

## HOW GOD REVEALS HIS WILL TO MEN

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on May 6, 1962 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Each of us who wears the name Christian has as the central desire of his heart the wish to honor and to glorify God. When we assemble for worship it is for the purpose of pouring out our adoration and praise. As we live our lives it is our purpose to do good works so that men may glorify our Father who is in heaven. The deepest desire of our hearts is the glorification of God, and hence we desire to know God, to know his will, and to live our lives as he wishes.

I hold in my hand a copy of God's inspired word, the Bible. It is the final authority in all matters of religion. In it God hath spoken. As the apostle Paul said, "Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work." (II Tim. 3:16-17).

But how can we know God's will as revealed in the Bible? After all, the Bible is a very large volume, made up of sixty-six separate books. Eleven hundred eighty nine chapters and more than 31,000 verses. The tragic fact of religious division also creates a question as to whether it is possible for all men to understand God's will or not. After all, do not all of the people in the more than 250 different denominations that make up Christendom today hold the Bible as a sacred book? In view of the different doctrines and different practices in religion how can we be sure that we know God's truth on each matter?

The first step in this vital undertaking is discovering God's will for men is an understanding of the way that the Bible is made. To put it another way, the apostle Paul admonished the young preacher, Timothy, "Give diligence to present thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, handling aright the word of truth." (II Tim. 2:15). The King James Version puts the same passage in these words, "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." Just how are we to divide the word of truth aright?

### God's Three Dispensations

The key to unlocking the spiritual treasures that are within the Bible is a knowledge of the fact that God has had three, separate, distinct dispensations, or eras, in his dealing with men. First of all, there was the Patriarchal Age, which began with Adam and continued to Moses, a period of more than 2500 years. During this era there was no written law, for God spoke to the patriarchs directly through visions, dreams, and by special messengers or angels. This has sometimes been called the period of "Starlight" in God's revelation of himself to men.

The second period was the Mosaic Age, which began during the lifetime of Moss, and continued into the life of Christ, a period of approximately 1500 years. In this age there was a written law, a regular priesthood, a tabernacle or temple, and a rigid system of animal sacrifices. The Ten Commandments, which were given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, were the heart of Moses' law. In all there were more than 660 commandments in this Old Testament period, with approximately two-thirds being negative commands of the "Thou shalt not ..." variety. This has been called the period of "Moonlight" revelation.

Finally, the Christian Age began when Christ was nailed to the cross and immediately thereafter with the beginning of his church or kingdom on Pentecost. This period has lasted already more than 1900 years and will continue until the end of time. The law of Christ has replaced the law of Moses. The church has taken the place of the temple. This is the period of brilliant "Sunlight" revelation.

In Col. 2:14, the apostle Paul makes it very clear that the Mosaic law has been taken out of the way in these words, "Having blotted out the bond written in ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us: and hath taken it out of the way, nailing it to the cross." A similar emphasis is found in Ephesians 2:15 where the apostle Paul says, "Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; that he might create in himself of the two one new man, so making peace." Further irrefutable evidence is found in the story of the transfiguration of Jesus, as we read it in the opening paragraph of Matthew 17. When Moses and Elijah were transfigured with Christ, Peter was so moved, that he said, "Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, I will make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Then, "While he was yet speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold, a voice out of the cloud saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him." (Matt. 17:4-5). Thus, God said that Christ--not Moses, the Old Testament lawgiver, nor Elijah, one of the chief Old Testament prophets--is to be followed. In no sense do we wish to disparage the Patriarchal or Mosaic periods, for they served their purposes grandly and then were set aside, much as a calendar serves a necessary purpose during a certain interval of time and then is removed when it is no longer in date. We read the Old Testament in order to understand the New Testament; we find much profit in the Old Testament examples. Yet, so far as commandments to be obeyed and instructions to be followed in pleasing God in our era are concerned we are under the law of Christ which we find in the New Testament.

