



Authority by Example

By Luis Zamora

God requires us to have His authority for everything we do and say, especially as it pertains to His church. He has not left us without law, or Himself without witness; and this fact necessitates divine authority for religious actions. From the example of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10:1-3, to the words of Christ in Matthew 15:9, the Bible makes abundantly clear that God requires us to strictly adhere to His law and His words, not to the law and words of men.

One way to determine divine authority is by example. Why example? Simply put, we sometimes have no other option. In 2 Peter 1:3, the Bible tells us that God has given us “all things that pertain to life and godliness....” We must be able to turn to God’s word to learn what is right. In fact, we can only turn to God’s word to determine what is right! The Scriptures bear this out in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. If we want to learn what is right, we have no choice but to go to the Scriptures. And if the Scriptures contain no direct commands, or require no inferences regarding a matter, we must search for examples. There simply is no other way to go about it.

The Scriptures further demonstrate our dependence on them, and on example, in that we find in Colossians 2:8 a prohibition of traditions, but in 2 Thessalonians 2:15, a command to keep them. So there are some traditions (or examples) we must keep, and some we must not keep. How do we know the difference? In 2 Peter 1:19, we read that the apostles have the prophetic word we should heed. The above passages, themselves, say as much. The prohibition is not on traditions, but rather on human traditions, and the commandment to keep the traditions is a command to keep the traditions of the apostles.

What constitutes an authoritative, Biblical example? As indicated in Philippians 3:16-19, the binding example is the example set by the apostles and defined by their actions. We follow their example, understanding that behaving otherwise would result in condemnation. And this brings us to another ingredient of Biblical examples: warning. The events of the Old Testament, "were recorded for our admonition" (1 Corinthians 10:11). Examples are binding, and not just when they are positive! Sometimes an example is intended to show us what we ought not to imitate. Let us look at some common New Testament examples that impact the work and worship of the church today.

Authoritative examples govern much of the observance of the Lord's Supper. The elements of the Lord's Supper are unleavened bread and fruit of the vine. Is this because we have a direct command to use these articles to observe the Lord's Supper? No, it is because the Lord Himself used these elements (Matthew 26:17, 29), and that is an approved, binding example.

What about the day for observing the Lord's Supper? In Acts 20:7, Luke wrote: "On the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread...." This is the only passage that speaks to the day of the week on which we should observe the Lord's Supper. It is an approved example, and is therefore binding. If not, how can any practice be approved with certainty, seeing we would need neither direct command, nor approved example for what we do? No, indeed. We have no choice but to take the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week.

In a similar way, example governs the contribution. There is only one New Testament passage that speaks about the day of the week on which we should give money: "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come." {1 Corinthians 16:1-2} This implies that all churches must have the same practice--giving on the first day of the week. Again, this example is binding, because there are no other commands concerning the timing of the contribution.

Authoritative examples also govern worship services. While there are commands to sing, pray, and teach, there is also an example of the church doing these things from day one. "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." {Acts 2:42}

What about forgiveness for the saints? Many in the religious world ask why people do not need to be re-baptized for forgiveness of sins committed after baptism. We find the answer in a Biblical example. In Acts 8:13, we are told that Simon (formerly a sorcerer) obeyed the gospel of Jesus Christ. But he later sinned by thinking he could buy the gift of God (verses 19-20). Peter instructed him: "Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity." {Acts 8:22,23} We see in verse 24 that Simon asked Peter to pray for him. This example shows us that Christians do not need to be re-baptized each time they sin. They must repent and pray for forgiveness.

What about support for gospel preachers? Again, governed by Biblical example. "Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel." {1 Corinthians 9:14} God ordained that a preacher should earn his living by doing the work of a gospel preacher. So we know preachers are to be compensated, but how? What if a smaller church cannot afford to support a local preacher? When we read 2 Corinthians 11:7-9, we see an example of Paul taking wages from other churches to do the Corinthians service. (Conspicuous by its absence is a missionary society or a sponsoring group of churches.) A church with abundant funds may support a preacher who is not local (Philippians 4:15-19). This passage also shows that they supported the preacher, not the church where he preached, and that they sent the support directly to him, rather than via a missionary society. Note also that when a church supports a preacher, it "shares with him" and therefore has fellowship with him.

There is another way in which a preacher is authorized (by example) to receive support. By reading Acts 18:1-3 and Acts 20:33-35, we learn that Paul had a secular job and, on many occasions, paid his own way. He worked with his hands to enable him to serve with a smaller group that could not support him fully. Today, many preachers do the same.

The foregoing are some more commonly used examples of Biblical authority by example. But we also need to consider some not-so-commonly used examples. In fact, we are commanded to do so!

In 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul tells us to imitate him, just as he imitates Christ. Imitate Paul, huh? What did Paul do? We know, of course, that he taught the lost wherever he went and that he served God in all things. But do we, perhaps willingly, forget that he withstood error to the face, tolerating compromise not for a moment. "To whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you...Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed..." {Galatians 2:5,11} In his preaching, Paul called people's names when it was necessary. "Of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme." {1 Timothy 1:20} "And their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some." {2 Timothy 2:17,18} Paul clearly taught the Roman church some of the reasons why he needed to take these actions. "Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple." {Romans 16:17,18} Or, do we remember that he taught the same message of truth in every place he preached. "For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church." {1 Corinthians 4:17} We need more preachers who are willing to be bound by this example.

Ephesians 5:1 requires that we imitate God Himself! In context, that imitation manifests itself in "...having no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather exposing them" (5:11). But can we not also look at the example of Jesus Christ, God in the flesh.

In John 6, Jesus taught many people. Many of them were bothered by His message. Jesus asked a question. "When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, "Does this offend you? What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you who do not believe." {John 6:61-64} He explained His words – what did some disciples do? "From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more." {John 6:66} Truth does that from time to time. When people love error more than they love truth, it is difficult for them to hear truth. My point is not that we should seek to offend people. Rather, we should seek not to offend, if possible. "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. 19Beloved, do not avenge yourselves..." {Romans 12:18,19} The point is we must speak truth regardless. Who would we rather hurt--God or men? We should never offend in demeanor or attitude; to do so is sin. "But, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ." {Ephesians 4:15} All Bible examples show that our actions must always be motivated by love for souls.

Too many preachers and teachers want only to point to the examples of love, mercy, compassion, and longsuffering. While the Bible is full of such examples, it also shows the other side of the coin. In all things, we must keep in mind this fundamental fact – "But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men." {Acts 5:29} Yes, truth sometimes offends. Yet, we must adhere to the example set by Jesus and His chosen apostles. *** (Edited – KMG)