

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #109: THE LAW OF EXCLUSION

By John Temples

I'm sure you would agree that there are several Bible passages that are hard to understand--not so much because they are difficult to decipher, but because they picture God as doing something that seems out of character with His holy and loving nature. One example is His requiring Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Another example is Leviticus 10:1-3:

“Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. *So fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.* Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘This is what the Lord spoke, saying, By those who come near me I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified.’ So Aaron held his peace.”

This is a passage unbelievers will throw in your face: “If your God is so good, why would He kill two young men who were sincerely trying to worship Him?” And it's not just unbelievers; many Christians have a hard time with it.

Why would God do such a thing? These young men were not stealing or carousing, they were worshipping. And they were not worshipping idols, they were paying homage to the true God. Moreover, they were the right persons to do it--they were sons of the High Priest, Aaron. They had just assisted their father in making the first animal sacrifices to God. Some time before, Nadab and Abihu had the privilege of climbing Mount Sinai with Moses and the elders of Israel and eating a covenant meal before God.

So what was their great sin, so great that it caused God to instantly take their lives? Verse 1 says they offered “profane” fire before the Lord. The King James Version says it was “strange” fire--not strange in the sense of weird, but strange in the sense of “from an improper source.” The New International Version hits the meaning exactly: “They offered unauthorized fire.”

From the previous chapter and other passages (Exodus 30:20, Leviticus 16:12), it is evident that God intended for the Israelites to use fire from the altar for their sacrifices. For whatever reason, Nadab and Abihu used fire from some other source, possibly a campfire. They probably thought, "Fire is fire; where you get it does not matter." Their sin, therefore, was a sin of *presumption*--taking it upon oneself to do something or make a change in a specified procedure without permission.

What is frightening is that the attitude of Nadab and Abihu is the attitude of most religious people today. As long as one is sincere, they say, one can freely disregard, modify, or add to God's instructions on how He is to be worshipped. In view of what God did in this case, we ought to study this subject carefully.

SO EXACTLY WHAT LAW DID NADAB AND ABIHU VIOLATE?

A typical modern might say, well, God did not say NOT to use fire from a source other than the altar. It's all right, they say, to do [fill in the blank] because God didn't forbid it. But it turns out they did violate a law: the Law of Exclusion. You say, I've never heard of that law, and I don't find that law anywhere in the Bible. Well, you won't find this law stated in so many words in Scripture, but you will find it in operation on almost every page. And it's a law you yourself use just about every day.

WHAT IS THE LAW OF EXCLUSION?

"Exclusion" means leaving something out. In the list 1, 2, 3, 5, the number 4 is excluded--it is left out. With regard to instructions or commands, the law of exclusion says this:

When you give a specific command, you automatically exclude anything contrary to the command or in addition to the command.

Another way of stating this law is, when you state what you WANT, it is understood that you are excluding everything you DON'T want. Or perhaps simplest of all, when you say what a thing IS, you don't have to say what it ISN'T.

You and I use this law constantly. It is what keeps a wife from telling her husband to go to the store and get some bread and having him come home with a truckload of his favorite foods. It's what, when you order a single item from Amazon, keeps them from sending you everything they have.

When it comes to religion and the Bible, this law operates exactly the same way. An article on the Gahanna-Jefferson Church of Christ website states it this way: *"The Law of Exclusion is a simple concept: When God specifically commands us to do something, every other possible action is automatically excluded."* (<https://gjcoc.us/the-law-of-exclusion/>)

If you go back to the text in Leviticus, you will see that this is indeed the law that Nadab and Abihu violated. Verse 1 says they "offered fire which [God] had NOT commanded them." It's not that the young men employed fire which God had forbidden them to use; rather, they used a source of fire other than the authorized one. When God specified the altar as the source of the fire to be used, that automatically excluded all other sources of fire. Here are some other Biblical situations in which we see the law of exclusion in operation:

MOSES STRIKING THE ROCK AT KADESH

The Israelites were camped at Kadesh and were complaining because there was no water. Numbers 20:7-8 reads, "Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Take the rod; you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water; thus you shall bring water for them out of the rock, and give drink to the congregation and their animals.'"

