

Understanding Bible Authority

Kevin Rhodes

The entire concept of biblical authority has come under fire in the last generation in an originally subtle and presently blatant attempt to rewrite the meaning of scripture. The relativistic approach to interpretation characterized by the completely subjective plea "This is what it means to me," now couched in hundred dollar words designed to disguise its penny worth meaning, has reached a level of acceptance that demonstrates the need to refocus on hermeneutics, the science of interpretation, in explaining everything we believe, say, and do (Col. 3:17).

The threefold nature of basic rhetorical interpretation, now ridiculed by those displeased by its limits, neither originated with the Age of Reason nor is unique to the interpretation of the Bible. To the contrary, the distinction of meaning recognized in direct statements, accounts of action, and implication are inherent in communication itself. Therefore, because God has communicated His will for man, His will is contained in direct statements, accounts of action, and implication. These, thus revealed, then necessarily carry His authority, as Jesus also said (John 12:48). Therefore, regardless of what modernists and post-modernists believe, understanding Bible authority is essential both to study and to understand the Bible properly.

Direct statements of various forms (commands, questions, exclamations, etc.) are the primary means by which a language communicates meaning, and thus a primary means by which the Bible, a message communicating through the written word, communicates God's meaning to man. The words God chose and the way He presented them are essential elements of communication. Jesus acknowledged this when tempted by His repetition of the phrase, "It is written" (Matt. 4:1-11). Moreover, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" (Mk. 16:16a) is a direct statement of fact. Said by Jesus, it carries divine authority. It does not communicate everything about baptism, but it does communicate relevant information. The written statements of inspiration thus communicate God's will. To deny this is to deny everything about Christianity, for we can only know about Christianity through what God has said about it. Accounts of action are descriptions of someone else's behavior designed to illustrate something meaningful as well. It is the verbal equivalent of a plumber telling his apprentice, "Here is how to do this in a way that works correctly." Jesus referred to the priests' behavior, working on the Sabbath, as an account of action illustrating why the Pharisees' interpretation of keeping the Sabbath holy was untenable (Matt. 12:1-8). Likewise, accounts of action in the New Testament that describe the behavior of Christians that was deemed acceptable by those first century men speaking or writing by inspiration prescribes behavior acceptable for Christians today. Christians in Troas met, along with the apostle Paul and his companions, on the first day of the week to worship (Acts 20:7). This shows that the practice was acceptable Christian behavior and is the only statement in the New Testament regarding the time of such as acceptable. Implication simply describes what logically follows from the direct statements provided. For example, the statement, "Jeff took a flight to California for a meeting," implies a number of things depending on the nature of context, one of which is an airplane or helicopter. However, if instead the statement said, "Jeff went to California for a meeting," the statement does not imply the specific means of transportation but only the fact of travel. Jesus interpreted the Old Testament with regard to its implications regularly. Indeed, it was a mainstay of His argumentation. For "Man shall not live by bread alone" had application to Jesus only by implication, because He was a

man. In His reply to Satan's quotation of Scripture, Jesus argued by implication that Satan's interpretation was wrong because it was inconsistent with scripture elsewhere--a statement that implied the unity of scripture while arguing from it (Luke 4:1-13).

Modern interpreters have attempted to move the emphasis in interpretation away from the Author and the text and move it toward the reader and his situation. Such an approach renders the Author's meaning irrelevant and the text a mere footnote while transforming every person into the sole authority by which to determine divine meaning. I would hope this demonstrates what is at stake when it comes to Bible authority and Bible study. It makes the difference between studying the Bible so man can conform to God's will and studying the Bible to try to conform God to man's will. How you understand Bible authority matters--immensely.