



"From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth, from the laziness that is content with half truths, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, O, God of Truth, deliver us."

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Command, Example, or Necessary Inference:

The Hermeneutic of Jesus?

--By Terry Carter

I recently read a booklet that argued that the hermeneutic (method of Scriptural interpretation) Jesus and the Apostles used was that of command, example, or necessary inference. What is meant by this is that unless we have been specifically commanded by Scripture to do something, have a specific example of Jesus or the early Church doing that, or it is necessarily implied by the Scripture that we must do it, we are forbidden to do it. This is an approach to Scripture that has been around for some time now. The work I read argues that it is the correct method since it is the one used by Jesus and the Apostles.

First of all, I need to say that it can be very valuable to ask whether there is a command, example, or necessary inference for a particular practice. If the answer is yes, it is definitely an allowable practice. But what if the answer is no? Does that mean that the practice is wrong or even sinful? The author I read believes so and claims that Jesus and the Apostles believed so too. It is that claim in particular that I would like to challenge here.

Without question, we must obey direct commands of the Scripture. Certainly Jesus and the Apostles believed this as well. Not to do so would be disobedience and rebellion by the very definition of the terms. Finding examples where Jesus and the Apostles obeyed express commands of Scripture is pretty easy.

I would also agree that we are to learn what God requires from us by means of example, as well. Paul says as much in **I Corinthians 10:6,11**. "6 Now these things **became our examples**, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted....11 Now all these things happened to them **as examples**, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come." Again it is easy to find passages where Jesus and the Apostles referred people to examples from Scripture to indicate how they ought to behave.

With examples, some questions do begin to arise, however. For example, (pardon the pun, I just couldn't help myself), Jesus' baptism is surely an example for us

to follow. But what specifics of this example are we bound to follow? Must we be baptized in a river? Must it be the Jordan? Must John do the baptizing? Of course, these questions are answered rather easily. A little thought and study of other Scripture makes them obvious.

But the questions can be more difficult to address. How are we to understand the example Jesus gave us in washing the disciples' feet? Is it the specific act of washing feet that we are to emulate, or the more general act of serving one another? This question takes a bit more work to answer than the ones above. However, it is still not too difficult. Nevertheless, very tough questions can and do arise when making application of examples.

The situation gets even trickier when we come to necessary inferences. The problem is that it is difficult to agree on what implications are and are not necessary. The sad reality is that debates of this sort have led to many divisions in the brotherhood. Are songbooks necessarily implied? What about Sunday school? What about buildings, pews, instruments, Bible colleges, orphanages, homes for widows, missionary societies, etc.? The list goes on and on.

Both Alexander and Thomas Campbell recognized the problem with binding "necessary inferences" on others. I quote these men not for authority, but to demonstrate the reasoned conclusion of learned men.

"We only pretend to assert what everyone that pretends to reason must acknowledge, namely, that there is a manifest distinction between an express scripture declaration, and the conclusion or inference which may be induced from it." [Thomas Campbell in the Declaration and Address]

"The inferences drawn by the human understanding partake of all the defects of that understanding...These conclusions, then, are always private property and can never be placed upon a level with the inspired word of God. Subscription to them, or acknowledgement of them can never be rationally required as a bond of union." [Alexander Campbell in the Christian Baptist]

This is not to say that there can never be agreement about what is a necessary inference in a passage of Scripture. It is simply to say that we must be careful about reading our opinions into the Scripture and then binding that on others as a test of fellowship.

Depending on exactly how you define a necessary inference, I believe it is fair to say that Jesus and the apostles used them to make a point at times. Usually we are talking about the obvious logical conclusion from a statement of Scripture. Certainly God expects us to reason from the Scriptures. Paul certainly did as we are repeatedly told in Acts.

The real issue is not recognizing that we must obey what God has instructed us through command, example or necessary inference. The issue is whether something is forbidden if there is not a specific command, example, or necessary inference for it in Scripture.

