

## ESTABLISHING BIBLE AUTHORITY—AN INTRODUCTORY STUDY

By Bob Young

This article serves as an introduction to a more detailed three-part study that I have written about Bible authority. An introduction to the study of Bible authority should anticipate some of the initial questions that will arise. My goal in this introduction is twofold: to make clear the breadth of the topic and to suggest how one can proceed to give a biblical answer to the subject of establishing religious and biblical authority.

The basic question of Bible authority is simple: **is a certain thing authorized or not authorized?**

Jesus has all authority in both the celestial and earthly realms (Matt. 28:18). Since Jesus has all authority, we must listen to him. The words of Jesus will reveal what he authorizes. This question leads to the question of how Jesus authorizes a certain thing, but another introductory question must be addressed first.

A related question arises, **“Is a certain thing inside or outside of Jesus’ authority?”**

This different but related question must not be confused with the previous question. To ask “is a certain thing within the authority of Jesus or outside the authority of Jesus?” is a different question than whether that certain thing is authorized or is not authorized.

Some things are not within the authority of Jesus. To clarify, since Jesus has all authority, to say that some things are not within the authority of Jesus is to say that Jesus has no preference and has not exercised authority. Certain things are not authorized by Jesus simply because he has not exercised authority. They are therefore acceptable. To give a simple example, I am wearing a red tie. Where is the authority to wear a red tie? Do I need authority? Where is wearing a red tie prohibited? The color of my tie is outside the authority of Jesus because he has not spoken.

Two important observations follow. One, God has not spoken specifically about every possibility of our lives, and two, the New Testament often provides authoritative guidance by giving principles to be applied. I chose my wife, not on the basis of specific biblical instructions but on the basis of biblical principles. Most of the decisions that I make daily are made not on the basis of specific instructions but on the basis of biblical principles.

God has not spoken about every possibility in our lives. God has not spoken about some matters in the realm of religion. God has not spoken about every detail of the activities of the church.

If one concludes that a certain matter is outside the authority of Jesus, one must be prepared to explain why the matter is outside Jesus’ authority.

If one concludes that a certain matter is within the authority of Jesus, one must be prepared to explain why and how the matter is within Jesus’ authority.

If Jesus has spoken authority, the question then is, “How is Jesus’ authority to be established and understood?”

**Three possibilities exist in reference to any matter.**

- We have to do something because God has authority over the matter and he has authorized it.
- We cannot do something because God has authority over the matter and he has prohibited it.
- We have liberty. Consider three possibilities. First, liberty may result from the fact that we are without specific instructions related to the matter, as in the case of my tie. Second, liberty may be ours when our liberty is related to method, “not that we must do a certain thing, but how we must do a certain thing.” A commonly used example is that that we must preach the gospel but are free to choose the method, the how. Third, a certain liberty may be ours in the application of principles, even when we bound generally by God’s instructions but are not bound specifically, as in the case of choosing a wife.

Generally, when we raise the question of Bible authority, we are dealing with religious matters, for example, our relationships with God, with brothers, and with others. Lack of obedience, either doing wrong or failing to do right, is sin (James 4:17).

## **How does the Bible authorize (or exclude) certain actions?**

Historically, it has been said that Bible authority is established by command, example, or necessary inference. In addition, one must recognize that Jesus Christ has not spoken about every matter and every possibility. Further, one must recognize that some Bible examples are incidental and do not establish a precedent. For an example to be binding, one must show that the action considered exemplary was the result of a specific command. In the extended three-part study, I explain in detail this fourth aspect of Bible authority – incidental references.

**Command.** Seeking Bible authority by direct command or direct statement, “he that believes and is baptized,” requires an additional step. Since there are no direct commands to us today (the Bible was written to the original recipients), one must study and explain why and how the direct commands apply to us today. For example, in studying the instructions to the group of elders-pastors- overseers in 1 Peter 5, do those specific instructions apply to parallel groups today? Why, how?

**Example.** To clarify the establishment of authority by example, one should speak of authorized example, not just any example. As already noted, some examples are incidental and do not establish precedent. In the case of example, one must show that what they did was the result of a direct command or direct statement, or instruction. With three “upper room” meetings in John 14, Acts 1, and Acts 20, how do we know that these references are not binding example?

**Necessary inference.** I prefer to use the phrase “correct inference.” Whatever is inferred is the result of Bible implication. The Bible implies, human beings infer. There can be no inference if there is no implication. Caution is necessary. The Bible implies a place of meeting but does not necessarily imply a church building. Scripture implies that there was a meeting place because there was a meeting. Since we do not assume a randomness so that everyone had to guess where the meeting was going to be, we infer that there was a specified place of meeting.

**Incidental references.** The study of incidental references and their role in establishing or denying Bible authority may be new to some readers. The subject deserves more space than can be given here. I refer you to the extended three-part study.

## **Sometimes principles and specifics can be established only by studying several texts together**

I give one example of how Acts 2 and Acts 20, studied in tandem, clarify the practice of the early church.

The early church met. Acts 20 reveals that they met on Sunday and that a primary purpose of their Sunday meeting was to eat the Lord’s Supper (break bread) together. Is the reference to Sunday essential or incidental?

The resurrection occurred on Sunday. Pentecost was on Sunday.

Members of the early church were together daily (Acts 2). They were in the temple together; they ate their food (broke bread) in their homes. Does eating their food in their homes (breaking bread) refer to the Lord’s Supper?

In Acts 20, the verb (eat, break bread) occurs twice, once in the plural and once in the singular. The plural occurrence refers to the Lord’s Supper. The singular occurrence refers only to Paul eating food to sustain him.

## **A brief mention of Romans 14-15**

To conclude this introduction, consider an example of the challenge of establishing Bible authority. In the study of Bible authority and liberty, the text of Romans 14-15 is an important passage. How does one apply the principles set forth in the passage? In the context of including Gentiles (see Rom. 15:7-12), Paul mentions the existence of different “reasonings.” (“Reasonings” is a good translation of the Greek word “dialogismos” and is preferable to “opinion” since Paul apparently chose not to use the Greek word for opinion, although the word existed and he could have used it.) Paul says that liberty exists in matters of reasoning where Bible teaching is not specific. The responsibility of every Christian is to honor conscience to avoid sin. Romans 14-15 raises at least two questions. What is the application? How does the passage about “reasonings” relate to Bible authority?