

THE AUTHORITY OF THE WORD

THE genuine ecclesia (*ekklêsia*, OUT-CALLED, “church,” AV) is simply comprised of all whom God *calls*. We are called out of the world and into Christ, out of unbelief into faith. “Ecclesia” is used in this way in many passages. *All* who truly believe “that Jesus died and rose” are saints of God and belong to His ecclesia, even if it should be that God has not increased their faith beyond this foundational, glorious revelation. “If we are believing that Jesus died and rose, thus also, those who are put to repose, will God, through Jesus, lead forth together with Him” (1 Thess.4:14).

The only other usages of *ekklêsia* in Scripture which are pertinent to believers are those in reference to saints living in a particular city or region (e.g., Gal.1:2), or to those who periodically assemble themselves together at a certain location (e.g., Rom.16:5). This latter usage of OUT-CALLED, though concerning believers, refers not to God’s having called them into Christ, but merely to a pastor’s (or some other leader’s) calling together of those who wish to be part of a certain congregation or regular gathering.

If the leader’s teachings, however, are not truly faithful to the evangel and its service, surely there is nothing very remarkable—let its members claim what they will—about being a part of such a group. Those who go so far as to speak of their own group—in *contradistinction to other believers*—as “the saints” or “the church,” are in serious error and are nurturing a false spirit.

THE TRAP OF “ESTABLISHED AUTHORITY”

Because of their immaturity, and the powers of the

Adversary, a great many believers will not have the ability to recognize ministries within the ecclesia that are more characterized by faithfulness than others. Those in positions of leadership are often endowed with various fine qualities. This is so no matter how erroneous their teachings may be. In addition to their appeal, such ones may also be very persuasive. It is only natural, then, that others, at least as immature as themselves, should accept them as stalwarts of the faith.

Those who are actually quite mistaken in many of their basic teachings will nonetheless be convinced of the verity and value of their own ministries. As a result, they will attract many followers who, quite understandably, will gladly affiliate themselves with them. At the outset, the novice is not competent to judge; later on, he fears to disagree with established authority. As a rule, however, the people “love to have it so” (*cp* Jer.5:31). Effectually, they cry out, “Give us a king to judge us!” (*cp* 1 Sam.8:5-7).

In certain cases a contemporary man is given an authoritative place; in others, an ancient church creed serves the same purpose. In a number of churches the chief pastor’s opinions are considered absolutely authoritative. To differ with him is to differ with Christ. To be “obedient to God,” one must actually follow the pastor in his mistaken views, until he recognizes the error of his ways. Such a one’s teachings are not to be questioned, much less doubted or rejected.

In other groups, while such a policy is theoretically repudiated and any such practice denied, it is practically accepted nonetheless, often with as much zeal as that of those who openly advocate such principles. The same spirit prevails, even if unwittingly so.

Ironically, many who condemn and reject human authority if it should be contemporary, singular, and heterodox, justify and embrace it themselves if it should be ancient,

plural, and orthodox. Many bow down to the dictums of the early church creeds just as surely as others prostrate themselves before modern day “apostles.”

All such things are altogether wrong, for they largely destroy one’s ability to think, seek, and decide for oneself. In all such cases it is a foregone conclusion that one must be subject either to an “authoritative” creed, a learned church leader, or to some other human dignity.

Yet the clearer our grasp of the evangel of true grace and of the intrinsic authority of the Scriptures themselves, the more clearly we will see the illegitimacy of any ecclesiastical policy that entails human authority concerning truth. Any such approach is terribly mistaken, for it necessitates the lordship of one man over another in matters of faith. *God* is able to establish His people, and He does so, according as He is intending. The truth does not need the assistance of human dominion. “Success” is no proof of faithfulness. To the contrary, it is usually a strong indication of its opposite.

ACCEPTED SCHOLARSHIP AND VENERATED CREEDS

Personal competency to make correct judgments is the vital need of every believer. Yet what is this but the gift of God, according to the wisdom and enlightenment He is pleased to give? Yet this only comes in response to prayer and in response to much sane-minded labor in the Word, labor that is rooted and grounded in love, not in fleshly pride or mere curiosity (Phil.1:9-11; Eph.3:14-19).

“*Examining the scriptures day by day, to see if these have it thus*” (Acts 17:11), is one thing. Rooting about in “the Bible” in a desperate quest for proof texts against a position which we do not wish to accept, is quite another. The former endeavor requires time, patience, competency and impartiality. The latter has no need of any of these.