The answer to this rightly depends upon whether Jesus and the apostles lived according to this rule. A look at the Gospels will make it clear that they did not. In fact, we have examples, (sorry about the pun again), of Jesus and the apostles doing things for which there is no command example or necessary inference. Following are three examples of Jesus Himself acting or defending another who acted without a command, example, or necessary inference.

1 - THE FEAST OF DEDICATION

In **John 10:22-23**, we read about Jesus attending the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem. This seems rather strange for someone who allegedly did nothing for which there is no command, example or necessary inference. You will look in vain to find any reference at all to this feast in the Old Testament. It is not there because it was not instituted until long after the Old Testament was completed. In fact it was instituted by Judas Maccabaeus in 164 B.C. to commemorate the purification of the temple after it was defiled by Antiochus Epiphanes.

Some argue that Jesus used this opportunity to teach but didn't actually observe it Himself. That may or may not be true. But in either case, the observance of this "unauthorized" feast did not keep Jesus away from the temple. Furthermore, we have no record that Jesus condemned the feast. I say, let's follow His example in this.

2 – SYNAGOGUES

All through the Gospels and book of Acts we find Jesus and the apostles attending services at the synagogues. But they had no command, example or necessary inference to "authorize" such worship. The Old Testament is completely silent about synagogues. It is not known exactly when they began, who started them, or why. But it was definitely something added by man.

In fact, you could argue that synagogues were in violation of God's command to worship Him in the place where He put His name.

"5 "But **you shall seek the place where the Lord your God chooses**, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place; and **there you shall go**...11 "then

there will be the place where the Lord your God chooses to make His name abide. There you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, and all your choice offerings which you vow to the Lord." **Deuteronomy 12:5,11**

Evidently, this didn't prohibit the synagogues since they never sacrificed there and it was allowable to teach anywhere. Still there was no command, example, or necessary inference for synagogues. Nevertheless Jesus and the apostles didn't seem to be troubled by that. They went to them, worshiped and taught there.

We see Jesus and the apostles in the synagogues constantly. They often challenged the teaching and practices of those who were there. However, they never challenged the legitimacy of the synagogues' existence. You may argue that Jesus didn't actually observe the Feast of Dedication, but He clearly worshiped in the synagogue. He taught and preached there. Paul did the same in Acts. No, it doesn't seem that they believed something was prohibited without a command, example or necessary inference.

3 – THE WOMAN POURING OIL ON JESUS' HEAD

In **Matthew 26:6-13**, we see a woman pouring oil on Jesus' head. She did this despite the fact that there was no command, example or necessary inference to do such a thing. The disciples were upset about it and called it a waste. The oil was very expensive and they said it should have been sold and the money given to the poor. But not one of them said it was wrong because there was no command, example or necessary inference for it. If that was the hermeneutic they were using and Jesus had taught them, you'd think this would be a good time to invoke it.

What is even more instructive is how Jesus responds to their criticism of this woman. He does more than just defend her, He praises her highly. He says she did a good work for Him. In fact, He says what she did will be told as a memorial to her wherever the Gospel is preached in the whole world.

"10 But when Jesus was aware of [it], He said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For **she has done a good work for Me**. 11 "For you have the poor with you always, but Me you do not have always. 12 "For in pouring this fragrant oil on My body, she did [it] for My burial. 13 "Assuredly, I say to you, **wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her.**" **Matthew 26:10-13**

The irony is that by doing something for which she had no command, example, or necessary inference, she has become an example to us all. The question is whether

those who hold to this hermeneutic will follow her example and do a good work for Jesus.

If Jesus held the idea that something is prohibited without a command, example, or necessary inference, He surely would have condemned this act rather than praising it. If the disciples followed such a hermeneutic, one of them would have made that part of their complaint. Yet this is not at all what we see in the passage.

Clearly this is not the hermeneutic of Jesus or the apostles. I wonder what acts are being forbidden today which Christ would call good work for Him. What favor and praise of God are we forfeiting by adopting a hermeneutic that Jesus and the apostles never held?

What this means is that if we are going to follow the example of Jesus and the apostles, we must do things for which there is no command, example, or necessary inference. In other words, the claim that something is forbidden if there is not a command, example or necessary inference, is self defeating and therefore not valid.

