

WHAT IS OUR STANDARD OF AUTHORITY?

Dave Leonard

Jesus once asked, “*The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men*” (Mat. 21:25). By posing this question Jesus was illustrating that in religious affairs there are only two sources of authority for what men do. All religious teachings and practices come either “*from heaven*” or “*from men.*” There are no other choices.

Today as we look at the religious world around us we see division. Why is it that men are so divided in their religious practices? We suggest that one of the main causes of religious division can be summarized in this statement: men are divided *because they follow different standards of authority.*

Each of us understands the need to have certain absolute “standards” in various matters that are unrelated to religion. For example, we buy milk in gallon or half-gallon containers. Cloth is measured in inches, feet, and yards. All of these measurements are simply absolute, objective, unchanging standards. If there were no such standards in society, and everybody just “did his own thing” when it came to measuring, chaos would result.

It’s the same way in religion. When folks do not heed one absolute, unchanging standard in their teaching and practices, then confusion and division are unavoidable. Thus, it is always wise to ask this question: What is our standard of authority in religious matters?

OUR FEELINGS

“If it feels right, do it.” This is a popular philosophy of our day. It has even become an accepted concept with many in the sphere of religion. But are feelings really a safe guide?

Adolf Hitler was a key figure in World War II. He considered the German race to be a superior one, and at the same time felt that the Jews were an inferior race, and ought to be exterminated. But Hitler’s ideas were not based on fact; they were simply his *subjective feelings*. Yes, Hitler possessed and followed strong feelings, yet, his action in murdering some six million Jews was wrong, do you not agree?

In the Bible we read of a man named Saul persecuting the disciples of Jesus (Acts 9:1-2). Why did Saul, who is later known as the apostle Paul, do such wicked things? He felt in his heart that he should do them! Listen to what he said about his persecution of Christ’s followers: “*I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth*” (Acts 26:9). Paul did what he *felt* was right, but his actions were wrong! This plainly shows that even in religious matters, one’s feelings can be deceptive. Thus, feelings are *not* a safe guide or standard to follow.

THE WISDOM OF MEN

Man's wisdom is also not a safe guide in serving the Lord. Many accept and do only that which *appears to them* to be wise or logical. This poses a great problem. The way *man* "sees" things is often not in harmony with the way that *God* thinks. ***"There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death"*** (Proverbs 16:25; cf. Jer. 10:23). Some things may "look" right, but they actually lead to spiritual destruction.

In our service to Christ, following the wisdom of men is not the way of salvation. Making this exact point, Jesus stated, ***"Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men"*** (Mark 7:7). We must not forget this truth: ***"... the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God"*** (1 Cor. 3:19). When it comes to pleasing God and the salvation of our souls, we must not follow worldly wisdom or what *we* think is best. Why? Man's wisdom is not infallible.

WHAT THE MAJORITY DOES

Surely you have heard someone say, "Everybody is doing it, so it must be right." Does the fact that many people are doing or teaching something make it right according to Scripture? God warned the Israelites: ***"Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil"*** (Exo. 23:2). The truth is, what many people do or teach could be right, but it just might be wrong, too. The action or teaching of the majority is *not* a safe guide.

How many lives were spared during the great flood in the days of Noah? ***"... while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water"*** (1 Pet. 3:20). The Bible does not tell us what the population of the world was in Noah's time, but only a ***"few,"*** eight people to be exact, were saved in the ark that Noah built. The majority of people who lived at that time were lost outside the ark. Clearly, in this case the action of the majority was wrong!

Jesus said, ***"Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it"*** (Mat. 7:13-14). If only ***"few"*** will receive eternal life, then the majority will be lost. Therefore, it would surely be unwise to accept and follow what the majority does!