It is not that we are obligated to consider every wind

of teaching that comes our way. That is quite impossible. Nor is it that any certain ministry is necessarily worthy of special consideration. It is instead that the issues in question themselves concerning the greatest scriptural themes, are worthy of our careful and protracted attention. It is most unsatisfactory to be ignorant of these things, or, in a dispute, only to consider well one side and not the other (*cf* Prov.18:13). In an era of apostasy such as the present (1 Tim.4:1,2; 2 Tim.3:13; 4:3,4), nothing could be more foolish than summarily to reject the leading exponents of those who dare to stand against our own traditions.

It is totally inadequate, not to mention dangerous, to approach the Word of God with no more in hand than the Authorized Version or some other all-too-frequently lawless and discordant translation. We need much guidance and wisdom even with a faithful translation before us, and cannot hope to gain a good understanding without an accurate, concordant version.

Few scriptural passages are fully absolute, without limitation of any kind, even if they should be practically absolute. And many statements are by no means absolute, but are true only as they relate to a certain subject. It is strictly a matter of wisdom and discernment, based upon our total knowledge of all facts that have a bearing on a matter, as to whether we should judge a statement absolute or relative, even as literal or figurative.

It will not suffice merely to make bold claims as to the significance of a passage, especially when, if the truth be known, we may never have realized that such a thing as varied senses in which a passage may be taken even exists.

Most of those who at least know something of our work seem to know, more or less, *what* we believe (even if they should find it difficult to state our position fairly and accurately); but few indeed seem to understand *why* we are constrained to take the stand that we do, especially in

those cases in which our findings are contrary to those of orthodoxy. So many simply will not “hear us out.” They do not really grasp what are—at least to us—the compelling *reasons* for our beliefs.

Consequently, on the one hand, they do not possess a sufficiently good reason for themselves to accept our findings, and on the other hand, they are unable to help us where we may need adjustment since they do not seem to understand the considerations that constrain us to teach as we do. That is, they are in no position to point out any actual weaknesses in a structure concerning which they hardly seem to discern at all the true nature of its foundation.

It is to be regretted that those who cannot concur with our findings nearly always appeal to “scholars” and “authorities.” The creeds of Christendom are regularly appealed to as well—as if, even in an era of extreme apostasy, prevailing opinion were somehow an indicator of truth! We do well to consult others, and it is not wrong to agree with them. But the least suggestion that truth concerning any certain subject is practically established because either the majority or a certain class or movement find accord among themselves concerning it, is only a manifestation of foolishness if not conceit. Few are even interested in the true meaning of scriptural terms and teachings. Yet even those who do make at least some sort of inquiry, too often confine their efforts to considering the opinions of those scholars who advocate their own present views. If the teachings of those holding contrary views are consulted at all, such considerations are nearly always more superficial than substantial, and are engaged in more obdurately than objectively.

Who are we to believe, those who boast the loudest of their credentials, or those of their mentors? Are we to entrust our faith to those who are the most vociferous and adamant, who insist that they and theirs alone are

“orthodox,” “evangelical,” “conservative,” “spirit-filled,” or perhaps even “the true church” or “apostolic”? Through such shibboleths, those who appeal to such things are only removing all doubt that they are entirely out of sympathy with the words of the apostle, “Let no one be boasting in men” (1 Cor.3:21).

“The principle of founding all upon the Scriptures themselves is vital and must be sustained above all. The Scriptures are our only authority. There are helps, and hindrances, but no authorities. Expositions represent fallible human endeavors to grasp God’s truth as revealed in His Word, and are neither authoritative nor inspired. The opinions of the founders of evangelical movements, however great or godly, are no more authoritative than those of other believers, are equally amenable to the tribunal of holy writ, and must stand or fall by its verdicts. To set up the teaching of any man or set of men as an authority is a return to Romanism.”¹

REALIZATION IN PRAYER

Every believer surely has the right to his own opinion. Yet the right to one’s opinion carries with it the obligation to see to it that one’s opinion is right. Therefore, God’s people need to learn how to *think*, both clearly and accurately, in order that they might make wise and valid judgments.

Apart from divine enlightenment, however, clear thinking and intelligence, however excellent, will by no means suffice for discerning the will of God. All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are *concealed* in Him (Col.2:3). We may sooner create the galaxies by ourselves than understand the Scriptures apart from God’s enabling power.