It should be noted here that this was not the hermeneutic of King David either. He desired to build a temple for God for which he had no command, example or necessary inference. In fact, God says as much, but still praises him for his desire to build it. God didn't allow him to build it, but he laid the plans and supplies for his son Solomon to build it with God's blessing.

"15 And he said: "Blessed [be] the Lord God of Israel, who spoke with His mouth to my father David, and with His hand has fulfilled [it], saying, 16 'Since the day that I brought My people Israel out of Egypt, **I have chosen no city from any tribe of Israel [in] [which] to build a house, that My name might be there;** but I chose David to be over My people Israel.' 17 "Now it was in the heart of my father David to build a temple for the name of the Lord God of Israel. 18 **"But the Lord said to my father David, 'Whereas it was in your heart to build a temple for My name, you did well that it was in your heart.** 19 'Nevertheless you shall not build the temple, but your son who will come from your body, he shall build the temple for My name.' 20 "So the Lord has fulfilled His word which He spoke; and I have filled the position of my father David, and sit on the throne of Israel, as the Lord promised; and I have built a temple for the name of the Lord God of Israel. 21 "And there I have made a place for the ark, in which [is] the covenant of the Lord which He made with our fathers, when He brought them out of the land of Egypt.'" **I Kings 8:15-21**

So without any command, example, or necessary inference, David decided to build a temple in Jerusalem. How does God respond? He doesn't condemn him for disobedience. Instead, He says David did well in desiring to do this. This is true despite the fact that the tabernacle, which was specifically commanded and designed by God, was still in use.

Saying that a command, example, or necessary inference is binding is certainly not logically equivalent to saying that a lack of these prohibits our action. That would be the inverse of the original statement. Any high school logic student can tell you that these are not logically equivalent.

Certainly Jesus and the apostles viewed commands, examples, and necessary inferences as binding on us. However, they clearly did not see the lack of them as prohibiting us. It is misleading at best to claim that their hermeneutic was that of command, example, or necessary inference.

Some may object that my position allows for us to substitute for what God has specified. I don't believe this is true. To substitute one thing for what God has specifically commanded is disobedience to the command. For instance, to substitute sprinkling for immersion disobeys the plain command to baptize, which means to immerse.

This is also true regarding examples. To save baptisms up for a special occasion rather than baptizing immediately as they did in the New Testament is disobedience to the plain example of Scripture. So substituting our own practices where there is a command or example is disobedience by definition.

As I considered substitutes with regard to necessary inference, I discovered something interesting. Every practice I could think of that is defended as a necessary inference, has substitutions which most everybody considers acceptable.

For example, Church buildings and songbooks are usually defended by saying that we have necessary inferences for them. We must have a place to meet and we must have a way for all to sing together. Yet most agree that we can meet other places besides a church building, a home for example. Most agree that we can project the words onto a screen rather than using songbooks. Every substitution I thought of that is clearly sinful was a violation of either a command or example, not a necessary inference. If you, the reader, can come up with one, I'd love to hear it.

What this means is that church buildings and songbooks are not **necessary** inferences. What is **necessary** is a place to meet and a way to sing the same words together. The **specific** means of accomplishing these tasks is a matter of choice or liberty. You cannot argue that church buildings or songbooks are necessary, just helpful. They aid us in obeying what we are bound to by command or example. It is necessary that we use something, but what we use is not specified. We have liberty to act as good stewards and use what is most effective in obeying God.

Therefore, virtually all agree that where there is silence, there is liberty. They may not accept this in principle, but they do in practice. This goes to the heart of the

discussion at hand. While many claim to believe that without a command, example, or necessary inference, we are prohibited from acting, they practice liberty where the Scriptures are silent. They recognize that where there are necessary inferences, the specifics of accomplishing them are a matter of liberty.

No, this was not the hermeneutic of Jesus and the apostles.

What is more, in practice it is not the hermeneutic of anyone even today. All who claim it as their hermeneutic are inconsistent. They practice liberty where there is no command, example, or necessary inference, while saying that there is no liberty in such matters.