

# Matters of Faith, Pt 1

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According to the Apostle Paul, faith comes by (*ek* - out of) hearing and hearing from (*dia* - through) the Word of God (*hrematos Christou* - the spoken word of Christ). The typical Greek expression in the NT for “the word of God” is “*ho logos tou theou*.” The word *hrema*, however, means “that which is spoken, a declaration, saying, or speech.” It is also used in the NT for “a command, mandate, or instruction.” The use of *hrema* rather than *logos* very likely means that writer intended to communicate the idea of words or speech rather than logic or reasoning, *per se*. Perhaps it is pressing the point too far, but, speaking lexically or etymologically, Paul is saying that the faith he is talking about in Romans 10:17 comes from the preaching and teaching that he had given to those to whom he had spoken or written. It is not logical argumentation *per se*, put the simple message of the Gospel that is to be believed or accepted as true; it is from the message communicated to us by God that our faith is to be drawn and matters of faith are to be determined.

Now, why is this lexical data important? It is important only in so far as it relates to the issue of the means of determining the content of matters of faith. What is a matter of faith? Essentially, it is a matter considered by a given community of believers to be an essential belief of the community. Our discussion, then, concerns how the members of a given community should go about determining a specific teaching as essential or not essential as a matter of belief and practice within their community.

Of course, this raises the issue of authority concerning such matters; i.e., who or what determines the binding efficacy of a given teaching or practice for the community as a whole? These matters or practices are commonly identified as “matters of faith,” and matters

not considered essential to faithfulness to the beliefs of the community are considered "matters of judgment or choice," or "matters of expediency."

If it is the case that the source of faith is "the word of Christ," then it follows that what Christ as authored or "authorized" is what must be considered essential to the beliefs of those who call themselves his followers or disciples. The assumption (or presupposition) of how one determines what is and what is not a matter of faith must be mutually agreed upon by the members of the community before they can realistically be expected to reach a consensus on such matters. If one is convinced that faith is derived from another (or other) source than the words of Christ (the resource of these words or teaching being the NT Scriptures), such sources must be presented and acknowledged by all parties concerned before the discussion of what is and what is not essential to faith can proceed.

It is here that the greatest amount of disagreement emerges in this whole enterprise. Some are convinced that matters of faith may only be drawn from the teachings of Christ while others insist that this approach is too limiting. This issue has produced a significant body of creeds and articles of faith, not to mention large libraries of books in defense or refutation of the content of these various lists.

Two of the most commonly accepted positions of this debate are: (1) that faith matters are to be determined from the propositional statements of Scripture and practices derived from Scripture which serve as precedents, and (2) that faith matters are to be determined by the traditional beliefs and practices of each community of faith as determined by that body as an autonomous body of believers. In the one, the Scriptures are the source of faith matters and in the other, the tradition of the community serves as a law unto itself.

This was the major issue giving rise to the ongoing conflicts between the Eastern and Western church communities of Europe for the first ten centuries of the Christian era. This is reflected historically in the numerous separations from the Roman Church by churches of

other cultures which did not acknowledge the authority of the Western Church to dictate matters of faith to their communities; i.e., the church in Ireland under Patrick (in the fifth century), the church in Scotland under Columba (in the sixth century), the separation of the Eastern Orthodox Church from the Roman Catholic Church (in the tenth century), and, eventually, the protestant reformation led by Martin Luther in Europe (in the 15<sup>th</sup> century).

This same issue has given rise to hundreds of divisions within Christianity since that time to the present. The issue of division in the face of Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17 seems especially inconsistent; but, as long as there are differences in thinking as to what matters are essential and non-essential as "matters of faith," this debate will go on and the estrangement of communities of believers from one another will continue.

### Determining Matters of Faith

The presupposition from which we will proceed in this presentation is rooted in the words of Paul in Romans 10:17, "Faith comes out of hearing, and hearing from the word of Christ." What constitutes "the word of Christ," as used by Paul here in this text, are the teachings of Christ (in word and example) which were given to his original disciples as found in the four Gospels of the New Testament, and the teachings of those who were authorized by him as his representatives or spokesmen; i.e., those called "his apostles" in the NT (cf. the apostolic commission of Matt 28:18-20).

How is the expression "faith comes out of hearing" to be applied in determining matters of faith? This simply means that there must be propositional statements or precedents from which the matters of faith are determined. The source for this data is the writings of the New Testament: the Gospels for the life and teaching of Jesus, Acts of Apostles and the NT letters for the teachings and examples of the apostolic community.

