

What Does the Bible Teach About Denominationalism #3

Introduction:

A. There Is Only One Truth

1. There is a single body of truth. "The" (singular article) "faith" (singular noun) means that there is one faith authorized by God. The New Testament does not speak of many acceptable "faiths." (Eph. 4:5 - "one faith"; 2Tim. 1:13 - "the pattern of sound words"; 1Tim. 3:13 - "the faith which is in Christ Jesus")
2. This one body of truth is apprehendable by all. God never gave a command beyond the ability of humankind to obey. Since God ordered the called to fight to maintain the purity of the single body of truth, it follows that they can discern the untainted faith from corrupted versions of it in order to contend for it. (Rom. 1:16-17, 10:17; Eph. 3:3-4)
3. This one body of truth is complete. Jude wrote: "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (v 3, NKJV). All subsequent revelations in conflict with it are false doctrines. (Gal. 1:6-9)
4. This one body of truth is authoritative; it was "delivered" to them. Inspired scripture came from the mind of God through the Holy Spirit to the apostles and prophets who wrote it word for word for posterity. (2Tim. 3:16-17; 2Peter 1:16-21, 3:1-2)
5. This one body of truth is exacting. It was delivered to the saints with no exemptions given to anyone for anything. All Christians must acknowledge this single body of truth, understand it alike, accept it in its fullness, recognize its authority, and contend for it earnestly against all false doctrines. Professed believers and followers of Jesus Christ need to develop the strength of character and moral courage to stand for sound doctrine. There are no neutral positions in the war on apostasy. (1Cor. 16:13)
6. There is a body of truth on any Bible matter. That body of truth is called THE (singular definitive article) faith. There is a means by which I apprehend the faith. It is called MY (personal possessive pronoun) faith. THE faith is objective, and cannot be less; MY faith is subjective, and cannot be more. THE faith is not modified by the strength or weakness of MY faith. Thus, MY faith must conform to THE faith.
7. It must be understood that there is difference between my faith and my opinion. My faith is what I believe about what God has said. My opinion is what I think about what God has said. My obedience to God is motivated by my faith, and my faith is merely informed by my reasoning. Both personal faith and opinions can be mistaken; however, in terms of my salvation my faith is more critical than my opinions, as my opinions are more mutable and transient.

B. The New Testament is how Christ speaks to men today - Heb. 1:1-2

1. Through the writing of the apostles, the "apostles' doctrine," the Lord speaks to and directs His Church.
2. The apostles' doctrine is the standard of authority in matters of religion
3. In which one must "continue steadfastly" - Acts 2:42

C. Many say that they accept the apostles' doctrine as their authority in religion, but when faced with an issue in which a favored view is challenged, they appeal to a source for their authority that is quite different.

1. Some are objective religious standards - unauthorized external sources
2. Some are subjective spiritual standards - unqualified internal answers

I. UNAUTHORIZED, EXTERNAL, OBJECTIVE STANDARDS OF AUTHORITY

A. The Old Testament / Law of Moses

1. It is common for people to resort to the O.T. to provide authority for some religious practice, when they can't find authority for it in the teachings of Christ or His apostles.
 - a. Clergy-laity system, burning of incense and use of instrumental music in worship, keeping the Sabbath, etc.
2. But the O.T. was designed to be temporary, to fulfill a specific purpose and as a covenant has been replaced by the New Covenant.
 - a. Given because of transgression, until Christ came - Gal. 3:19
 - b. For those under the Law, it was a tutor.
 - 1) A tutor designed to lead them to Christ - Gal. 3:24
 - 2) A tutor that has been taken away - Gal. 3:25
 - c. When those who were under the Law came to Christ:
 - 1) They became dead to the Law - Rom. 7:4,
 - 2) They were delivered from the Law - Rom. 7:6.
 - d. As prophesied by Jeremiah, God has made a new covenant to replace the first covenant which is now obsolete - Heb. 8:7-13.
3. In the issue of circumcision, the apostles demonstrated that one cannot use the O.T. to teach something which they did not command - Acts 15:1, 6, 24.
4. The O.T. is of value to Christians - Rom. 15:4; 1Cor. 10:6, 11
 - a. However, one cannot use it to enjoin religious practices upon others which the apostles themselves did not teach.

