

The Authority of the Scriptures

1. Although the title above would seem to be a concept widely accepted by Christians, the theory by that name is at the heart of the extraordinary division found among churches of Christ.
 - a. Denominations with centralized authority may or may not ascribe to this theory. Among those that do, division is avoided by definitions established by their authority figures.
 - b. Rather than being drawn from the Scriptures, the theory is a filter through which the Scriptures are interpreted.
2. The first assumption made in this theory is that the New Testament church should imitate the church described in the New Testament.
 - a. The congregations described in the New Testament were different than those today
 - 1) Different problems
 - 2) Different cultures
 - 3) Different spiritual gifts
 - b. The New Testament does not address a method by which to separate the features that were specific to that time from those that would apply to all times. Therefore, different congregations have different lists of essential features, resulting in division.
3. The four basic tenets of the Authority of the Scriptures is that congregational practices must be based on the commands, examples, and necessary inferences of the New Testament, and that the silence of the Scripture implies opposition.
 - a. Commands
 - 1) The term is used 71 times in the New Testament. (Commandment handout)
 - 2) The only specific commandments are faith and love.
 - 3) Paul, Peter, and John considered their writings to be “the Lord’s commandment.” Determining which parts of their writings are to be considered commandments has been the source of much division. Examples:
 - a) Not on the list: 1 Corinthians 16:20 “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” (Also 1 Peter 5:14 and Romans 16:16)
 - b) On the list: 1 Corinthians 16:2 “On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing as he may prosper,” despite 2 Corinthians 8:8, “I speak not by way of commandment.”
 - 4) Paul warned Timothy that some would attempt to turn their good advice and insight into rules (1 Timothy 1:5 – 9) “Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from a sincere faith, from which some, having strayed, have turned aside to idle talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm. But we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully, knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate...”
 - 5) Any list with more than two commandments is based on faulty logic.
 - b. Examples
 - 1) In the New Testament, Christians are enjoined 16 times to follow (or not to follow) certain examples. (Examples handout)

- 2) In each case, the specific parts of the example to be copied by Christians are given. Expanding beyond the context is arbitrary and has been the source of much division.
- 3) In most cases, the character traits of various people are to be imitated, not their practices.
- 4) Several clear examples are ignored
 - a) (Acts 2:44) “They had all things in common.” (Acts 4:32) “Not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them.”
 - a. Many have cited Acts 5:4 (“While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control?”) to negate these two clear examples. This sets two passages in the same book against one another, requiring the conclusion that the nature of the gospel changed between Acts 4 and Acts 5.
 - b. Paul cautioned against this conclusion in Galatians 1:6 – 9, “I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.”
 - c. The nature of the gospel does not change (see Characteristics of the Gospel handout).
 - b) (1 Timothy 2:8) “Lifting up holy hands.” This is a clear direction from an apostle concerning the assembly. Yet, few practice or recommend it, and extremely few require it,
 - c) (James 5:14) “Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.” This is a clear direction in the Scriptures for all Christians.
 - d) The theory of Binding Examples requires that all congregations of all centuries, cultures, and climates have the same practices. This makes the assumption that one’s understanding is perfect and will fit perfectly everywhere. Further, it assumes that local authority is of no consequence, since my understanding automatically supersedes that of the leadership of another place.
 - e) The theories are applied only to matters of the assembly. For example, some believe that individuals can contribute to orphans’ homes, but not congregations. Certain behaviors are not permissible in the assembly, but are permitted at any other time. This is inconsistent.
- 5) Re-enacting the Lord’s Supper is not a command. Since we obviously do not follow all the examples of the early church, claiming to perform the Lord’s Supper because it was left as an example for us would be arbitrary. We do it for two reasons: Jesus asked to be remembered in this way and it illustrates some important concepts about which we need frequent reminders.

