

Lawyers, Law, and Principle (Continued)

This is a continuation of last week's issue written in 1997. It led to consideration of our hermeneutic, that is, the rules we apply for the interpreting of God's will for us. After that issue I used an emailed reminder by Derek McNamara, who was in Germany at the time, as to how "legal" we have been. I share his letter below. He wrote:

"As I was looking through this outline (*Keys To Unity*, by Bill Smith) the other day, I was reminded of the statement that our traditional hermeneutic is the exact same as a lawyer's hermeneutic!

What has been our traditional approach to establishing Biblical authority?

1. It is established by **COMMAND**.
2. It is established by **APPROVED EXAMPLE**.
3. It is established by **(NECESSARY) INFERENCE**.

The real question is, is that the way the Bible says one is to establish authority?

These three steps are the way lawyers debate the Law and the Constitution.

COMMANDS: Is this in the Constitution, is it an amendment, or is it on the law books? Typically, we have not split over direct commands in the New Testament.

EXAMPLE: Legally, this is called precedence. Has there been a ruling which could set the example or pattern to follow? Lawyers often quote previous decisions of judges as precedents or examples.

INFERENCE: This is the greatest Church Splitter, for inference relies on man's flawed logic to find the inference, and inference moves with the tide! Look at how the interpretation and application of the first amendment has been taken to imply that free speech includes pornography. In matters pertaining to the Church, what you see as a necessary inference is not necessarily what I see as a necessary inference.

Command, Example, and Inference is a truly legalistic way of looking at Scripture." (End of letter.)

Thanks to Derek for reminding us so emphatically that our method of interpretation definitely relates to a legal code. In interpreting our civil code of law, this method has NOT always brought satisfactory decisions. An alternative is to have a dictatorial government that takes the authority to make, define, and enforce all decrees. There can be enforced

conformity under such a system for in it the individual conviction does not count. The individual enjoys no privilege of interpreting the law. He needs no rules of interpretation.

Our problem in following this method of interpretation is that we are not under a code of law. Neither has God put us under authoritarian leaders empowered to enforce conformity. That has not kept sincere seekers of God's will from believing that his revelation to us is a legal code to be interpreted in such a manner. But where is such a listing of laws? In harmony with my early teaching, I was confident that the entirety of the New Testament writings are a set of laws though no such claim is made in those writings.

In our assembly this morning, the lesson was based on Paul's words: "*Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved – and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have*" (Phil. 1:27-30).

In reading and meditating on that passage, I wondered with consternation how I could ever have thought that such rich expressions were part of a code of LAW! Surely I was bright enough as a youth to have rejected such a concept, except that I had been blinded by sincere teachers. How could such a part of a personal letter from Paul to other disciples be applied through command, example, and inference?

Am I implying that such passages are useless for us? By no means, but we should explore them to find applications that may guide our attitude, conduct, and actions. Principle is the higher concept encouraging loving concern while law fosters correctness of more formal action. It is easier to abide by "thou shalt not kill" than to help a person who has problems and needs. Emphasis of law over principle has allowed us to become unloving, rejecting, and divisive by elevating our opinions about doctrinal and ritualistic correctness as law.

Those who look for a law for everything inevitably fill in with laws and sub-laws of their own interpretation. Just how many specific commands or laws are required for us to have the religion James (1:27) speaks of: "*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*"? Commands, instructions, and exhortations point to acceptable expressions of our response to grace, but they can be applied effectively only through the higher principle of love. Rituals and quotas do not bring justification. That comes as a gift. Our response is love, yet no "passing grade" of love merits that gift.

If you consider James' statement above as law/command, let me ask some questions that must be answered definitively in order to be sure we are fulfilling them. What exactly does "visit" mean? How often and how long would those visits have to be. Would every disciple in the area be obligated to visit? If visits were not invited, should we intrude? Would a deserted wife be considered a widow? Since James is silent about visiting other children and women, would it

be sinful to visit them? Who is to define what qualifies as an affliction? And is this all that is required for us to have pure and undefiled religion? Can we not see how foolish a legalistic approach is? Can we not see that James is only calling for the demonstration of love – the bearing of one another’s burdens – and that does not have legal limits?

Similar questions about “assembling” would need specific answers. If we are “commanded” to assemble, when are they to be, how long, and how often should they be? Who must be there? What participation must each attendee have? Since the scriptures do not define all the details, may other humans make and bind them as the will of God? Or, are not the scheduling and participation in meetings for the concerned edification of believers left to our judgment as to when and how to best serve our current needs?

In the Jerusalem conference Peter concluded his speech with, *"Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will"* (Acts 15:10f).

Law is an unbearable yoke, an unforgiving master. Each infraction adds to the unrelieved burden. There is no rest for the soul.

In view of all this, Jesus’ Great Invitation is most appealing (Matt. 11:28f). In my own paraphrase, he says, "Come to me, all who laboriously struggle under the burden of guilt brought by the yoke of law. I will give you the rest and relief of forgiveness. Serve under my yoke of love, learning from my example, for I am gentle and lowly in heart. My yoke of law is easy, for love is not burdensome."

Begin with COMMANDS.