



Faith Pulpit

The Christian and Church History

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 complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

As I study church history, 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17 is a comforting passage. When one studies the discipline of church history, many unsettling episodes present themselves. We often wonder how people could make the decisions they did, and even more, how they justified those decisions with the authorities they used.

We as Bible-believers have the benefit of going back to the divine source—the Word of God—as our authority. Whether we realize it or not, we are affected in the way we think by the events of the past. And it is true that no person or group can be completely isolated and not use their own personal understandings to interpret the Bible. Further, try as we might, we often struggle to understand the context of the Old Testament and even first-century Christianity.

Nonetheless, God inspired a Bible that allows us (or any Christian group) to go back to the original source to renew our minds with His principles of living a Christian life, practicing a Christian walk, and administering a Christian church. We can go back to our source to make corrections in our understandings and actions that perhaps have been more influenced by our history than by His Word.

Going back to one of the examples of the previous article, it is true that the Old Testament kings can teach lessons to us today. I love preaching from the Old Testament historical books. Nevertheless, to project their situation as monarchs of the national people of Israel and Judah directly onto a multinational New Testament entity called the church is bad interpretation. History shows such an approach is also dangerous to the cause of Christ.

We must carefully evaluate the decisions we make, and especially the decisions of others whom we are called upon to follow. Perhaps the RAMHI model suggested in the first article can help us better analyze and evaluate the motivations and authorities people use in the “Christian” world to call us to action. Perhaps we can even use it to reveal the authorities we follow in the personal decisions we make.

We encounter many competing philosophies of ministry (reasons for conducting ministry in a certain way). We can use the RAMHI model to analyze, evaluate, and assess the value of what we read, hear, and see. This model can help us weigh the value of current trends and passing fads. Those who advocate various philosophies of ministry are often very clear in their perspectives, values, and assumptions. Their philosophies can be unabashed pragmatism (whatever produces results), postmodernism, or business-style models of running their churches. Not all of these philosophies may be especially right- or wrong-headed. However, examining the authorities a person, movement, or organization uses to justify change or inactivity is worthwhile and goes a long way to determine its value.

I recently had a conversation with a person who has been in ministry for some twenty years who brought an authority situation to my attention. This person remarked that people going through a certain circumstance of life may suffer from self-esteem issues, a viewpoint widely advocated in evangelical publishing.¹ Many Christians assume a person’s low self-esteem is a genuine spiritual problem, a devastating condition that merits professional attention.

Let us apply the RAMHI model. First, who is in charge? In this case, we hear this philosophy from some influential Christian psychologists and counselors who often have advanced psychology degrees and a great amount of counseling experience. They have been strongly influenced, wittingly or unwittingly, by the humanistic perspectives of psychology developed in the 1960’s. Second, what do they want to change or keep the same? Since this belief was not heard much until a generation or two ago in Christian circles, it seems an innovation.

Third, what authorities do advocates of this view use to justify their actions or ideas? It may be true that I (perhaps you as well) have not studied the backgrounds of every major philosophy, but I have studied the Bible. And the Bible does not contain exhortations for believers to love themselves more (despite the best efforts of some to find such passages). Nor does the Bible say that spiritual difficulties are a result of our not thinking of ourselves highly enough or of having unmet psychological needs (2 Pet. 1:3, 4). Rather, it seems clear the opposite is true. We are challenged to live lives of sacrifice to God, not esteeming ourselves (Rom. 12:1–3) but being others-focused (Rom.12:10, 13, 16, 18). We are to love God and then others (Rom.5:1–5; 13:8, 9), not selfishly love ourselves (Rom.15:1, 2; Phil.2.1–4; 1 John 4:7–11, 20).²

Fourth, why are these authorities convincing to those who follow and advocate it? Some people adopt this philosophy because it appeals to our flesh and the self-centered orientation the world encourages us to cultivate. Some people desire to help others, but without a solid foundation in the Scriptures they have been influenced by those who advocate these ideas. Notably the educational, counseling, and publishing accomplishments, as well as the fame of those who promote this viewpoint, are convincing to many.

In addition, some who adopt this philosophy have sought counseling from Christian friends and pastors but found it to be lacking. Others simply have rejected wise, compassionate Biblical counsel. This philosophy of life, while not Biblically correct, seems to resonate more clearly with them and offers hope that seems to be absent elsewhere.

Baptists declare that their sole authority for faith and practice is the Bible. We should realize that often we can discover other authorities than the Bible to justify our actions and positions. We need to ask if they are legitimate. The history of Christianity can be a help to us in finding examples of the results of foolish authorities we would all do well to avoid. The model suggested above will also help us discern the value of ministries, movements, and philosophies we see in ministry every day.

Works Cited

1. For the following information and editing help throughout this section, I am indebted to the expertise of Dr. Jeff Newman, professor of Biblical Counseling at Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary. Several examples of this perspective include Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *God Will Make a Way: What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do* (Brentwood, TN: Integrity Publishers, 2003); Gary Chapman, *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 1992); and Willard F. Harley, *His Needs, Her Needs: Building an Affair-Proof Marriage*, revised and expanded (Grand Rapids: Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 1986, 2011).
2. Dr. Newman recommends Ed Welsh's *When People Are Big and God Is Small* (Phillipsburg, NJ: R&R Publishing Company, 1997).

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