In evaluating or researching the NT Scriptures for this data one must look for the words of Scripture (i.e. propositional statements),

not the absence of words or “the silence of Scripture,” which is often interpreted as a negative propositional statement prohibiting or forbidding a given action. Propositional statements must have a subject and predicate at minimum. To insist that silence can prove anything, positively or negatively, is a fallacy of reasoning. In Aristotelian logic there are four types of propositional statements: (1) “A” categorical (a universal affirmative), (2) an “E” Categorical (a universal negative), (3) an “I” categorical (a particular affirmative), and (4) an “O” categorical (a particular negative). Propositional statements may also be drawn from hypothetical statements (i.e. “If/then” statements).

Obviously, within Aristotelian logic and in hypothetical syllogisms there must be a subject, a predicate, and an object in order for a propositional statement to be present. All men (subject) are (predicate) human beings (direct object). These are the rules given by Aristotle in his three volume *Analytics*, which are universally recognized as the basis for discursive reasoning. According to these rules of argumentation, an argument is determined to be “a valid argument” if the essentials of a propositional statement are in place and the terms of the argument are properly distributed; the argument is considered to be “a sound argument” if the propositions of a valid argument can be shown to be true. With silence, none of this is possible; silence is, essentially, the absence of an argument and nothing can be determined from silence, neither positively nor negatively. This applies as well to matters of faith. No matter of faith can be determined from the silence of Scripture, only from the language of Scripture. Silence contains no subject or predicate, and no object of the predicate, there is no verbiage, no grammar, no substance, no content from which to reason. Silence is just that – “silent!” It can prove nothing!

In order to establish a matter of faith one must do so from the words or statements of Scripture, not from the absence of words, which can neither affirm nor negate. One must work through the text of Scripture looking for propositional statements or language which may easily be converted into such a statement in order to reason anything from that statement in the development of that

which may be considered a matter of faith for a given community of believers. The truth of Scripture may only be determined by an evaluation of statements or the description of precedents found in the word of God, not from the silence of such; silence cannot be interpreted as the word of God. It is, then, the words of Scripture which determine a matter of faith. If a matter cannot be so determined, then it is a matter of judgment and cannot be called a matter of faith. This principle was realized and stated very early in the development of the Restoration Movement when Thomas Campbell made what is called "The Restoration Plea" in the words, "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent." His motivation for this statement was to provide a way of deciding what would and would not be determined matters of faith in the lives of the believers embracing the movement to restore NT Christianity and disassociate themselves with all beliefs and practices not having Scripture to justify them being considered essentially matters of belief and practice for the community of believers, the church.

### Where the Scriptures Are Silent

Silence is defined as, "the state of keeping or being silent; *especially*: forbearance from speech or comment; the absence of sound; stillness; a period of time without speech or noise," (*Dictionary.com*).

Silence has no voice, no content or substance; it gives no instruction, and, consequently, has no authority in determining matters of faith. Silence is just that, silent.

One of the greatest problems of the Restoration Movement has been the interpretation of the restoration plea, "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak, and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent."

The problem has been that how one understands the expression "remain silent," which has been interpreted by many to mean "without biblical authority" if the Scriptures do not expressly authorize it.

The argument here is that if a given practice is not specifically authorized by Scripture, (i.e. if the Scriptures are silent on a matter),

then it is to be excluded in that there is no authority for it. This argument is based on the assumption that all actions of the community of believers must be authorized by the Scriptures and if there is no authorization for the action, it is to be prohibited. This argument works from the logical fallacy that silence may be understood as having a voice where, in reality, it does not.

One cannot claim that something is forbidden unless it is expressly forbidden. It may not be forbidden "by default." The silence of Scripture on any matter simply means that the Scriptures do not address the issue; and if this is the case, then the issue is a matter of judgment or expediency. One cannot prove something right or wrong from silence. One cannot break a law if there is no law to break; nor can one violate a prohibition of Scripture unless there is a prohibition there to violate. It is the "voice of Scripture" that gives authorization to a matter of faith, and it must be remembered that it is only a matter of faith must have the authority of Scripture. In matters of expediency (i.e., the means of expediting a given action), the issue must be how to best proceed in carrying out a given action. If the Scriptures are silent on such a matter, then the matter cannot be called a matter of faith, it must be considered as a matter of judgment or expediency. One must base his beliefs on content and on the absence of content.

