



An Overview of Biblical Authority

By Keith Greer

In every realm of life, we recognize the need for authority. This need is evident in the home, at school, in business, and in the government's affairs. Surely, we all recognize the need for religious authority.

A person acts with authority, either because he has jurisdiction, or because he receives orders or instructions from one who has legal, rightful power. We must recognize the need for authority and respect that authority once it is established.

The Need for Divine Authority in the Religious Realm

The chief priests and the elders of the Jews recognized the need for authority (Matthew 21:23-27). They asked Jesus: "...By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?" (Matthew 21:23) These questions illustrate their recognition of two things:

The need for authority.

That such authority must come from one who has the right and power to grant it. They asked: "who gave you this authority?"

Jesus answered with a question: "The baptism of John; where was it from? From heaven or from men?" (Matthew 21:25) His answer shows that there are only two sources of authority: Heaven and Men -- Divine and Human.

Some deny the necessity of having God's authority for everything we practice religiously. Those who have such attitudes either:

Look to themselves for authority (Jeremiah 10:23; Proverbs 14:12), or

Look to other men for authority (Matthew 15:8,9).

No scriptural authority exists for many of their inaugurated practices, and they cry aloud: "We do not need scriptural authority for everything we do." Those who scorn the need for divine authority overlook a basic Bible principle and in so doing, flirt with danger. We may act without God's authority, but we cannot do so with His approval and fellowship (2 John 9-11)!

Throughout the Bible, we see exhibited the need to respect authority, and examples of what happened when such was not the case. Following are three:

Adam and Eve (Genesis 2,3).

Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-5).

Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1,2).

In each instance, failure to follow God's commands led to severe consequences.

King Saul did not submit to God's authority when he chose not to utterly destroy the Amalekites, but to bring back King Agag and the best of the livestock to sacrifice to the Lord (1 Samuel 15). We cannot help noticing that King Saul's apparently good intention -- to offer sacrifices to God -- made no difference to God (Isaiah 5:20; Romans 3:20).

King Uzziah acted without divine authority when he entered the temple to burn incense to the Lord (2 Chronicles 26:16-30; Ezekiel 30:1-10). Burning incense was a good work, authorized by God, but Azariah the priest said: "It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the Lord." Divine authority dictated that only the priests could burn incense.

When Uzziah turned his back on divine authority, he became his own source of authority. He was wrong.

Jesus recognized and taught the need for divine authority. He promised to reject those who work iniquity (Matthew 7:21-23). Iniquity means lawlessness (NASB). To work lawlessness is to work without authority. Workers of iniquity will be gathered out of the kingdom (Matthew 13:41,42).

Look at our Lord's teaching in the parable of the wise and foolish builders (Matthew 7:24-27). The wise man hears and DOES the Lord's will (James 1:22-25). He acts as the Lord authorized (1 Corinthians 4:6). The foolish man hears but DOES NOT obey. He may call Jesus "Lord, Lord," but he refuses to do what Jesus authorized (Luke 6:46; Matthew 19:16-22).

The apostles taught the need for divine authority. They appealed for unity (1 Corinthians 1:10; Philippians 3:16). We cannot have unity unless we all abide by the same rules and speak the same things. To do this, we must recognize and accept an authority standard that governs us (Ephesians 4:1-3).

Illustrate: Merchants practice unity when they weigh and measure, because they all accept the same rule as their authority.

Illustrate: All postal clerks follow the same rule. All packages of the same weight go for the same cost. There's one standard.

"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) In this text, "in the name of" means "by the authority of." Only when they act in the name of Christ do men act with authority that pleases the Father. While here, Jesus prepared the apostles to continue His teaching on man's need to abide in the truth -- God's only standard in religion (John 8:31,32; 17:17).

Sources From Which We Do Not Get Authority

Old Testament doctrines and practices. Many, failing to realize this, appeal to the Old Testament for authority today. The following religious practices are evidence of this problem:

Tithing as the law of giving (Leviticus 27:30).

Instrumental music in worship (Psalms 150).

Infant membership in the church (Hebrews 8:11).

Polygamy as practiced by the Mormons (Matthew 19:1-9).

Keeping the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20).

Those who do these things fail to recognize that the Old Testament system was only a shadow (Hebrews 10:1) that Christ removed when He died on the cross (Ephesians 2:14-16; Colossians 2:14-16).