Just as proficiency in any field requires training and experience, progress in the faith is impossible apart from

¹ I. A. E. Knoch, *Unsearchable Riches*, vol.1, p.253.

prayer and education. This is God’s *way*; it is His “means of grace.” It is unrealistic and foolish to minimize the importance of either of these two entities.

In prayer, as in our walk in general, we are to become imitators of the apostle Paul; as he says, “according as I also am [an imitator] of Christ” (1 Cor.11:1). Thus we have the apostle “for a model” (Phil.3:17). We do well to note that his concerns and petitions to God are not for soulish welfare but for *spiritual enlightenment*. Among his most notable prayers are these; may they be our guide as we seek wisdom from above and spiritual understanding:

“Therefore, I also, on hearing of this faith of yours in the Lord Jesus, and that for all the saints, do not cease giving thanks for you, making mention in my prayers that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may be giving you *a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the realization of Him*, the eyes of your heart having been enlightened, for you to perceive what is the expectation of His calling, and what the riches of the glory of His allotment among the saints, and what the transcendent greatness of His power for us who are believing, in accord with the operation of the might of His strength” (Eph.1:15-19; *cp* 2 Cor. 4:13).

“Be rejoicing *in the Lord* always! Again, I will declare, be rejoicing! Let your lenience be known to all men: the Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God, and the peace of God, that is superior to every frame of mind, shall be garrisoning your hearts and your apprehensions in Christ Jesus” (Phil.4:4-7).

“We are thanking the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, always praying concerning you, on hearing of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints, because of the expectation reserved for you in the heavens, which you hear before in *the word of the truth*

of the evangel, which, being present with you, according as in the entire world also, is bearing fruit and growing, according as it is among you also, from the day on which you hear and realized the grace of God in truth, according as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow slave, who is a faithful dispenser of Christ for us, who makes evident to us your love in spirit.

“Therefore we also, from the day on which we hear, *do not cease praying for you* and requesting that you may be *filled full with the realization of His will, in all wisdom and spiritual understanding*, you to walk worthily of the Lord for all pleasing, bearing fruit in every good work, and growing in *the realization of God*; being endued with all power, in accord with the might of His glory, *for all endurance and patience with joy*; at the same time *giving thanks to the Father*, Who makes you competent for a part of the allotment of the saints, in light” (Col.1:3-12).

FOUR VITAL QUESTIONS

In studying any passage of Scripture, we must always ask ourselves: (1) *What* does it say? (2) *Whom* does it concern? (3) *When* does it apply? and (4), In *what sense* is it true?

Unless we have no opinion at all concerning a certain subject, it will be impossible for us not to make some type of judgment concerning it with respect to these questions, even if we do not consciously rehearse these points or even know they exist.

Indeed, many naively imagine that they themselves simply “believe God,” while accepting the Scriptures at “face value”—unlike certain others whom they deem “too intellectual,” not to mention less “spiritual” than themselves. Such ones will often further declare, albeit tautologically, since “God’s Word says what it means, and means what it says,” there is no need for any “human interpretation.”

All such sentiments are simply wrongheaded. First of

all, there are no interpretations except for human interpretations. Unless we make no claim at all as to how a given declaration should be understood, we simply cannot avoid “interpreting” it, which is simply to say, declaring the sense in which we believe it should be understood.

Therefore, it is by far the wiser course to keep the following questions ever before us as we seek further light, and, as God grants it to us.

(1) *What* does it say? In order to judge correctly here it is essential that we learn the difference between an actual scriptural declaration and a mere human inference therefrom. We need to be especially clear as to the enormous difference between a *corollary* (that which, though not expressed, must be true, in light of what *has* been said) and an *inference* (that which not only has not been expressed, but may well not be true at all, and, in any case, cannot be known to be true). We must not self-confidently claim that a writer is “undoubtedly” making an implication when it is far more likely that we are only making an unwarranted inference.

It will not suffice to note that a certain translation may state a certain thing in a certain passage; for, for all their accord, there are many differences in rendering among translations, from one version to another. These differences are often by no means trivial or confined simply to choice of phrasing or even to significantly distinct ideas though only concerning minor points of teaching. To the contrary, in some cases, differences in translation declare completely opposite thoughts, even concerning subjects of the greatest consequence.

If we would not blindly follow others, our only recourse, then, is to the authority of the Scriptures themselves, through a careful consideration of their own definitive usages of the words of inspiration. Such a pursuit entails, at minimum, at least some measure of intelligent, per-

sonal use of a concordance, one which provides access to all occurrences of those words of the Original concerning which the meaning is disputed. We will wish to investigate the various usages of these expressions, so that we might discover for ourselves those passages in which they are used in a truly definitive way.

