

Is It From Heaven Or From Men?

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Matt. 21:23-27

While teaching in the temple, Jesus was confronted by the chief priests and elders. They questioned His authority to teach.

Matt. 21:23, *“And when he was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching, and said, By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?”*

Jesus saw through their hypocrisy, and challenged them regarding the authority behind the baptism of John.

Matt. 21:24-25, *“And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? ...”*

Since they would not be honest in their answer, Jesus refused to answer their question.

Matt. 21:25-27, *“... And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him? But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet. And they answered Jesus, and said, We cannot tell. And he said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.”*

In the process of exposing their hypocrisy, Jesus revealed an important principle regarding authority in matters of religion. All religious practices must come from one of two sources: They come either from heaven, or from men.

Matt. 23:25, *“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess.”*

What Jesus asked regarding John’s baptism, could be asked of many religious practices.

- Infant baptism.
- Sprinkling or pouring instead of immersion.
- Denominationalism, a clergy-laity distinction.
- The impossibility of apostasy, observing the Sabbath.
- Instrumental music, burning of incense, etc., in our worship.

Are such practices from heaven, or from men?

In this study, we shall consider how one can know whether a particular religious practice is from heaven, or from man.

To be from heaven

It must come from Jesus.

For He has been given all authority. Matt. 28:18, *“And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.”* Both in heaven and on earth. Certainly if Jesus commanded it, it is from heaven!

It must come through His apostles.

For Jesus delegated His authority to His apostles. John 13:20, *“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that receiveth whomsoever I send receiveth me; and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me.”*

They serve as His official ambassadors. 2 Cor. 5:20, *“Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.”*

To ensure their reliability, Jesus promised the Spirit to remind them of what He taught, and to guide them into all the truth.

- John 14:26, *“But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.”*
- John 16:12-13, *“I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.”*

This is why the church continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine.

- Acts 2:42, *“And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”*
- 1 Cor. 14:37, *“If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.”*

- 1 Thess. 2:13, *“For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.”*

If the apostles of Christ taught it, it is from heaven!

It must come only from the apostles.

The apostles were given, and proclaimed, the whole counsel of God. Acts 20:27, *“For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.”*

They were given all things that pertain to life and godliness. 2 Pet. 1:3, *“According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue.”*

The faith revealed through them was delivered one time for all times. Jude 1:3, *“Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.”*

There is no need for modern day revelations, for in the scriptures we have all that is needed to be complete. 2 Tim. 3:16-17, *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.”*

If a religious practice can be found to be taught by Jesus or His apostles, then it is truly from heaven! Religious practices that are from men, however, might come from a variety of sources.

It is from man...

If based solely upon what the majority thinks.

Many people will accept whatever most people think about something. Yet Jesus warned against following the majority.

Matt. 7:13-14, *“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.”*

If you had followed the majority...

- In Noah's day, you would have perished in the flood.
- In Joshua's day, you would have perished in the wilderness.

What the majority believes or does is not likely to be from heaven, but from men!

If based solely upon what our parents taught us.

Some believe "If it was good enough for Mom and Dad, it is good enough for me." As much as we may love and respect our parents, Christ must come first. Matt. 10:37, *"He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."*

If every generation had simply followed their parents, then we who are Gentiles would likely still be idol-worshippers and polytheistic!

Let us honor our parents, not by following them blindly, but by applying principles they themselves likely taught us, such as seek to do the right thing, obey God, etc.

If based solely upon what preachers tell us.

It is common for people to place their trust in their "preacher", "priest", or "pastor".

Their reason that surely these "men of God" could not be wrong or lead them astray. Yet Paul warned of how we can easily be misled.

2 Cor. 11:13-15, *"For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works."*

And Jesus warned about the "blind leading the blind".

Matt. 15:12-14, *"Then came his disciples, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, after they heard this saying? But he answered and said, Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up. Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch."*

Our attitude needs to be like that of the Bereans, who carefully examined Paul's teachings in light of the Scriptures.

Acts 17:11, *"These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so."*

What a preacher teaches is only as good as the authority behind it; unless we wish to be led astray, we have the responsibility to ask “Is it from God, or men?”

If based solely upon creeds and traditions of men.

This is where the denominations really get most of their authority.

Example: For such things as infant baptism, pouring or sprinkling instead of immersion, denominationalism, once saved always saved.

Indeed, adherence to the creeds of men is what produces denominations.

Accept the Bible only, and you become a Christian only.

Accept some man-made creed or tradition, and you become something else!

- Accept the Book of Mormon, and you become a Mormon.
- Accept papal authority, and you become a Roman Catholic.
- Accept the Lutheran Catechism, and you become a Lutheran.

Creeds are really not even necessary.

