

From Heaven Or From Men?

Introduction. Authority is defined as “the power to enforce laws, exact obedience, command, determine, or judge.” In every realm of activity, we can recognize that someone must have legal or rightful power to rule, command, and maintain law and order. The only alternative is anarchy. If we were to eliminate the standards in our society, the result would be mass confusion.

If this is true in a physical sense, then surely it must be true concerning the salvation of our souls. One of the most confusing periods in the history of the Jewish nation was described as entirely lacking in respect for God’s authority (Judges 21:25). The division and confusion in the religious world today can be directly related to a failure to recognize any single standard of authority. Literally, the world has come to rest upon the premise that everything is acceptable as long as you are sincere.

In Matthew 21:23-27, Jesus recognized only two general sources of authority in spiritual matters. Despite the dilemma of the Jews, the answer was obvious. The baptism of John was from heaven (Matthew 3:14-15; John 1:6). But suppose it had not been from heaven. What is the only other alternative that Jesus recognized? If it had not come from heaven, it would have come from men. The question, “Is it from heaven or from men?” is a vital and practical question for us to answer because it directly relates to our religious beliefs and practices.

I. **Authority From Heaven**

- A. In order for authority to be from heaven it must originate with God.
 1. God is the source of all truth (James 1:17-18; Isaiah 46:9-10).
 2. God has spoken to man (Hebrews 1:1-2).
 - a) God’s authority in the Jewish dispensation was exercised in and through Moses and the prophets and was directed to the Jewish fathers.
 - b) God’s authority in the Christian dispensation is exercised in and through Christ and is directed to us.
 - c) This eliminates the Old Testament as our authority today (Hebrews 9:16-17; 10:9-10; Colossians 2:14-16; Galatians 3:24-25).
- B. In order for authority to be from heaven it must come through Christ.
 1. Ephesians 1:20-23.
 - a) The head directs and guides the movements of the body.
 - b) The church has no right to teach or practice anything that the head (or Christ) does not direct.

2. Matthew 28:18.
 - a) All "power" or "authority" means that all legislative, executive, and judicial authority resides in Him.
 - b) Because Jesus has all authority, we have no right to bestow authority to others.
 3. Matthew 17:5.
 - a) The only subject of sufficient significance to warrant God speaking directly and audibly to man was the authority of His Son.
 - b) On the mount of transfiguration, God said, "Listen to Him!"
 4. John 12:48.
 - a) We will be judged by the words of Christ at the last day.
 - b) What more compelling incentive can we have to respect the authority of Christ than the realization that our lives will be judged by that standard?
- C. In order for authority to be from heaven it must be revealed through the Holy Spirit to the apostles.
1. John 14:26; 16:13-14; 17:18.
 - a) The revelation God gave to His Son, Christ entrusted to His chosen apostles and guarded the transmission of it by the Holy Spirit working in them.
 - b) Jesus "sending" them into the world is in the same sense in which God had "sent" Christ into the world.
 - c) To reject Jesus is to reject God (1 John 2:23). To hear Jesus is to hear God (John 3:34; 12:49).
 2. Matthew 16:19; 18:18.
 - a) "Keys" signify power and authority. The giving of "keys" to Christ signified His authority (Isaiah 9:6-7; 22:22; Revelation 3:7).
 - b) Likewise, the giving of "keys" to the apostles signifies the delegation of authority from Christ to them.
 3. Acts 2:42.
 - a) The standard of authority recognized and used by the early church was the "apostles doctrine."
 - b) This term is not used because they invented it, but because they revealed it.
 4. Galatians 1:8-10; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 John 4:6.
 - a) To honor the word of the apostles is to honor God. To preach anything based upon some other authority is to bring the curse of God upon us.
 - b) The apostles constitute the Supreme Court of the Christian religion (Matthew 19:28). There is no source of appeal from their decisions (Acts 15:6, 22-29).

- D. In order for authority to be from heaven it must be recorded in the New Testament.
1. What the apostles received by the Holy Spirit they wrote for all future generations (2 Peter 3:1-2; 1 John 1:3-4; Ephesians 3:3-5).
 2. This revelation is complete and sufficient (John 16:13; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; James 1:25; 2 Peter 1:3).
 - a) All of the sacrifice necessary to save man from sin was made by Christ (Hebrews 7:27; 9:28; 10:10). No additional sacrifice will ever be given!
 - b) All the revelation necessary to teach and instruct man has been given to the saints (Jude 3-5). No additional revelation will ever be given!
 3. How to establish authority from the New Testament scriptures.
 - a) God can tell us what to do. This is known as a command. Commands or precepts can either be positive, telling us to do something, or negative, forbidding a particular action.
 - b) God can show us what to do. This is known as an example. Paul encouraged the Corinthians to follow his example (1 Corinthians 4:17; 11:1). The Lord also used examples to teach lessons (John 13:15).
 - c) God can give us all the pieces and we can put them together in a conclusion. This is known as necessary inference. This form of authority is neither expressly stated nor specifically exemplified yet is necessarily implied by the clear import and meaning of the language used.
 - (1) Several instances in the Bible say that the disciples "reasoned from the scriptures" that Jesus was the Christ. All fulfillment of prophecy depends on understanding the process of necessary inference.
 - (2) In jury duty, you have the task of evaluating the evidence and making a judgment or a conclusion based on that evidence. The problem in using this approach is not whether inferences are valid, but do the necessary implications exist to point us to an inference.
 4. These are not "church of Christ tradition;" they are common sense. We all use these methods every day on ordinary matters. These three methods of receiving divine authority can be illustrated by the Lord's supper.
 - a) Command.
 - (1) Its observance is given by divine command: "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:25).
 - (2) Paul received it from the Lord and gave it to the church by His authority (1 Corinthians 11:23).

b) Approved example.