(2) *Whom* does it concern? and (3) *When* does it apply? It does not follow from the fact that a certain revelation is “in the Bible,” is “in the New Testament,” or is included among “the very words of Christ,” that such a revelation therefore concerns ourselves. *This may or may not be the case.* Furthermore, some things that have a vital application, whether for Israel or the nations, are nonetheless only applicable within a certain era or under a certain administration. They are not necessarily in effect continually and interminably even for those to whom they do apply, much less with respect to all.

Such important questions as these must be intelligently and patiently considered; we must endeavor not to make rash judgments, decisions that are the fruit of our own imprudence and impatience, according to our ignorance and prejudice.

All Scripture is truth for today concerning the subject with which it deals and with respect to those who are concerned in it. All Scripture is *for* us in the sense that it is in some way beneficial to us, whether for teaching, exposure, or correction; and it is all given to us with a view toward our instruction in righteousness (2 Tim.3:16), so that we might know what is true. This is all unto the end that the man of God might truly be “equipped, fitted out for every good act” (2 Tim.3:17).

Yet if we should truly wish to engage in *faithful* acts, we must come to “know that which concerns [ourselves]” (Col.4:8), and to distinguish it from what does not concern us, insofar as any certain act of human obedience,

divine blessing, curse, promise, warning, or other teaching is concerned. It is by no means ideal for us to take to ourselves those things in the Bible which do not belong to us. Such practices are mere religious thievery, no matter how hallowed by antiquity. The apostle Paul refers to those who, however sincerely, were taking up with those many things which are concerned only with the flesh and with the nation of Israel, as “curs,” as “evil workers,” and entreats the Philippians to “beware” of them (*cf* Phil.3:2-9).

It is true that we must not contrive artificial distinctions, imagining differences that simply do not exist. Yet it is just as true that we must not fail to note and heed all genuine distinctions, no matter how many of our own traditions may have to be set aside as a result.

Misplaced truth becomes insidious error, for it seems to have scriptural support. As little as it may be heeded, at least the principle of proper application seems to be acknowledged among virtually all believers. For example, hardly any seek to apply *all* the laws of Moses to themselves, or even *all* the imperatives of the Lord Jesus, which He declared within the compass of His personal ministry to Israel. We have yet to hear of any today who wish to make either male circumcision or animal sacrifices compulsory for salvation, however much they may differ among themselves or seek to press other “requirements” into service unto this same end.

Therefore, nearly all, even if tacitly, at least assent to the principle of “correctly *cutting* the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15), insofar as this entreaty has in view the fact that while all Scripture is for us, it is not all *to* us; it is not all applicable to believers today, to those who are the members of the body of Christ.

It must be recognized as well that even where the word “all” or any other “universal” expression is used (e.g., “each,” “any,” or “every”), the reference is always to *all*—to “each”

and “every” one—of *those who are in view* within the scope of the subject matter of the text in question. In some instances, the reference is to all believers (or, as the case may be, to all saints, humans, or even creatures) without distinction—apart from any limitations—whether of era or administration. In other cases, either the actual *context* of a passage or the nature of the case *limits* the application of such “universal” terms. It limits them solely to all those of a certain group or class, to those living at a certain time or under a certain administration or economy. It is essential to recognize as well the mere *close proximity* of a certain phrase to an actual *context* which is in question, when such a phrase is actually a part of a *different* context (albeit a contiguous one) from the one which is being considered or is primarily in view.

(4) In *what sense* is it true? Even if we have succeeded in discerning what has been said, whom it concerns and when it applies, we are not ready to come to a conclusion until we resolve the vital question which remains, *In what sense* is this passage true? That is, is it to be understood literally or figuratively; and, absolutely or relatively?

All literature is comprised *primarily* of literal expressions, even if many figurative expressions should also be employed. Indeed, without an understanding of the literal it is impossible to discern the message of the figurative, for literal meaning is the basis of figurative application.

Therefore, the adage “whenever possible, literal” is essentially sound advice. We would prefer to refine this slightly, however, and say, “Whenever *viable*—all things considered—literal.” Taking this approach will not close the door to the recognition of true figurative passages or otherwise diminish our insight to discern that which is *spiritual* (which is an entirely different matter from that which is *figurative*). To the contrary, it will form a sound basis for our study of literary figures and will tend toward

awakening us to their presence. Though there are many figures of speech, by far the most common ones, metaphor and metonymy, are concerned, respectively, with either likeness to or association with the literal. Of course, when considering literal meaning, we must not confound essential *meaning* with derived *usage*. Similarly, we must note the difference between the many lexical *definitions* of a word’s usage, and the vital, definitive *essence* of the word itself, which distinguishes it from other expressions.

