

Lawyers, Law, and Principle (Last of 3)

In our previous two essays we have dealt with the rule which evolved in our Stone-Campbell Movement for interpreting the will of God. It is the method lawyers use in applying a legal code. We defined it as *Command, Example, and Necessary Inference* (CENI).

Wrestling with that CENI ideology, the sincerest of men have continued to debate and divide, especially in my lifetime. If demonstration is acceptable evidence, we have proved that such an approach to understanding will not work. Yet we hear continued insistence that we must follow that track as we continue to fragment.

Let's face it: None of us is willing to follow those three rules consistently. We accept what seems to fit our understanding, and we reject or overlook teachings of the same classification that do not fit our mental picture. Let me point out just a few teachings to illustrate this.

COMMANDS: "*Give to everyone who begs of you*"; "*Lend, expecting nothing in return*"; "*Judge not, condemn not*" (Luke 6:30, 35, 37). "*When you pray, say,*" the Lord's Prayer (Lk. 11:2; Matt. 6:9). "*Think not that I came to abolish the law*"; "*Do not swear at all*"; "*When you pray, go into your room and shut the door*" (Matt. 5:17, 34; 6:6). "*When you give a dinner or banquet, do not invite your friends, etc. When you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind...*" (Luke 14:12f). "*Earnestly desire...that you may prophesy*" (1 Cor. 14:1). "*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*" (James 5:14). "*If any one is hungry, let him eat at home*" (1 Cor. 11:34). "*Let him who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches*" (Gal. 6:6).

Is that enough, or must I go on? A complete list of the directives in the New Testament Scriptures would be staggering. Do you keep all those commands? Do you know of anyone who even tries to keep them all? Books and commentaries have been written to explain to us why we need not feel obligated to obey all these directives. So, what does that do for our simplistic hermeneutic?

EXAMPLES: After Jesus had washed his disciples' feet, he said, "*I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.*" He said also, "*You ought to wash one another's feet.*" (John 13:14f). This is an example which Jesus commanded -- doubly bound! Jesus gave the Lord's Prayer as an example and told his disciples to say those words when they prayed (Matt. 6:9; Luke 11:2). Have you been advised against praying that prayer and washing feet? We have the example of Jesus and his disciples participating in the Lord's Supper on a weekday. Have you been warned against following that example?

Paul gave "*an example to imitate*" to the Thessalonian disciples by working to pay his own way while serving among them (2 Thes. 3:7f). How many ministers and preachers bind that "*approved example*"? Paul gave us an approved example of keeping rituals of the Law of Moses long after he became a disciple (Acts 21:17-26). Does that example establish Scriptural authority which we must obey? With approval, King David ate the showbread which was

unlawful, had multiple wives, and a beautiful young woman was chosen to lie in bed with the aged King David to keep him warm (1 Kings 1:1-4)! How about those “approved examples”?

The only instruction to appoint elders was given to an evangelist, not a church (Titus 1:5). In the only example of appointing elders, it was done by two evangelists (Acts 14:23). Appointments were made with fasting and prayer. Do you insist on following those examples?

If Scriptural authority is established by historical or incidental details which we have called “approved examples,” then we have a lot of revising to do in order to be consistent. But the Scriptures nowhere indicate that a historical or incidental occurrence sets a pattern to be bound or limits us to that supposed pattern.

NECESSARY INFERENCE: If all the above is confusing to you, save a bit of bewilderment for the “necessary inference” hermeneutic. This involves our reasoning and logic. I don't know who established this method, but I suspect that we would have never needed it were it not for the perceived need to lawfully bind observance of the Lord's Supper every Sunday and only on Sunday, which the Lord could have clearly detailed in one sentence if it had been his intention.

Our traditional illustration supporting that inference is "*Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.*" It is reasoned (illogically) that this command implies that they were to keep every Sabbath day, that those at Troas met on the first day of the week to break bread, and that one must necessarily infer that they broke bread every first day of the week (Acts 20:7).

"*Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy*" might imply that they were to keep each Sabbath, for an implication is a meaning expressed indirectly. The thing implied here is that any time a person failed to keep the Sabbath holy, he would be violating the command. Other teachings in the Law about Sabbath-keeping would even remove it from the area of implication and inference. Jews did not keep the Sabbath because of an inference but because of a command!

How universally must we interpret that rule of inference? "*Contribute to the needs of the saints*" (Rom. 12:13). Using the same reasoning that we use concerning the Sabbath, does that not imply that we must contribute to the needs of every saint, for when we fail to help one, we have violated the command?

An inference cannot be considered as necessary unless its disregarded conclusion brings us in conflict with an expressed directive, and in that case the force is in the command rather than the inferred conclusion.

We do not deal with inferences consistently. Jesus instructed: "*When you fast, do not look dismal...*" (Matt. 6:16f). That clearly implies that we should fast, does it not? "*Love your enemies*" (Matt. 5:44) implies that we must have enemies. "*Honor the king/emperor* (1 Pet. 2:17) implies that we should live under a monarchy. Do we bind the inferences drawn from those instructions?