- c. Necessary Inference – may or may not be necessary
- d. Silence of the Scriptures
 - 1) The foundation premise is that if a practice is not given as an example by the early church, then it is prohibited.
 - 2) Many common practices of congregations are not described in the New Testament.
 - a) No New Testament congregation met in a building constructed for that purpose.
 - b) A congregational treasury is not described.
 - c) Neither song books nor song leaders are mentioned.
 - d) Vocal harmony was invented many centuries after the New Testament was written, so could not be implied.
 - e) Neither utilities nor environmental control had been invented.
 - f) Orphans homes, clapping, Bible classes, Christian schools and colleges, semi-permanent paid preachers are not mentioned.
 - g) In 1 Timothy 5:23, Timothy is enjoined to take a little wine and not water only. These are the only two beverages permitted to evangelists, the wine only in the case of frequent stomach ailments. By extension, since all Christians must spread the gospel, these are the only two beverages permitted for any Christian.
 - h) The theory is based on a confusion of the principle of mutual exclusivity. Actions or characteristics are mutually exclusive if they cannot be true at the same time. An example is Hebrews 7:14, “It is evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood.” If you tell me to ride a horse, I know I should not walk. But I do not know whether or not to use a saddle.
 - 3) The following examples are taken from the tract, “The Silence of the Scriptures,” by John Isaac Edwards, published by the Guardian of Truth Foundation. Although many arguments are made in favor of the theory of the Silence of the Scriptures, these are given as representative of the general illogic of the theory.
 - a) Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1) were consumed by fire from the door of the tabernacle not because of Silence of the Scriptures, but because of mutual exclusivity. They were told exactly how to mix the incense. They chose deliberately to do otherwise. Any mixture other than the one given would be wrong. The theory of the Silence of the Scriptures gains no support from this example. The principle of mutual exclusivity is demonstrated.
 - b) Moses smote the rock instead of speaking to it (Numbers 20:11). God was upset with Moses not because of Silence but because of mutual exclusivity. We do not have all the details of the incident, so we do not know if there were any other details given by God that Moses did follow exactly. We only know for certain the specification he chose to change. But let us suppose that God had made no specifications about whether to approach the rock from the north or the south. Then Moses could approach from whichever direction that would, in his understanding, be

the most profitable for God at that moment. This is not to say that he could not do whatever he pleased in choosing a compass direction. Rather, he would be required to choose what was best for the purposes of God based on his best understanding. Again, the theory of Silence of the Scriptures is not supported in this passage, only mutual exclusivity.

- c) The early church had difficulty deciding what to do about circumcision. The statements of Peter and James are claimed to support approved examples (Acts 15:12), necessary inferences (Acts 15:7 – 11), and the Silence of the Scriptures. Such claims are examples of arguing from the specific to the general, which is unacceptable in any field of study, and even by common logic. One must prove that all such examples are binding and that all silence is significant. Numerous examples have been cited above to the contrary, so the claim fails. Peter noted that Gentiles received the Holy Spirit from God without circumcision (Acts 15:6 – 11). James quoted Amos, who predicted that Gentiles would become a part of the Kingdom of God. They determined that circumcision and the Law were for Israelites, not everyone, because God had revealed it through Amos and demonstrated it through Cornelius. These events cannot be re-interpreted to support a man-made theory.
- d) Hebrews 1:5 is cited as an example that no angel is God's Son, "For unto which of the angels said He at any time, 'Thou art My Son, this day I have begotten Thee?'" The author of the tract makes an argument not made by the Scriptures. One could cite any verse in Scriptures and claim that it is silent concerning driving automobiles, so Christians cannot drive them to the Christian assembly (although driving would be permitted at any other time). The inspired writer is making a point about the superiority of Jesus over the angels. There is no inference from silence.
- e) The author of the tract claims that, "The statement to do one thing excludes the doing of others." This claim is only partly true. If the thing stated can be shown to be mutually exclusive with another thing, the theory can be maintained. The author's examples are all based on mutual exclusivity, but he fails to mention that fact. In succeeding paragraphs, claims are made concerning activities that are not mutually exclusive, as shall be explained in the following paragraphs.
- f) The author cites Numbers 15:30 – 31, "But the soul that doeth ought presumptuously . . . that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the Lord, and hath broken His commandment, that soul shall utterly be cut off; his iniquity shall be upon him," to condemn those who disagree with him. He makes the assumption that those who have a different understanding are presumptuous, and that they despise the word of the Lord. This is an unethical argument that, in a debate, would cause the moderator to end the session and disbar the proponent of such unfounded assertions.
- g) The author cites 1 Corinthians 4:6, "Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that in use you might learn not to exceed what is written..." However, the author stopped

quoting too soon, since the context of the passage refutes the author's concept, "That no one of you might become arrogant in behalf of one against the other." Reading the context reveals that Paul's injunction is against standing resolute on a favorite doctrine, thereby creating division. The author condemns himself.

