and choice of Noah. Not a word was spoken about where the trees should come from; how they were to be cut; into what size pieces of lumber; etc. Not a tool was mentioned: ax, hammer, level, saw, measuring instrument, etc. Yet any tool which Noah chose in accomplishing his task of building the ark was authorized by God under the general command to build an ark. It falls under specific and generic authority.

Someone makes the argument, “Where is your authority for a radio program, a meeting-house, or a baptistry?” The command to do a thing is all the authority one needs for the tools he uses in doing the thing commanded. The command to preach the gospel is authority for a radio program. The command to assemble is the authority behind the meetinghouse. The command to baptize is the authority behind the baptistry. These are expedients, tools by which a commanded thing is done, and are authorized under generic authority.

Expedients Are Not Additions

We must be careful not to confuse expedients, which are authorized under generic authority, with additions which are not authorized at all. For example: Noah might have used an ax by the authority of God, though an ax was not mentioned. But he could not use pine wood in building the ark, though pine wood was not mentioned. Why would an ax, which is not mentioned, be authorized, while pine wood, which is also not mentioned, not be authorized? Because an ax is an expedient, a tool for doing exactly what God commanded; but pine wood would not be an expedient

or tool for doing what God commanded. To use pine wood in the ark would be an addition to that which God authorized. This is also the difference between the songbook and the piano. The songbook is an expedient, a tool to accomplish effective singing. The piano, however much it may be thought by some to help accomplish effective singing, is an addition to that which God’s word authorizes. Why? Because it produces a kind of music God has not authorized – just as much as building the ark partly of pine wood would produce a different kind of ark from that which God has authorized.

The Most Common Usage

When the phrase, “God didn’t say not to,” is used, it is usually concerning the idea of instrumental music in worship. When the New Testament is searched, and no authority for instrumental music in worship is found, the last argument some will hold to is, “Well, God didn’t say not to use instrumental music in worship.” Actually, God did. When God gave the command to sing and make melody in your hearts to the Lord (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16), everything else was excluded. To add any mechanical instruments to our worship would be to offer God what He had not authorized, a different kind of music than He authorized. It would be an addition, not an expedient. Please continue to study the law of exclusion, as well as God’s specific and generic authority.

Conclusion

God only accepts in religion that which He authorizes. The conclusion is not, “God didn’t say not to,” but “Where does God authorize it?”

This tract is condensed from a lesson presented at the
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**“They Shall Be Turned
Unto Fables”**

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