A knowledge of these three dispensations makes it possible for a man to read his Bible with understanding. Otherwise he might begin with Genesis, read delightfully through its fifty chapters which tell of the patriarchs of old, read on into Exodus and then bog down in the minute commands of Moses' law. Many a man has decided that the Bible is "too much for him" and has closed it and laid it back on the shelf. Had he only known this simple key he would have understood that the old has been laid aside and that we are under the now law Of Christ.

### Three Methods

In the Bible God has chosen to reveal his will to man by three simple methods. The first of these is through direct commands. For example, in Acts 16: 30-31, the Philippian jailor received the following answer to his question, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" "And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thou house." Notice that this is a direct command to believe. Similarly, in Acts 2:38, Peter answered the same question on Pentecost with the words, "Repent ye, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." These people had already believed, so Peter commanded them to take the next steps toward salvation. There are many other direct commandments throughout the New Testament through which God reveals his will to people of our time.

As we speak of God's commandments, it is also of value to mention the fact that sometime God uses generic, or general commandments. An example might be Matt, 28:19-20 where Jesus says, "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nation's, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you." The word "go" is a direct command of the generic type, for it leaves the details or the means by which one goes to the judgment of the one going. He may choose to go by any means of transportation that is available, since no specific requirement is mentioned. However, notice that in the same sentence the command to baptize is a specific or detailed commandment. The word, baptizo is a Greek word which literally means, "to dip, to plunge, to immerse." Thus in the same sentence there is a general commandment, which allows the reader certain freedom of choice, and a specific commandment, which allows no freedom or variation. In another example, Eph. 5:19, we find a specific commandment; "Speaking one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." In this commandment the Holy Spirit specified "singing," a specific, rather than "making music," a general commandment. Had the Holy Spirit said, "make music," we would have had the option as to whether to use instrumental music, vocal-music, or a combination of the two in our worship. The Holy Spirit, however, specified singing. Col. 3:16 adds, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts unto God." Again the commandment is specific, leaving the reader no alternative but to sing.

### Examples

A second means by which God gives instructions to his people is through approved apostolic examples. For example, in Acts 20:7 we read, "And upon the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul discoursed with them." Here is an example of the apostle Paul eating the Lord's supper on the first day of the week. Another apostolic example is found in Titus 1:5 where Paul says, "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that were wanting, and appoint elders in every city, as I gave thee charge." Here is an example of an apostle leaving an evangelist in an area for the purpose of appointing elders there.

At this point some thoughtful person suggests a problem. He asks, "But how can we know when apostolic action was intended as an example and when it was merely incidental?" This problem becomes apparent when one considers the fact that the apostles often met in an upper room. Does this mean that Christians still should meet in upper rooms for their worship? Obviously not, yet we have several instances in which the apostles did. Or, to take another example, it is surprising to note that all examples of missionary journeys in New Testament times, as recorded in book of Acts, were toward the north and west. Does this mean that missionaries in our day, too, should only go toward the north and west? Would it be wrong to carry the gospel in a southern or eastern direction?

The answer to the problem is not an easy one, but it is possible to distinguish between incidental apostolic action and that which was meant to be an example to the church for the future. If there is an implied command behind the action, then it is meant as an example. To test this suggestion let us return to Acts 20:7, the example of meeting on the first day of the week to eat the Lord's supper. Our minds go back to Matthew 26, Mark 14, and Luke 22, as well as to I Cor. 11, where the scriptures teach plainly that Christians are to eat the Lord's supper. Then in Acts 20:7, we have an example of an apostle doing it. Surely he would know when and how the Lord intended for this commandment to be carried out. Similarly, in our example of Titus 1:5, in which Paul mentioned leaving Titus to appoint elders, we again find an underlying commandment implied. Our minds go back to I Tim. 3 and other passages which indicate the qualifications which elders are to meet. The example under consideration is simply a carrying out of what is commanded in other passages. Our conclusion is that approved apostolic examples are those which present an apostle doing something which implies or suggests an underlying commandment.