- h) Many other misapplications of Scripture are contained in this tract. Many pages would be required to expose them all. These few examples are sufficient to demonstrate that the common defense of the Silence of the Scriptures has no foundation in either logic or Scripture.
4. Those who justify division reveal that they are not Christians
- a. Christians will always have differences of understanding. (1 Corinthians 11:19)
 - b. Christians are promised that God will resolve the difference in understanding. (Philippians 3:15)
 - c. The weaker brother concept (Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8) applies to both parties in a difference because each considers the other party to be weaker.
 - d. Remaining weak is not an option (Hebrews 5:11 – 6:8), so no one can claim a right to a practice by asserting that others must concede to the weak. The weak must instead follow the strong.
 - e. The practices of another person cannot cause (force) me to sin. Paul's dividing line for separation was if the Gentiles thought it was horrible (1 Corinthians 5:1).
 - f. Jesus said that unity would be a sign to the world of the true church. (John 13:34 – 35)
 - g. We cannot choose an understanding of one portion of Scripture that invalidates another portion, so division is never acceptable.
 - h. Constructing a list of essentials causes division because each person's list is of a different length.
 - i. The unspiritual (non-Christian) nature of a person is revealed when he or she justifies division for supposed "Scriptural" reasons. (1 John 2:19, Acts 20:30, 1 Corinthians 3:3) Paul recommended staying away from divisive people. (Romans 16:17 – 18, Titus 3:10 – 11). See also Jude 19.
 - j. With every temptation (in this case, to divide) is provided the way of escape. (1 Corinthians 10:13)
5. Historically, these principles have resulted in and endorsed division despite Jesus' clear prayer for unity and Paul's repeated teaching on unity.
- a. It assumes that, if someone else's actions are contrary to my conscience, division is justified. This is a misunderstanding of conscience (1 Corinthians 8, Romans 14). Many people use the tangentially Biblical phrase that some practice offends his or her conscience. Using the context from which that is taken, the person is announcing that he or she will return to worshipping idols and give up on Jesus if things don't change.
 - b. The Scriptures enjoin us not to force others to practice what they think is wrong, or to flaunt our liberty to those who are weak in faith. Those who practice division expand the Scriptures to include the idea that if someone else does something that I think is sinful, whether I can see it or not, this violates my conscience. This is exactly opposite to the Scriptures because it is entirely self centered. Those who use this argument of conscience conveniently overlook that, having identified themselves as those weak in faith, they should turn to others for wisdom, not try to resolve the

- problem from a position of weakness. Many have extended this conscience argument to include practices by people far away about which the person objecting has no personal knowledge. On the basis of gossip, division is justified. The Scriptures require us to allow others the right to be wrong. Anyone who demands that his position be given preference because of his conscience or his weakness is claiming both weakness and understanding at the same time, which is an untenable position.
- c. Others extend the conscience theory to cover church finances. If collections are accumulated in one account, then there is no reasonable way to sort out what income is going to which expense. So, if any expenditure of the church treasury is against one person's opinion, then no one can participate. Of course, this is a result of a series of misconceptions. The New Testament has no church treasury, so all the regulations that have been invented to govern it rest on nothing.
 - d. The theory assumes that it is sinful to be in the same congregation as others who practice what I believe to be sin. Therefore, division is justified. This is based on a misunderstanding of the concept of "fellowship." Those who espouse this theory insist that Christians must first agree on a set of rules before they can have fellowship. This is not the concept presented in the New Testament. Instead, we have fellowship because we each walk in the light, not because we agree (1 John 1:7). Those who insist on agreement in order to have fellowship have set up a standard contrary to the apostle John. Those who justify division because others have different practices operate in direct contradiction of the writings and actions of Paul.