ACTS 20:7: There is no command, example, or inference that disciples are required to participate in the Communion once and only once each and every first day of the week. In using

Acts 20:7 as our proof-text, we have assumed that the “breaking of bread” is the Communion rather than a shared meal as in Acts 2:46. An assumption destroys the validity of any premise! Any conclusion based upon an unproven premise is flawed! Yet we have made such a conclusion into a “necessary inference” bound as universal, dogma law!

"On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them..." Can it possibly be concluded that Luke and Paul gathered with them each and every first day, or that the disciples of Troas gathered to break bread each and every first day? Does it imply that they had been doing so previously and that they continued to do so afterward? No such inference is suggested, or possible – much less bound as law.

If their meeting was according to Jewish of time, they met on Saturday night to participate. Would that be acceptable today? If their meeting was according to Roman time, they met on Sunday night, but they did not participate in the meal until Monday morning after Paul's midnight discourse. Would that be acceptable for us? The CENI formula proves nothing relating to this text.

If Luke had indicated that this incident was recorded in order to emphasize some lesson, then we would be obligated to draw some inferences. In the absence of a stated purpose, let us ask why Luke reported it. It could be because this tells us of Paul's greatest miracle -- the raising of a man from the dead! But we have overlooked the obvious purpose in order to uphold an unwarranted contention.

You may be protesting mentally that I am overlooking the rules by which we determine which command, example, or inference is binding on us and which is not. These questions must be asked as we study: Who is speaking or writing? To whom is it addressed? What is the context of the message? In what period of history did it apply? Is it universal or limited in its application? What were the customs of the land at that time? What do other portions of the Scriptures say on the subject? Is the language to be understood literally or figuratively? What is the meaning of the words used?

That simplifies everything, doesn't it? Countless volumes have been written to explain all those things, and we continue to lack a common understanding and to justify unholy divisions. We simply have not come up with a consistent hermeneutic. The tendency is to reject others who do not follow our hermeneutic even though we do not follow it consistently ourselves.

Let me pause to assure you that I am not making light of the Communion. I am affirming that participation in it is not to fulfill CENI but to remember its purpose.

Although we might be inclined to think that God put his laws in a legal code on the pages of the New Testament writings, he has put them in our hearts instead. Even those who had no written revelation of God could still have the law written on their hearts, according to Romans 1 & 2. All men have known to love God and man – his two universal laws/principles of action fulfilling all other perceived laws. The written revelation gives us grounds for our belief and love, and it guides and encourages the expression of it through teachings, commands, exhortations, and

warnings. But the comprehensive law of God has been given to us individually because God's love has been poured into our hearts, and we love because he first loved us.

This series is growing too long, so I will try to bring it to some sort of conclusion, inconclusive as it will be. I will talk about Willie who is not quite as smart as you and I. (☹) He was hiding behind the door when the extra smarts that you and I received were being handed out. It was by the grace of his teacher that he passed high school grammar and literature. So, when he reads the Bible, he gets plum bumfuzzled by all those big religious words like redemption, justification, righteousness, sanctification, covenant, dispensation, Deuteronomy, atonement, predestination, and antiquated "thee" and "thou" holy language and our CENI. He does not comprehend similes, metaphors, allegories, and allusions.

Well, he could read the "command" to greet one another with a kiss, but the thought of kissing another man was repulsive to him and he knew if he kissed the ladies he would get slapped. He could see Jesus' example of such a practical thing as washing the disciples' dirty feet but felt that would be a senseless show for him to do it to people with clean feet. And as for necessary inferences, he would not have recognized one of those things if his dog had killed one and dragged on to his back porch.

It was said, however, that Willie was born with a smile on his face which was radiated to all whom he saw. He, like Will Rogers, never saw a man he did not like. Being of creative and artistic mind, he could make most anything, fix most anything, and make it look better. He seemed instinctively to be at the right place when people needed him, and he always helped people cheerfully like he was the one being helped. He never used pious terms like, "I'm doing this because I love you," or "I am trying to let the love of God work through me." He would even "miss church" to care for someone's immediate needs. He honored God, not by singing songs to him but by helping and honoring God's people. He claimed that God did not need his encouragement but people did. Much of the time he had no money to put in the collection basket for he had used all his resources to help others. He had no envy at all toward his dear friends, Hal and Helen, who drove matching new Mercedes. If someone had given him one, he would have been embarrassed for his employees and friends to see him riding in it. Some criticized his lack of "church work" saying he was trying to earn salvation apart from the church. The only thing he was trying to earn was the joy of helping others. And many others learned to follow his example.

He went to assemblies, not to fulfill some sense of duty, but because he loved the people there and enjoyed encouraging interactions with them. He liked the uplift he got but was saddened when the preacher and others were negative and felt compelled to dogmatize all the minute details of what they could do and could not do while together. He had read enough of the Bible to learn that men had worshipped God spontaneously in many ways with no example of God ever rejecting the **sincere** worship of anyone, regardless of the ritual through which that worship was expressed.

OK. You have caught the drift. Even though Willie was no Bible scholar, and those who were scholarly disagreed and upheld divisions, he was walking in the light of the highest of all principles of conduct which were written in his heart.

Will you walk with Willie? – or, does the very thought give you the willies? []

(Cecil Hook; September 2006)