What the preacher says. Many regard the preacher's word as authority in religion (1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 2:4,5; 4:6). Lazy church members who are unwilling to study expect the preacher to study for them (Acts 17:11). One of the most ridiculous spectacles in the religious realm is the diversity in doctrines espoused by God-called preachers. Did God call each to teach a different doctrine (Galatians 1:6-9). Preachers are to preach THE WORD (2 Timothy 4:1,2), not their own word (Titus 2:15). The Bible is enough; it is all-sufficient (2 Timothy 3:16,17; 2 Peter 1:3).

Men's creeds. Nearly every denomination has its own manual, discipline, prayer book, or book of minutes that contains doctrines and procedures for organizing that denomination. We cannot please God by accepting men's creeds (Matthew 15:8,9; Colossians 2:20-22; Galatians 1:6-9). If God's book is His mind revealed to man; and if He is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-wise, how could man write anything superior to what He has written?

The congregation's desires. Some religious organizations take pride in being democratic, determining their policies by majority vote. The congregation's wishes may not be right in God's sight. Look at some examples from the pages of God's book:

Israel wanted other gods to go before them (Exodus 32).

Israel wanted a king (1 Samuel 8:1-19).

King Saul wanted to do his own thing; then, when called to account for his disobedience, he blamed the people (1 Samuel 15:15,24).

The people loved the words of the false prophets (Jeremiah 5:30,31).

The results accomplished. If a work is a good work, or if it brings big results, that is insufficient authority for its existence. We cannot assume that the "end justifies the means." In religious matters, the end, good or bad, does not qualify a work as acceptable to God. A perfect example is David and the cart (1 Chronicles 15:1-14). It was an incorrect transport mode for the ark. The ark moved, but in the process, Uzzah lost his life. God told them to carry the ark, not to place it on a cart and have oxen pull it! God takes no pleasure in our accomplishments, if He has not authorized what we do. Such thinking shows lack of respect for God's authority.

Our Only Source of Divine Authority - The New Testament

Jesus Christ is the source of authority. He is God's ordained spokesman (Matthew 17:1-5; Hebrews 1:1,2). God requires that we hear Him, and only Him (Deuteronomy 18:15-18; Acts 3:22,23). He has all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18). This authority was given to Him by the Father in heaven, who has rightful power, and who put all things, except Himself, under Him (1 Corinthians 11:3; 15:27; Ephesians 1:20-23). He is head of the body, the church (Colossians 1:18). As members of a physical body are subject to the head's direction, so must the body be subject to Christ.

Christ is the head of the body. Christians are members of that body and must work in harmony, as directed by the head (1 Corinthians 12:12,13). The church is His bride. As

the husband is the head of the wife, and she is subject to him, so the church is to be subject to Christ (Ephesians 5:23,24).

The New Testament is God's message to men in this dispensation. The apostles and other inspired men wrote the truth as it was revealed to them (Ephesians 3:1-4). Their writings are the New Testament.

It is a divine message, the word of God (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

It is a complete message (John 16:13; 2 Timothy 3:16,17; 2 Peter 1:3).

It is God's final message to His creation (Jude 3).

It is the message of salvation (Romans 1:16; James 1:21).

It is an understandable message (Ephesians 3:1-3; 5:17).

We must be led by the apostles' teaching (Galatians 1:8,9). Everything we teach, practice, and do must be authorized in the New Testament. Look for BOOK, CHAPTER, and VERSE for what you believe and practice. Do you know where it is, and are you certain? If what I'm doing cannot be found in the pages of God's word, then I'm not walking according to His Divine Authority. Could we be walking according to man's authority?

As God's people, what must we do when issues arise and threaten to divide us? One thing even worse than division is unity with error. Should we ignore the issues, wait to see where the majority stands (which way the wind blows), decide on the basis of what good and great men have said, or do what we have always done? None of these solutions is workable, because all are wrong. Let's get back to doing things in Bible ways and calling things by Bible names. What about A THUS SAITH THE LORD. Isn't that the better way? To be honest, it's the ONLY WAY to please God. We must obey the rules:

Be ready to give God's answer -- not our own (1 Peter 3:15).

Respect the authority of the Scriptures (1 Peter 4:11).

Believe that scripture can be understood (Ephesians 5:17).

Handle aright the word of life (2 Timothy.2:15).

Resolve to follow whatever course truth demands (Proverbs 23:23).

Stand for truth without bitterness (Matthew 5:43-46).

Prove all things; hold fast to that which is right (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Be willing to examine conclusions in light of the scriptures (Acts 17:11).

Respect the silence of God's word (1 Corinthians 4:6).

The honest hearer seeks to do these things to please God, not men. Compromise is never an option for those who love God and His word. We must be willing to study and examine any interpretation of truth to be sure we are "rightly dividing the word of truth."