## Presuppositions

In every argument there are presuppositions underlying the argument from which the argument develops. With many arguments, however, the presupposition underlying the argument may be in want of a little argument itself. The logical fallacy of "Begging the Question" is the problem here; i.e., assuming as true the very point to be proven. This is the case with the reasoning associated with the so-called "law of silence." The assumption at work here is that all actions of the community of believers must be expressly authorized by the NT Scriptures (i.e., there must be biblical authority for everything we say and do as a community of believers). Thus, it is argued that all actions done in worship must be authorized by the NT Scriptures. If a given action is not explicitly or implicitly

authorized by the NT, it is an action which is forbidden by the "silence of Scripture." In his evaluation of certain statements made which do not appear to have adequate evidence or reasoning to establish them, C. S. Lewis, would say, "This argument is in want of a little argumentation." Where is the proof or evidence underlying this presupposition that all action in which the community of believers engage must be authorized by the NT Scriptures? What line of argumentation may be presented to establish this presupposition as true?

### The Meaning of Colossians 3:17

Attempts have been made to draw such proof from the statement of Paul in Col 3:17, "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus." The reasoning here is that this is an apostolic instruction requiring those who follow Jesus to have biblical authority for all that they say and do. The key phrase is "in the name of the Lord Jesus," which is taken to be "by the authority of the Lord Jesus." There are texts in which this expression may be so understood, but this is not the primary meaning of the expression "in the name of" in the Greek speaking first century Mediterranean world.

This is the view of one of the most renowned philologists known to the study of language of *Koine* Greek, Adolf Deissmann. He states in one of his book on NT words and expressions, *Bible Studies* (1901) that the expression "in the name of," which has its roots in the Greek *LXX*, means essentially, "of or belonging to," or "by virtue of ownership or possession," especially when used as a *technus terminus*. To declare a given piece of land as belonging to a given monarch or his realm, one declares it as his by use of the expression "in the name of." It is not "by his authority," which in a certain context could be implied, but what being said by the expression concerns ownership or possession. To believe "in the name (or into) the name" of Jesus is to give ownership or possession of oneself to Jesus (cf. Adolf Deissmann, *Bible Studies*, pp 146-48; 196-98).

Another consideration in the interpretation of this statement in

Col 3:17 is the fact that the context of this statement has nothing to do with establishing biblical authority for a given act of worship, activity, or course of action of the church. Paul is not addressing the issue of biblical authority; rather, he is encouraging his readers to do all that they do as people who belong to Christ; i.e., they should follow the example Christ in all they say and do.

The larger context of this statement begins in 3:1 and runs through verse 17. The theme throughout is their behavior in every walk of life: if they have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, they are to set their mind on things above not on things that are on earth, they are to put to death their immoral behavior and behave as those who are the chosen of God, they are to let the word of Christ dwell richly within them and they are to sing of their faith in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, given thanks to God. Then Paul concludes this pericope or paragraphs with the words, translated very literally from the Greek text, "and in everything, whatsoever you do in word or work, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." This admonition is not a dictum concerning the essentiality of having biblical authority for what is done in Christian worship. It is an admonition to his readers to conduct themselves in every walk of life as those who belong to Christ, they should lives with songs in their hearts, singing of their beliefs in everything they say and do. If this verse is a mandate for the essentiality for biblical authority in all we say and do, it is not exclusive to Christian worship, it is applicable to "everything, whatsoever you do" (*pan ho ti ean poie'te*). Whatever would be unacceptable to do in Christian worship would be unacceptable to do in every activity of life.

The suggestion that the expression "in the name of" should be understood, "by the authority of" does not fit the context here at all. Such an interpretation is "eisegetical" rather than "exegetical," in that it completely ignores the context and the all-inclusive nature of what is to be said and done. The most evident meaning of Col 3:17 is that these people should live their lives "as ones identifying themselves with" the one whose example is the paradigm or exemplar for all those who call themselves followers of Christ. To reduce this text to

a mandate ordering the believer to have book, chapter, and verse for every word he utters and every action in which he engages is to completely turn the meaning of Paul's word from their original intent as determined from the lexical, syntactical, and contextual data of the verse.

## Summary

Matters of faith, then, are matters upon which Christ has spoken or provided us a precedent to follow; all else are matters of judgment or expediency. A matter of faith is a matter addressed in Scripture. Such a matter is determined by the language of Scripture and/or that which is necessarily implicit within that language. Matters which may be considered necessary or desirable in the practice of the community of believers are to be considered matters of choice or expediency if the matter in which the Scriptures speak.

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