B. Majority Rule

1. Many people accept whatever the majority thinks about religion.
2. Jesus on majorities - Matt. 7:13-14
3. If one followed the majority:
 - a. He would have perished in the flood of Noah's day,
 - b. In Joshua's day, he would have died in the wilderness.
4. Rather than follow the majority, follow the Lord - Joshua 24:14-15.

C. Parents

1. "If it was good enough for Mom and Dad, it is good enough for me."
2. Christ must come first - Matt. 10:37.
3. If every generation followed its parents, then most Americans would still be pagans and polytheists.

D. Preachers

1. "Surely these 'men of God' could not be wrong nor lead us astray!"
 - a. 2Cor. 11:13-15; Matt. 15:12-14
2. Ones' attitude must be like that of the Bereans who carefully examined Paul's teachings in light of the Scriptures - Acts 17:11.

E. Creeds and traditions of men

1. This is where the denominations get most of their erring authority.
2. Adherence to the creeds of men is what produces denominations.
 - a. Accept the Bible only, and one becomes a Christian only.
 - b. Accept the Bible with some creed, one becomes something else.
 - 1) The Bible and the Book of Mormon makes Mormons.
 - 2) The Bible and Catechism makes Roman Catholics.
 - 3) The Bible and Lutheran Catechism make Lutherans.
 - 4) The Bible and Methodist Disciplines make Methodists.
 - 5) The Bible and 39 Articles of Faith make Episcopalians.
 - 6) The Bible and Westminster Confession of Faith make Presbyterians.
 - 7) The Bible and Watchtower make Jehovah's Witnesses.

- 8) The Bible and the Baptist Manual makes Baptists.
 - c. In every case, it is not the Bible that confers denominational identity; it is the creed. The Bible only makes Christians only.
- 3. Creeds are not necessary.
 - a. If they say more than what the Bible says, they say too much.
 - b. If they say less than what the Bible says, they say too little.
 - c. If they say exactly what the Bible says, then what purpose do creed books serve?
- 4. Creeds are filled with the traditions, doctrines, and commandments of men, which conflict with and displace the commands of God - Mark 7:6-9.

II. UNQUALIFIED, INTERNAL, SUBJECTIVE STANDARDS OF AUTHORITY

A. Conscience

- 1. "Let your conscience be your guide" is the motto of many.
- 2. But conscience is not reliable and is always subjective.
 - a. Paul served God with a good conscience his whole life - Acts 23:1.
 - b. Even when he was persecuting Christians - Acts 26:9-11
- 3. Ones' conscience is like a clock, which is accurate only if set according to a correct standard. Once the conscience has been set by apostles' doctrine, it can be trusted as a good guide, but not a final authority.

B. Human Wisdom

- 1. Many feel they are wise enough to determine right and wrong.
- 2. But God's thoughts and ways are not the same as a man's - Isa. 55:8-9.
- 3. In fact, God has chosen to save man in a manner specifically designed to confound those who depend solely on human wisdom - 1Cor. 1:18-21, 25-29.
- 4. For one to know God's will, it was necessary for God to reveal it.
 - a. 1Cor. 2:9-12; Eph. 3:1-5

C. Feelings

- 1. This is often the only standard of authority in religion for most people.
 - a. "It feels right to me." "It is better felt than told."
- 2. The danger of trusting feelings in religion - Prov. 14:12, 28:26; Jer. 10:23

