

Great Questions of the Bible: “By What Authority Doest Thou These Things?”

We continue our series today with a question that arose during a conversation between Jesus and the chief priests and scribes. They were angry with Jesus because He had gone into the temple and thrown out the moneychangers. They saw that as a challenge to their authority, and they came to Him where He was teaching on this occasion and asked Him this question.

Matthew 21:23-27 “...By what authority doest thou these things? And who gave thee this authority? And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him? But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet. And they answered Jesus, and said, We cannot tell. And he said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.”

Obviously, both the Lord and His skeptics agreed that it was necessary to operate by God’s authority. They believed that Jesus was making unfounded claims though, and was blaspheming God. Jesus knew that they were rebelling against God’s authority by rejecting their own scriptures and substituting their own laws and false interpretations of the Old Testament.

But the question asked is of great importance: *By what authority doest thou these things?* Does it matter, even today, whether we have God’s authority for what we say and do in religion? If so, how do we discover that authority?

The chief priests and scribes didn’t want to admit that God gave Jesus His authority, because then they would be admitting that Jesus’ claims were true, and that He was the Son of God, the Messiah. But it was a legitimate question. Jesus well understood the importance of all things being done by the authority of God, and Jesus promised to answer their question if they would answer one of His. That was one of the Lord’s most frequent responses to their veiled attempts to entrap Him and make Him say something that they could accuse Him with.

So, Jesus asked them to tell Him what they thought about John’s baptism: was it from heaven or from men? In other words, was John acting by God’s authority or by his own? Well, that put them in a corner, because if they said it was from God, they were acknowledging that Jesus was the Christ, because John himself declared Jesus to be the Lamb of God, sent by God, to take away the sins of the world. But, if they said that John was wrong, they would be at odds with all of the people because nearly everybody acknowledged John as a prophet, a messenger of God.

So, the scripture says that they couldn’t answer His question, and that brought the conversation to a close. But the question IS valid in regard to anyone who claims to serve the Lord. Jesus didn’t criticize or discount the question because He Himself cited the authority of God for the many things that He preached and performed throughout His ministry.

Matthew 7:28-29 “And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine. For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”

Matthew 28:18 “...All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.”

Jesus would not have been the Son of God had He not been speaking and acting by the authority of God. But, He not only made the claim; He demonstrated that His authority came from God. He healed the sick, restored sight to the blind, calmed the angry sea, raised the dead, fed the multitudes with a few loaves of bread and a few fish...And it was all so convincing that you may recall what the ruler, Nicodemus said:

John 3:2 “Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.”

It was not only necessary for Christ to speak and live by God’s authority; it is necessary for us to do so, as well.

1 Peter 4:11 “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God...”

That means that he is to only speak as God has already spoken; to only say the same things as God has said. But, today, there is very little emphasis placed on authority. In fact, we live in an age where men resent authority, whether civil, educational, domestic or spiritual. The postmodern age has brought the rejection of absolute truth and the authority that is inherent with it. Therefore, people reject all authority outside of themselves and their own opinions. That’s the culture we are now living in. It’s even the religious culture we are now living in. This has had a disastrous effect, even on religious people.

For many years, we’ve been told that *it’s what’s in a person’s heart, not their adherence to Bible doctrine that matters. It’s how it makes us feel, not what the Bible says about the subject.* The genuineness of a thing is gauged by emotion, rather than by the validity of a thing in God’s word. “True worship” has been reduced to whatever draws the largest crowd and produces the most excitement, as opposed to what Jesus required:

John 4:24 “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”

But, IS God’s authority as irrelevant and insignificant as some seem to think? Think about it this way: do you really want to live in a world that does not recognize or respect authority? What if we had a society with no authority, no laws whatsoever? Can you imagine the chaos that would ensue if there were no set standards of measurement, for example? What if you were to go down to the gas pump where gas is advertised for so much per gallon, but let’s say it was left up to the owner of the gas station to determine what constitutes a gallon; the owner sets the standard. Or, say you wanted to buy lumber to build a house. Most lumber is sold by the foot. What if it was simply left up to the lumber business to determine the length of a foot? You know, international atomic time is determined by a set procedure, and it determines the time to which we set all of our clocks around the world. What if we didn’t have that standard to set our clocks to? You might say, *well, we could get fairly close, given where the sun appears in the sky at a given time,* but can you imagine, in today’s technological age what disruption and even chaos such would cause?

You see, we recognize the need for a standard, an authority in the everyday affairs and transactions of society; but, what about in our relationship to God? What about in moral matters? What about in spiritual matters? The Old Testament book of Judges shows how God's people went through a very dark period of anarchy and spiritual decay. When you read what happened there, some of it just makes you scratch your head. It's very bizarre and without logic. Samuel identified the source of confusion when he wrote the following:

Judges 17:6 "In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes."

In other words, every man just became his own authority; no authority outside of himself. That's what we see today. People shrug and say, *well, it really doesn't matter what you believe...Having a sincere heart is all that matters...Just be nice to people and that's all that God really cares about...If you feel like it's right, then it's right for you, but what's right for you may not be right for me...So, what happens is that we become our own authority instead of God being the source of authority.*

Jeremiah 10:23 "O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps."

Stop and think for a moment about all of the things that people cite as their authority in religion, and how these things really make them their own authority instead of them submitting to the authority of God. Many people view their feelings as the authority. They'll say, *I know I'm saved because I feel like I'm saved. You can't deny that I feel like I'm in a right relationship with God...I know that God accepts my worship because it makes me feel good, and I can't see anything wrong with it.* When two or more people are discussing matters of faith, stop and think about how many sentences begin with, *"Well, I just feel like..."* Have you ever had a conversation like that? Have you ever been guilty of arguing from that basis when you're discussing some matter of faith? Stop and take notice how few sentences begin with, *"Well, the Bible says..."* You see, when your beliefs and practices are sincerely challenged, how do you reply? Do you really think something as subjective and changeable as your feelings are an adequate authority in eternal matters?