### Inferences

In still another way God teaches us his will. Through necessary inferences he indicates additional teaching. In Heb. 10:25 we read, "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. This is one of the several indications that Christians are to meet for worship. This is clearly and plainly taught in the scriptures. When the Lord commanded Christians to meet for worship, he plainly and necessarily implied that they are authorized to provide a place in which to meet. The commandment to meet is necessary inference authority for the providing of a place in which to meet. It is left to the discretion of the elders as to whether they shall borrow the use of a place, rent a suitable place, or build such a place. Another example might be Acts 2:38 where Peter commanded that his hearers "repent and be baptized ..." The commandment to be baptized necessarily implies that water is to be provided. The necessary inference is that water must be provided in some suitable way, since New Testament baptism always was in water.

The Lord then reveals his will to men through direct commands, approved apostolic examples, and necessary inferences. Through one of these avenues it is necessary to have a "Thus saith the Lord" for everything that we do in faith and practice. We must have authority through one of these means for everything that we believe and practice.

### Three Pitfalls

Sometime during the last century John A. Broadus suggested the three most common ways of misinterpreting scripture. He included the following: First, there was the matter of disregarding the context of a passage. The context is simply the scriptures surrounding a statement or phrase of scripture. In order to be sure that one does not misinterpret, he needs to read the whole book, the entire chapter, and certainly the whole paragraph in which a text is included.

During the temperance lectures that were common during the Chautauqua movement, John G. Gough and others used the text, "Handle not, nor touch, nor taste" (Col. 2:21), quite extensively. A careful reading of the paragraph, however, shows that the apostle Paul was saying just the opposite from what they quoted him as saying. The entire paragraph reads, "If ye died with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourself to ordinances, Handle not, nor taste, nor touch (all which things are to perish with the using), after the precepts and doctrines of men? which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will-worship and humility, and severity to the body; but are not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh." (Col. 2:20-23). Paul was saying that when a man is really dedicated to Christ and converted thoroughly he does not try to depend upon merit-works such as pilgrimages and fasts.

The second problem is a misunderstanding of the phraseology of the scriptures. In Matthew 26:27 Jesus is described as taking the cup and saying to his disciples. "Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many unto remission of sins." Some have misunderstood this and similar passages to mean that in drinking the fruit of the vine in the Lord's supper, that one container or cup is mandatory. They fail to realize that Christ was referring to the contents of the cup rather than to the container. A reading of I Cor. 11:25-26, makes it clear that he refers not to the container but to its contents. "In like manner also the cup, after supper, saying, This cup is the new covenant of my blood, this do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink the cup, ye proclaim the Lord's death til he come."

A third common misinterpretation of scripture arises from improper spiritualizing. Literal teachings are sometimes spiritualized; figurative passages are sometimes liberalized. An example of the latter might be Rev. 20:1-3, where some people get the idea that Christ is going to reign on the earth for a literal 1,000 years. Obviously the passage is a figurative passage and it is hardly defensible to liberalize one element and leave the others still in their figurative form. "And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key of the abyss and a big chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, the old serpent, which is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and cast him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him ..." By what reasoning does the thousand years become literal, but the key, the abyss, the chain, and the dragon still remain figurative?

### Conclusion

In view of the fact that God has loved mankind enough to create him with the ability to think and to reason, and has then given him a specially prepared book to guide him toward heaven, we must resolve to spend our best efforts in understanding that book. As we love God, we will want to know more and more of his will for us. Let me suggest three great principles that should be a part of the thinking of every Christian. Let each one of us work for the time when he can say in the fullest sense:

- (1) The Bible is my guide. It is the only and final authority of God, and is the only safe guide from earth to heaven.
- (2) I know what the Bible teaches. This involves a lifetime of study and is the main emphasis of this particular message.
- (3) I am doing what the Bible says. Obviously it is not enough to make the Bible one's guide nor even to know what the Bible teaches. Only when we are living that which the Bible teaches can we hope for eternal salvation.

This is solid ground. Let us take the Bible as our guide, study its contents carefully and intelligently, and then live exactly as this inspired book teaches us to live.