D. Man needs an authorized, qualified, objective standard for authority in religion

- 1. He cannot depend upon subjective or unauthorized standards like conscience, human wisdom, feelings, creeds of men, preachers, parents, majority rule, or even the Old Testament. Only in the doctrine of Christ as given through His apostles and prophets in the New Testament
 - a. They were personally selected to be Christ's ambassadors
 - b. They were inspired by the Holy Spirit who guided them in all truth
 - c. They were inspired to write all Christ would have us know and do

III. THE ONLY AUTHORIZED, QUALIFIED, OBJECTIVE SOURCE OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY: THE NEW TESTAMENT

- A. One must not change its message - Gal. 1:8-9.
- B. One must not add to or take away from it - Rev. 22:18-19; Deut. 4:2; Prov. 30:5-6.
- C. One must abide in the doctrine of Christ - 2John 9.
 - 1. It is fundamental to the faith to hold to the proper views about Christ - 2John 7.
 - 2. It is fundamental to the faith to obey the commandments of Christ - 1John 3:24
- D. One must not allow traditions of men to trump commands of God.
 - 1. Vain worship - Mark 7:5-13
 - 2. Evaluate ones' own religious practices:
 - a. Are they based on traditions of men or commandments of God?

- b. If it is a tradition of men, does keeping it render the commands of God of no effect?
 - c. By keeping the man-made tradition of sprinkling for baptism, one renders the command of God for immersion (baptizo) of no effect.
 - d. Is the tradition based on expediency? Then there is no point in changing it unless it ceases to be expedient.
- E. One must not abuse liberty in Christ.
- 1. In Christ is wonderful freedom, but one must be careful in using it - Gal. 5:1, 13
 - 2. One must be considerate of his brother's conscience - Rom. 14:14 - 15:3.
 - 3. One should be willing to forego his liberty rather than let it destroy a brother - 1Cor. 8:9-13.
 - 4. Not only ask "Is it lawful," but also "Does it edify?" - 1Cor. 10:23-24, 31-33
 - 5. One may not rule over his stronger brethren with his weak conscience.
 - a. He may not require another to practice his scruple
 - b. He may not judge another who does not practice his scruple
 - c. He may not bind his scruple as a test of fellowship. Romans 14 governs the weaker brother, too.
 - d. He is expected to grow in faith and understanding by objectively listening to stronger brethren as they teach about liberty.

IV. AGREEING ON THE SAME STANDARD WILL NOT GUARANTEE UNITY

A. Challenges

- 1. Which commands are binding today?
 - a. Some commands are limited in application (local, cultural, problem specific, time linked, and individual specific).
 - b. Determine whether a command is limited or universal in application.
- 2. Which approved examples are for the church today?
 - a. Much of what is learned about the church relative to its work and organization is by example, not precept.
 - b. Is the example a binding principle that must be observed universally?
- 3. When are Divine implications really necessary implications?
 - a. People often infer things from the Bible and call their conclusions necessary implications.
 - b. But it may only be a possible implication, not necessarily inferred.
- 4. Is a practice and expediency or an addition?
 - a. Whose judgment determines expediency? Should it be practiced after it ceases to be expedient? Should a local church forgo an expediency to ease the conscience of a few weak brethren?
 - b. What about obstinate brethren?

B. "As Christians seek for unity and harmony, they will need more than just the same standard of authority. Barton W. Stone, an effective promoter of Christian unity through the written word of God in the early 1800's, wrote an article entitled "Christian Union" published in The Christian Messenger (1828): "On no other foundation can the parties ever meet, than on the Bible alone, without note or comment; and in no other name will they ever unite, but in that given to the disciples at Antioch--CHRISTIAN. But should all the professors of Christianity reject all their various creeds and names, and agree to receive the Bible alone, and be called by no other name than Christian, will this unite them? No, we are fully convinced that unless they all possess the spirit of that book and name they are far, very far, from Christian union." (As quoted by J. M. Powell, The Cause We Plead: A Story Of The Restoration Movement, 20th Century Christian, 1987, p. 56)