

“By What Authority Do You Do These Things?”

When Jesus finished the Sermon on the Mount Scripture tells us that the people were amazed, “for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matthew 7:29, NKJV).

Joseph Henry Thayer in his *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* tells us that the word *exousia* (ἐξουσία), translated “authority” here, means “...the power of rule or government (the power of him whose will and commands must be submitted to by others and obeyed)...” (225). When Jesus taught He was giving commands that the people were to obey. This was different from the approach which the scribes and pharisees used.

This demonstration of authority was not always well received. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us of an occasion when the chief priests, scribes and elders asked Jesus “...**By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?**” (Matthew 21:23, cf. Mark 11:28 and Luke 20:2). On this occasion, because of the hardness of their hearts in rejecting John the Baptist, Jesus did not answer their question directly. However, on other occasions, He directly addressed this issue. John tells us in three passages how explicitly Jesus answered this matter. In John 7:16 Jesus said, “...**My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me.**” In John 12:49 He said, “**For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak.**” And finally, in John 14:24 He said, “...**the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father’s who sent Me.**” Jesus, declared with these words that He

Himself, God the Son, was acting under the authority of God the Father.

After Jesus' resurrection, the extent of Jesus' authority was broadened. As He gave His apostles the charge to teach all the nations, He began with the words, **"...All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth."** (Matthew 28:18). This tells us that God the Father gave to Jesus the right to command all the universe. As a result all of the universe is obligated to obey Jesus' teachings and to submit to His authority. This was promised in Deuteronomy 18:18-19, when God told Moses, **"I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him."**

When the apostles went out to preach they acknowledged divine authority, and held themselves under such authority. In the first sermon they preached, they taught the Jews on the day of Pentecost to, **"...Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ..."** (Acts 2:38). The apostle Paul taught the Christians in Colosse, **"And whatever you do in word or deed, [do] all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him"** (Colossians 3:17). To act *in the name* of Jesus is to act with and under the authority of Jesus. This meant that the apostles' message, like that of Jesus, was not their own but from the One who sent them. Paul praised the church in Thessalonica saying, **"...when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe"** (1 Thessalonians 2:13). The writings of the apostles held the same authority. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, **"If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord"** (1 Corinthians 14:37).

Just as God had promised to give authority to Jesus, Jesus promised to give authority to His apostles.

Jesus encouraged His disciples saying, “...when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you” (Matthew 10:19-20). If people rejected the message of the apostles, Jesus taught that it was the same as rejecting Him and rejecting God the Father. Luke tells us that Jesus told His apostles, “He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me” (Luke 10:16).

When we look to the Bible we have the written teachings of Jesus. Whether we look at the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ words while on the earth or the records of what the apostles taught, we have before us the teachings (or *doctrine*) of Jesus. This is the standard of authority that must be obeyed. This is the source from which we must derive the authority for all that we say and do in religion.

How can we establish authority from Scripture for what we do in service to God?

First we must understand what the Bible is. Quite simply, it is the written will of God. It was given to the apostles and prophets of the first century in order to communicate understandable information to ordinary human beings. When Paul wrote to the Ephesians, he claimed that the things which he wrote explained the plan of God which had previously been a mystery. He told them, “...when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ, which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets” (Ephesians 3:4-5). When Paul tells them, “when you read, you may understand” it shows us that Scripture is not some dark enigma that can not

be unraveled, but written communication that can be understood just as we do any other type of written communication.

When we read a letter, a story, an article, or some type of instructional literature we use the same basic methods to discern the meaning of the material. We consider what the document states directly, what it describes and what it infers about the subject in question. All of this information is taken into account in order to ascertain the content of the piece. The Bible is no different. There are direct statements which explicitly command or direct behavior. There are descriptions of behavior that is approved or condemned. There are, in the context of some broader discussion, details which are inferred that may further clarify the meaning of a particular issue.

If we are going to act under the authority of Jesus in what we do in service to God what will determine whether or not we have authority for the things we do? There are many direct statements that are in the Bible. Some are given to specific individuals and not to anyone else (e.g. Abraham's charge to sacrifice Isaac – Genesis 22:2). Other commands fall under a distinct period of jurisdiction, and do not apply to those under Christ (e.g. animal sacrifice under the Law of Moses no longer applies to man today). If Jesus Christ now has all authority, and He gave His instructions to His apostles, it would follow that the first source we should look to in order to establish authority would be the direct commands of Jesus and His apostles.

Next, we look to the descriptions of things in the Bible. Again, if we are interested in acting under the authority of Christ our pattern cannot be drawn from descriptions of behavior that was not subject to the authority of Christ (e.g. Israel under the Law of Moses or Gentiles when they were without God). That brings us to what is described in the New Testament. Here we find descriptions of things that were approved and things that were not approved. If Jesus taught that rejection of the apostles was rejection of Him (Luke 10:16), it would follow that those descriptions which serve as binding ex-

amples to us today are the approved examples of behavior carried out under Christ and the apostles.

Finally, as a piece of written material, the Bible is filled with numerous topics and discussions of issues. The inferences within these discourses to things that have been commanded or described further clarifies the application of what is authorized under Christ. As with any literature, inferences are often more subjective (i.e. subject to personal opinion and perspective) than direct statements or descriptions. One person might draw an inference from some nuance of wording that totally eludes another person. Or, there might be inferential references to things that are incidental to the matter under consideration. Because of these dangers when we look to the inferences of Scripture we must look to those necessary inferences that clarify approved examples or direct commands. When such inferences offer inescapable conclusions about a matter under consideration, they establish authority for action in service to God.

Many in the world conduct themselves as if there is no need to establish divine authority in religion. The question posed to Jesus remains particularly applicable today, “by what authority are you doing these things?” Jesus and the apostles acted under divine authority. What about us?

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