- If they say more than what the Bible says, they say too much.
- If they say less than what the Bible says, they say too little.
- If they say exactly what the Bible says, then why not let the Bible be our creed book?

The fact is creeds are filled with the traditions and commands of men, many of which conflict with and displace the commands of God!

Mark 7:6-9, *“He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition.”*

If based solely upon what your conscience tells you.

“Let your conscience be your guide” is the motto of many. But our conscience cannot always be reliable. Paul had served God with a good conscience throughout his life.

Acts 23:1, “*And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.*”

Even at a time when he was persecuting Christians!

Acts 26:9-11, “*I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities.*”

Our conscience is like a clock, which works properly if set correctly. Once our conscience has been “set” by the “*apostles’ doctrine*” then it can be a good guide.

Unless what your conscience is telling you can be confirmed by the Word of God, then what you believe is from man, not God!

If based solely upon what is human wisdom.

Many believe that through their own wisdom they can determine right and wrong. If it makes sense to them, they reason it must be true. If it doesn’t make sense, they won’t accept it.

But God’s thoughts and ways are not always our own. Isa. 55:8-9, “*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.*”

In fact, God has chosen to save man in a manner specifically designed to confound those who depend solely upon human wisdom.

1 Cor. 1:18-29, “*For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than*

men. For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.”

For us to know God’s will, it was necessary for Him to reveal it to us.

1 Cor. 2:9-12, “*But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.*”

This He has done through His Spirit-inspired apostles. who in turn shared it with us through their writings.

Eph. 3:1-5, “*For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles, If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words, Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit;*”

Appeal to human reason to justify a certain practice, and it will likely be from man, not God!

If based solely upon feelings.

This is often the “standard of authority” for many people, who go by whatever “feels right”, who place stock in a religion “better felt than told”.

Yet the Bible declares the danger of trusting in “feelings”.

- Prov. 14:12, “*There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.*”
- Prov. 28:26, “*He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool: but whoso walketh wisely, he shall be delivered.*”

- Jer. 10:23, “*O LORD, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.*”

It should be evident that any religious practice or doctrine based upon “feelings” alone is from man, not God!

If based solely upon the Old Testament.

People will sometimes resort to the Old Testament to provide authority for some practice, when they can't find authority for it in the teachings of Christ and/or His apostles.

For example, a clergy-laity system, burning of incense and use of instrumental music in worship, keeping the Sabbath, etc.

But the Old Testament was designed to be temporary, to fulfill a specific purpose and as a covenant has been replaced by the New Covenant (i.e., the New Testament).

It was given because of transgressions, till Christ should come. Gal. 3:19, “*Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator.*”

For those under the Law (Israel), it was a tutor. A tutor designed to lead them to Christ. Gal. 3:24, “*Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.*”

The tutor that has been taken away. Gal. 3:25, “*But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.*”

When those who were under the Law came to Christ, they became dead to the Law. Rom. 7:4, “*Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God.*”

They were delivered from the Law. Rom. 7:6, “*But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter.*”

As prophesied by Jeremiah, God has made a “*new covenant*” to replace the “*first covenant*” which is now obsolete.

Heb. 8:7-13, “*For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second. For finding fault with them, he saith, Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of*

Egypt; because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people: And they shall not teach every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more. In that he saith, A new covenant, he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away.”

In handling the issue of circumcision, the apostles demonstrated that one cannot use the Old Testament to teach something which they did not command.

Some sought to enforce circumcision and the Law upon Gentile believers.

- Acts 15:1, *“And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.”*
- Acts 15:6, *“And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.”*

But the apostles, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, were able to defuse the problem by simply stating they themselves *“gave no such commandment”*

Acts 15:22-29, “Then pleased it the apostles and elders with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas and Silas, chief men among the brethren: And they wrote letters by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia. Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment: It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well.”

This is not to say the Old Testament is not of value to Christians. It was written for our learning, to provide patience, comfort, and hope. Rom. 15:4, *“For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.”*

It was written for our admonition, that we not make similar mistakes.

- 1 Cor. 10:6, *“Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted.”*
- 1 Cor. 10:11, *“Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.”*

We just can't use it to enjoin religious practices upon others which the apostles' themselves did not teach!

Conclusion

Do we want to avoid being led astray?

By “blind leaders of the blind”?

Matt. 15:14, *“Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.”*

By “false teachers”?

2 Pet. 2:1, *“But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.”*

Then we need to know how to ascertain whether a religious doctrine or practice...

- Is from God or from men.
- Is based upon what the apostles of Christ taught, or some other “authority”.

The solution is simple, but requires effort on our part...

We must continue: Acts 2:42, *“... stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”*

We must search: Acts 17:11, *“... the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.”*

Only then can we be sure that what we believe or someone teaches is truly from God, and not from man!