If you were to go out and buy an acre of land, what if the seller didn't have the property surveyed and didn't give you a legal deed, would you be satisfied with that transaction? Would you be satisfied if he just went out there and marked off some spot and said, *"I feel like this is about an acre."*? Would you be satisfied to walk away without a legal document and say, *"Well, I feel good about this. I feel like this land is mine."*? Now, why do we demand more in insignificant earthly matters than we do in weighty and eternal matters? Isn't that strange?

Then there are those who say their conscience is their authority. *I live according to my conscience.* They just use this 'inner voice' or hunch as their standard of right and wrong. Well, the conscience is a wonderful thing that God placed within us, to trouble us when we sin, but the conscience has to be educated by something outside of itself. People who sincerely hold to many beliefs hold to beliefs that are wrong, but they do so because they think those beliefs are right; their conscience doesn't bother them. Rather it provokes them to do what they do. People who sincerely held to pagan religions through

the millennia offered human sacrifices and did other ghastly things in the name of faith because their consciences demanded it of them. Even the apostle Paul, once known as Saul, devoted his life to the persecution and extermination of the church of Christ before he met the Lord.

Acts 26:9-11 “I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities.”

Acts 23:1 “...Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.”

Paul never violated his conscience; but Paul’s conscience didn’t always lead him to do right. It sometimes told him to do things that were horrible, supposedly in the name of God, you see.

Then there are those who believe that the majority should be the standard. *Whatever the majority decides, that will be the authority.* They believe that we should just *change as society changes, and whatever the general consensus is, that is right, and God will just accept it.* Yet, from the beginning of time until now, the Bible shows us repeatedly that the majority has always been wrong—not right! Show me one time where the whole of humanity was right. I can only think of one time, and that is after God had destroyed the world by water and Noah’s family came off the ark. God destroyed the majority, and Noah went into the ark a minority, but came out in the majority. But that didn’t last long. I can’t think of any other time in all of human history when all of mankind was right.

Here’s a good rule of thumb: if everybody agrees with it—in fact, if most people agree with it, it’s most likely wrong.

Exodus 23:2 “Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil...”

Matthew 7:13-14 “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.”

I heard someone say the other day, that we often sing about a stairway to heaven and a highway to hell, and that ought to tell us something; that’s actually a very Biblical concept. So, surely the majority cannot constitute the authority in spiritual matters.

Then there are those who believe that tradition is the authority; that is to say the oral and written traditions of the church fathers, as they are called, should guide the church and guide Christians in matters of faith and practice today. Back in the sixteenth century, the council of Trent met and decreed that the oral traditions of the church were to be received with equal piety and reverence as the Old and New Testaments. Many today operate upon that belief. They believe that churches have the prerogative to interpret scriptures as they see fit and to add to it or make it up as they go along...The whole history of Christendom is littered with false doctrines that arose out of human creeds, human ideas, human

dogma and traditions that were bound over and preserved to exist, even today, because of church tradition. Infant baptism is not found in scriptures; in fact, it is contrary to what the Bible says about baptism. You know, one of the earliest mentions of it does not appear in the Bible, but in the writings of Tertullian nearly 200 years after Jesus Christ built His church. Many doctrines, ordinances and sacraments practiced in the denominations today are the direct result of human creeds and the traditions of their church fathers. They don't find their basis and authority in the New Testament.

Matthew 15:3 “But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?”

Colossians 2:8 “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.”

Let me illustrate the danger of using human traditions as a standard. What if I was cutting boards to build the walls of a house, and I used an accurate tape to measure the first board to a certain length, then I cut it. Then I laid the tape aside and used that first board as a guide to cut the second board. Then I laid the first board aside and used the second board as a guide to cut the third board. Then I used the third board as a measure and guide to cut the fourth board, and so on...Do you suppose that when I stood that wall upright, something might be wrong or askew or crooked? That it might slope? Do you think that one end of it might be a good bit shorter than the other? Of course it would. Why: because I had progressively used a subjective standard.

But what if I measure every board by the same standard? Well, you see, the word of God IS the standard. The only tradition which is to be our authority is that which came by Christ, through His inspired apostles, and can thus be found written in the New Testament.

I Corinthians 11:2 “Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances (*traditions*), as I delivered them to you.”

What traditions was Paul talking about? The ones he delivered. Well, where did Paul receive them? Were they his own? Were they human in origin?

I Corinthians 11:23 “For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you...”

You see, the word of God is to be our authority, and it is to be our ONLY authority in moral and spiritual matters.

II Timothy 3:14-17 “But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. 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 perfect (*complete, mature*), thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

There is it, you see. The scriptures furnish us to every good or acceptable work in the eyes of God. So, I ask you today, what is your authority? Were you saved upon God's authority, or that of your feelings and emotions, or the creed or tradition of some church? What about your worship? Can you read about what your local church practices in the New Testament? Do they carefully follow the example of the New Testament church in doctrine, organization, worship and edification? Or, is your standard what feels good, whatever excites the emotions or draws the biggest crowd? You see, that's not good enough. Even Jesus respected the need to have God's authority, and Jesus warned us that in the last day, when we stand before Him to be judged, His word will judge us.

John 12:48 "...the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day."

It's a vital question that you need to sincerely ask today. A great question of the Bible: *By what authority doest thou these things?* I hope you'll seriously consider it today.