

Following the Bible

by Sewell Hall

Our claim to a unique position in the religious world is our determination to follow the Bible. But when this claim is made, the usual response is "All churches follow the Bible." This raises an obvious question: "If all churches follow the Bible, why the variety of doctrines and practices?"

Unacceptable Explanations

Some say the Bible cannot be understood sufficiently well to allow for unity. This questions God's wisdom, for God intended for us to understand. "Be ye not foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (Eph. 5:17). Was God incapable of providing a book that men could understand?

Others insist that the Bible actually teaches many different things. Denominationalists have been claiming this for years. More recently, we even heard a preacher among churches of Christ say that the Bible can be used to justify different kinds of church government. Sometimes it is said, "You can prove anything by the Bible." This questions God's integrity. It is insulting to say of a man: "You can prove anything by him." How much worse to say this of a book given to us by God! It contains one consistent message and to make it support contradictory positions requires an abuse of its message.

The Real Problem

The problem is not with the Bible, nor with its source. The problem is the varying approaches to following the Bible. Some believe in a careful adherence to what the Bible says. Others believe in a rather casual following "not of the letter, but of the Spirit," as they put it, adopting the words but not the sense of 2 Corinthians 3:6. Stated another way, some construe the Scriptures strictly, believing that we must do in religion only what the Scriptures authorize. Others construe the Scriptures loosely, believing that we may practice anything not plainly forbidden.

These two views formed a clear issue between the two great reformers of Germany and Switzerland, Luther and Zwingli. A History of the Christian Church, Lars Qualben explains: "One of the great differences between Zwingli and Luther was: Luther used the Bible as corrective, retaining those rites and ceremonies of the Medieval church which were not positively anti-scriptural. Hence he retained images, altars, ornaments of the churches, organs, church bells, and the like. Zwingli used the Bible as a code of laws, rejecting everything not expressly enjoined in the Scriptures" (p. 255).

Following Recipes and Directions

If a teacher gives a student a recipe for making a cake, what does she expect? If the girl adds ingredients not found in the recipe, will the teacher credit her with following the recipe? Obviously, the student was following the recipe as long as she was using what the recipe required. But when she added other ingredients, she ceased following the recipe and began following her own way.

If a person is given directions for finding a location, what is involved in following those directions? As long as he is making the turns authorized, he is following directions. But when he begins making turns not called for, he has ceased following directions.

Are people actually following the Bible as they follow recipes or directions? The majority of ingredients in modern religion are nowhere authorized in Scripture. They are the products of human wisdom. And it is these additional ingredients, these unauthorized changes of directions that account for the differences that exist in religion.