

God's Authority in Inference

By Micky Galloway

Divine authority is the real issue at the base of all religious differences. A knowledge of how to establish divine authority; a recognition of the different kinds of divine authority; a clear conception of the nature of each, and a faithful application of such knowledge will necessarily result in our speaking the same thing with no divisions among us, but all being perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment (1 Cor. 1:10).

Churches of Christ are now facing another authority crisis, the latest in a number that have divided God's people since the beginning. The very nature of Scripture and the proper approach to its study, as set forth in the sacred text itself, are being denied and rejected. Some are calling for a "new hermeneutic," a new way of looking at Scripture and ascertaining truth. It is hoped by them that by looking at the Scriptures differently and by approaching them differently, we will be able to find the answers to many issues confronting us, (i.e. marriage-divorce, women's liberation, homosexuality, abortion, instrumental music in worship, etc.) answers that will be generally acceptable and upon which we can unite. We are told that we can no longer view the Scriptures as a divinely-inspired constitution, designed to regulate our every belief and practice. Nor can we approach the Scriptures as a source of authority, as expressed in commands (statements), approved examples, and necessary inferences. We are told by some that this is a man-made system of Bible interpretation growing out of traditional views and doctrinal biases. Others tell us that authority is established by "principle." Let us be reminded that for any principle to be divine it must first be revealed by God. "Principles" are revealed in the Scriptures, by way of either expressed statement, approved apostolic example or necessary inference.

The purpose of this article will be to discuss necessary inference. The Bible does indeed teach by inference. When a command is neither expressly stated nor specifically exemplified, it may be determined by a logical deduction. However, let it be observed that in order to establish scriptural authority the inference must be NECESSARY. Herein is the mistake made by those who practice infant baptism. In the case of Lydia's household they reason that she MIGHT have been married; PROBABLY had children; if so, it is POSSIBLE that one of them was an infant, and, although she was away from home, in all PROBABILITY she had her infant with her. Hence, they conclude that an infant was in her household, and, therefore, infant baptism was practiced. Their inference is based upon "might," "probably," "possibly," "probability," etc., all of which amounts to only a reasonable inference based upon assumption. Scriptural authority is NOT established by reasonable inferences—they must be necessary! Things that are only "probable" or "likely" cannot be binding.

Everything that is ever said is said either implicitly or explicitly. To say something explicitly is to say it plainly in so many words. To say something implicitly is to say it by implication. Certainly much truth is revealed by implication. This is not a man made rule.

If I show you a square, and inform you that side A-B is 12 inches, I have told you two things explicitly: (1) The figure is a square; and (2) side A-B is 12 inches. However, in telling you that, I have also told you implicitly (necessarily inferred) that the perimeter of this figure is 48 inches; that the area is 144 square inches; and that the other three sides are also 12 inches each.

The fact that action is authorized by necessary conclusions is illustrated in classic Bible examples. Consider the baptism of Jesus (Mt. 3:16). We know that Jesus went down into the water though it is not explicitly stated. We know this because you cannot come up out of the water without first having gone down into the water. This is a forced conclusion, a necessary inference. The resurrection of the dead is taught by necessary inference by our Lord in Mt. 22:23-33. The Sadducees denied the resurrection, considering the dead to be annihilated. Jesus did not use a direct statement to refute them, but rather quoted Ex. 3:6,16.. "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." When

God spoke these words to Moses, the three patriarchs named had been dead for some four-hundred years. Yet, Jesus concludes (necessarily) that "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." From the tense of the verb ("I am" and not "I was"), Jesus drew the conclusion necessarily that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, lived so as to be resurrected. It is necessarily inferred that baptism is a part of preaching Christ (Acts 8:35-36). Nothing is explicitly stated in the text instructing the Eunuch to be baptized, only that Philip "preached unto him Jesus". Yet we know Philip preached to him about baptism, for when "they came unto a certain water; and the eunuch saith, Behold, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?" (vs. 35-36) How did the Eunuch know about baptism? It is necessarily inferred that Philip taught him! It is by necessary inference that we learn that the church was established on the first Pentecost after the resurrection of Christ (Mk. 9:1; Acts 1:8; 2:4). We learn the frequency of observance of the Lord's Supper by necessary inference. If "the Sabbath day" in Ex. 20:8 "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy," means EVERY Sabbath as regularly as it comes, why should not "the first day" in Acts 20:7 "The first day of the week...to break bread" mean every "first day" as often as it comes? As every week has a "first day" it is necessarily implied that we must observe the Lord's Supper with weekly frequency upon the first day of the week. In Hebrews 10:25, it is necessarily inferred that the church have a PLACE to meet. We are commanded, "not forsaking our own assembling together, as the custom of some is, but exhorting (one another); and so much the more, as ye see the day drawing nigh." In the command to assemble, a PLACE is necessarily inferred. This is a forced conclusion. It is impossible to assemble without a place. Therefore, a church building is an expedient in providing a PLACE, which is necessarily inferred in the command to assemble.

In Acts 15 we find a classic example of God revealing His will by direct statement, approved apostolic examples and necessary inference. According to verse 1, the proposition under discussion was: "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved." After all other evidence was considered, James reached a conclusion that was the ONLY logical inference from the evidence. James said, "Wherefore my judgment is, that we trouble not them that from among the Gentiles turn to God" (vs. 19).

Necessary inference becomes an effective means of establishing divine authority. If we cannot find authorization either by direct statement, approved example, or necessary implication, then let us respect God's silence. Only when people appreciate divine authority revealed in the Scriptures and are determined to reproduce the faith of its message in their lives, will the unity of the Spirit be achieved and maintained.