When judging between the literal and figurative, if, because it would entail absurdity or contradiction to take a phrase literally we are constrained to deem it figurative, we must still ask ourselves, Of what does the figure consist and what is the literal *idea* behind the figure, which it merely serves to convey?

Yet wherever there is no compelling reason to take a statement figuratively and we therefore judge it to be literal, we must still decide whether this literal statement is *absolute* or *relative*. If we should judge it to be truly absolute, we must regard it as universally so, without limitation of any kind. If we should regard it as relative (as most statements are, even if they should be practically absolute), we must decide the *scope* of the subject matter to which this literal statement may be *applied*.

All these matters are concerned with wise and astute judgment. They are matters of “interpretation,” which is merely to say they are matters concerning which we must make correct decisions. Though it is not *literally* true that “the Scriptures interpret themselves,” nonetheless, the spirit of this aphorism is certainly true, as expressed through this metonymical figure! The literal idea intended is that if we would truly *understand* (i.e., make out the meaning of) a certain text, we must make many correct decisions concerning it *as we are guided by the many related scrip-*

tural matters with which it is associated or otherwise connected or dependent.

ISSUES VITAL TO 1 CORINTHIANS 15:22

By way of example concerning the *necessity* of interpretation of sense in order to gain a correct understanding of what is revealed, let us consider 1 Corinthians 15:22: “For even as, in Adam, all are dying, thus also, in Christ, shall all be vivified.”² At least the following eight questions must be answered—and answered correctly—in order to avoid misunderstanding what is indeed truly declared therein:

(1) What is the force of the word “For” and to what does it refer?

(2) What is it for something to be so in an “even as-thus also” way, and how is that way properly applied to this case at hand?

(3) What is it for a phrase to be set in “parallel” to another, and are the phrases herein “in Adam” and “in Christ” thus juxtaposed?

(4) In these same phrases, “in Adam,” and “in Christ,” the word “in” is prominently employed. Since the word “in” is sometimes used locatively, and in other cases is used instrumentally, we must first ask: (a) What is meant by each of the two respective terms, “the locative usage of ‘in,’” and “the instrumental usage of ‘in’”? and then (b) How can we determine which usage is employed here?

(5) How can we determine whether the same usage occurs in both phrases, or if a different usage is employed in each case, and, in that event, which usage is the one employed in each respective case?

2. Our findings on these questions concerning 1 Corinthians 15:22, are set forth in detail in the article, “Crucial Questions About Resurrection”: *Unsearchable Riches*, vol.85, pp.163-177; and, www.concordant.org/expohtml/HumanDestiny/1cor15.html .

(6) What is the scope of the “all” that, in Adam, are dying, as well as of the “all” that, in Christ, shall be vivified?

(7) What is the difference in meaning between the Scriptural declaration “in Adam, all are dying . . . [and] . . . in Christ, shall all be vivified” and the common misreading of this verse: “all in Adam are dying . . . [and] all in Christ shall be vivified”?

(8) What is the essential meaning of “vivify” (i.e., of the Greek word, *ζῶοποιεῖν*, LIVE-DO), and what is the sense in which it is used here in 1 Corinthians 15:22?

It is true that suitable aptitude and temperament and adequate skills in language and logic, together with sufficient interest, inclination, and available time, are requisite to ongoing research in the resolution of such questions.

However, what are any of these but the gift of God? After all, since “a man can not get *anything* if it should not be given him out of heaven” (John 3:27), a man certainly cannot possess any such needful skills and disposition except on this same basis.

One should by no means despair, however, if he or she does not personally possess such wherewithal for original investigation. Instead, one should rather, then, pray for the wisdom to *recognize* helpful teaching when one encounters it, together with a heart disposition to *learn* from anyone providing any such useful service (*cf* Eph.4:11-14).

May our God and Father grant us grace not only to believe His Word, but to make wise judgments concerning its proper sense as well, according as He grants us enlightenment.

Accordingly, then, may our hearts be consoled, being united in love, in our quest for “all the riches of *the assurance of understanding*, unto a realization of the secret of the God and Father, of Christ, in Whom *all* the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are *concealed*” (Col.2:2,3).