

Title: CENI – A Biblical Hermeneutic
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Jesus criticized the Pharisees and scribes for the human traditions which they elevated to the status of law (Matthew 15:1-9). In light of that criticism, it is important that we examine our own practices to “weed out” traditions which have no biblical basis and are treated as “law.” However, we must also be careful not to abandon scriptural teachings in our enthusiasm for house-cleaning.

There are some members of the church today who are challenging the teaching that God authorizes by means of command or precept, approved example and necessary inference (Command, Example, Necessary Inference – CENI). The CENI system of interpretation is merely a “Church of Christ tradition,” according to an increasing number of Christians.

Traditions develop as individuals do the same thing in the same way. Ideas become “traditions” as preachers repeat them without scriptural backing. If CENI is indeed merely tradition, then it should be rejected and we should not teach that this is the right way to interpret Scripture. On the other hand, the assertion that CENI is just tradition should not be given credence just because someone affirms it!

A study of Acts 15 illustrates that, when the early disciples needed to answer the question of the necessity of circumcision for Gentile Christians, CENI was used to determine the Lord’s will. First, Peter cited his experience at Cornelius’ house, concluding from the fact that the Gentiles there received the Holy Spirit that God “acknowledged them” and “made no distinction between” Jew and Gentile (15:7-9). God never explicitly stated that conclusion; Peter inferred it from the evidence that God provided in the giving of the Holy Spirit. It was, in fact, a necessary inference, meaning that no other conclusion could be drawn. Peter likewise necessarily inferred that God was not talking about unclean animals in his vision of Acts 10.

Next, Paul and Barnabas related to the brethren assembled in Jerusalem “how God had worked through them among the Gentiles” (vs. 12). As those who taught that Gentiles could be saved without circumcision, they represented the answer to the question by approved (by God) example. It could also be noted that the conclusion that their example was approved is by necessary inference. One must infer from the fact that God empowered them to perform miracles that their conduct was approved.

Finally, James quoted a statement from Amos which predicted that Gentiles would be “called by” the name of the Lord (15:16). Although not stated in the form of a command, the prophecy of Amos is the citation of a precept which also answered the question of circumcision.

CENI, far from being merely tradition, is exactly how God’s will was actually determined in the first century. The push to reject this method of scripture interpretation is motivated by the desire to allow more “freedom” in our practices. The need for divine authority in religion is too restrictive for many who want to gratify their own desires rather than glorify God!