Notice that God specified that Moses was to speak to the rock. But when he was about to act, the contentious behavior of the crowd provoked him to do a rash thing: instead of speaking to the rock, he struck it with his rod. The record says, "And he said to them, 'Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?' Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly...." (Numbers

20:10-11). He was able to bring forth the water, but not in the way which God had said.

You might think this to be a relatively mild breach of protocol, but it cost Moses the Promised Land. Numbers 20:12--"Because you [Moses] did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them." Notice that God regarded Moses' not doing something in the way He had commanded as an act of unbelief and a failure to sanctify Him in view of the people.

There is a striking similarity in the actions of Moses and the actions of Nadab and Abihu. God told Moses, "You did not hallow me in the eyes of the people [hold Me up before the people as holy]" (Numbers 20:12). Leviticus 10:3 uses similar language, saying of Nadab and Abihu that they did not hold God forth as holy before the people--they showed contempt for God's commands.

What are we learning from this? That it is a serious matter to do something in a way other than the way God has specified, or to add something to what God commanded.

ANOTHER STRIKING EXAMPLE: CHRIST'S PRIESTHOOD

Hebrews 7 and 8 deal with the priesthood of Christ. He is called our High Priest in Hebrews 8:1. But in chapter 7, the writer points out that Christ is not a priest after the order of Aaron, the Old Testament high priest. In Hebrews 8:4, the dramatic statement is made that it would be *impossible* for Christ to be a priest if He remained on earth. Why? Because "...[It] is evident that our lord arose from Judah, *of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood.*"

Why couldn't a man from Judah be a priest? Is it because there is a passage that says, "No man of the tribe of Judah can be a priest"? No, there is no such passage. The Bible says Christ could not be a priest because Moses *spoke nothing* about a man from that tribe being a priest. By specifying Levi, he *excluded* Judah (and all the other tribes).

You know what a religious modernist would say about this? Here is how the conversation might go:

MODERNIST: "God, do you want your Son to be High Priest?"

GOD: "Yes, but for that to happen, I'm going to have to completely replace the Old Testament system, because My Son is of the tribe of Judah."

MODERNIST: "God, you don't have to go to all that trouble; after all, you didn't say a man from the tribe of Judah could NOT be a priest, did you?"

GOD: "No, but I said the priests would come from the tribe of Levi, and that automatically excludes every other tribe."

That, my friends, is the law of exclusion. When anyone--and that includes God--says what he wants, he does not have to list all other options and say "I don't want these."

TWO NEW TESTAMENT EXAMPLES AND ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE LAW OF EXCLUSION

Instruments of music in church worship. When you discuss this issue with your denominational friends, their usual response is, "Well, the Bible doesn't say NOT to use instruments." But what does it SAY to use? The human voice, the only "musical instrument" God ever made. "Sing and make melody in your heart to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:19). "Sing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Colossians 3:16). If you say, it's all right to use instruments in worship because God didn't specifically forbid them, you are using exactly the same reasoning as Nadab and Abihu, who no doubt thought, "God didn't say NOT to use fire from the campfire."

The timing of observance of the Lord's Supper. Acts 20:7 tells us that the early Christians observed the Supper on the first day of the week (every first day). The modernist: "Yes but it doesn't say NOT to have it monthly, or quarterly, or on a Thursday," etc. We ought to know the answer to this by now, should we not? When God specified the first day, He didn't have to say, "Not the second day, or the third, or...."

CONCLUSION

This is really simple and basic, and applies to a multitude of life situations, and also to our obedience to God's commands; but it is something the religious world by and large does not understand. It boils down to the question, are we going to respect God's commands, stay within their bounds, and obey them exactly as given? Or do we think, well, it's okay to do it differently (after all, I'm doing it sincerely)?

When Aaron, the father of Nadab and Abihu, saw what God had done in taking the life of his sons, he started to cry out (as any father would do). But Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord spoke, saying, 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy, and before all the people I will be glorified.'" So Aaron held his peace (remained silent and did not protest, Leviticus 10:3b). Aaron realized that his sons had acted presumptuously. He knew and respected the law of exclusion. Do we? --John Temples