- (1) The time of its observance (Acts 20:7). Paul had received this memorial institution from the Lord and knew therefore when the Lord wanted it to be observed. He remained in Troas for seven days -- obviously waiting for the day upon which the saints assembled (Acts 20:6).
- (2) This supper was observed in the New Testament church only upon the first day of the week -- the Lord's day (Revelation 1:10).

c) Necessary inference.

- (1) The frequency of its observance (Acts 20:7). Compare this to Exodus 20:8. If the "sabbath day to keep it holy" means every every sabbath -- as regularly as it comes -- then, "The first day of the week to break bread" means every "first day," as regularly as it comes.
- (2) This is the unavoidable implication of the language. The same phrase is used in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 of the contribution, which everyone understands is every Sunday.

d) General and specific authority.

- (1) All authority is either general (including any method or means of execution that comes within the class or order of the precept or example commanded) or specific (excluding every method or means of execution in the same order or class which is not specified in the precept or example commanded).
- (2) In short, general authority includes and specific authority excludes.
 - (a) Illustrations of general authority.
 - i) Matthew 28:19 says "Go." We can decide the means of going. We can walk, ride in a car, fly in an airplane, or sail on a ship. God did not specify; therefore, we have a choice. No person has the right to bind a specific method.
 - ii) Matthew 28:19 says "Teach." We can teach in private or in public. We can teach in a home or a rented building. God did not specify; therefore, we have a choice. No person has the right to bind a specific method.
 - iii) Hebrews 10:25 commands us to not forsake the assembly. Christians must assemble to be pleasing to God. However, we can choose to assemble in someone's home, this building, or in place which we

rent. God did not specify; therefore, we have a choice. No person has the right to bind a specific method.

- iv) Ephesians 5:19 says "Sing." We can sing using song books or we can sing by memory. We can all sing the same part or we can sing using four-part harmony. God did not specify; therefore, we have a choice. No person has the right to bind a specific method.
- (b) Illustrations of specific authority.
 - i) God told Noah to build an ark of gopher wood (Genesis 6:14). Gopher wood excluded walnut, pine, ash, spruce, oak, and all other kinds of wood. When God specified gopher wood, no one had the right to add another kind.
 - ii) Numbers 19:2 commands the use of an unblemished red heifer. A red heifer excluded sheep, goats, pigs, horses, camels, and every other kind of heifer. When God specified a red heifer, no one had the right to add another color or kind of animal.
 - iii) Ephesians 5:19 says "Sing." This excludes every other "kind" of music. Instrumental music is excluded by the fact that God specified "singing" and that does not include "playing" an instrument. No man has the right to grant a liberty which God's authority excludes.
 - iv) The Lord's supper (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:23). The unleavened loaf and fruit of the vine excludes every other element. The first day of the week excludes every other day. God has made His choice of elements and we have no choice but to do the will of God.
 - v) The local church (Acts 14:23; Philippians 1:1). God has specified congregational government under elders or bishops. There is nothing larger or smaller in the New Testament scriptures. Man has to accept God's arrangement and be satisfied or rebel against divine authority by substituting or adding some other organization.
 - vi) Elders in every church (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2). God has specified the jurisdiction of elders. They are shepherd and guard only flock of which they are a part. Whenever elders become overseers of anything else but the work of their own flock they are without jurisdiction and have therefore added to the word of God.

II. **Authority From Men**

- A. Man has always wanted to substitute his will for God's will and essentially establish man's authority over God's authority (cf. Jeremiah 2:13).
- B. Mankind builds their religious convictions and practices upon a lot of "broken cisterns."
 - 1. Parents.
 - a) Many believe what they do for no other reason than that is the way they were raised. They say, "If it's good enough for my parents, it's good enough for me!"
 - b) But Jesus stated that we must love God more than our parents and Saul of Tarsus had to forsake the religion of his parents (Matthew 10:37; Galatians 1:14).
 - 2. Conscience.
 - a) "Let your conscience be your guide" is the motto of many in religion. Again, Saul of Tarsus learned that this was not a sufficient guide (Acts 23:1; Proverbs 16:25).
 - b) Conscience is the sense in the mind that tells us whether we are doing right or wrong according to the way we have been taught. But like a clock that is set wrong, it will always be wrong no matter how well it operates.
 - 3. Human wisdom.
 - a) A lot of people put their trust in and build upon the wisdom of religious scholars (Jeremiah 8:8-10).
 - b) Also, many people trust in my "think so." But we cannot know what God thinks unless it is revealed to us by His Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:10-14).
 - 4. Preachers.
 - a) The faith of many is built upon the "clergy." For example, you may have heard the expression, "I don't know, but my preacher can tell you."
 - b) Any preacher is a human authority unless he is citing divine authority for what he says (1 Timothy 6:3-5; 1 Peter 4:11).
 - 5. Feelings.
 - a) Many put their trust in some physical feeling which may be expressed by the saying, "My religion is better felt than told."
 - b) But feelings have to do with our physical nature while our salvation has to do with our spiritual nature (Proverbs 28:26).
 - 6. Human creeds.
 - a) These are manuals, disciplines, catechisms, etc., that are supposed to summarize and explain what the New Testament teaches.

b) Even though these may be honest attempts, they invariably go beyond or contain less than the New Testament (Revelation 22:18-19).

Conclusion. In order for something to be authorized there must be either command, approved example, or necessary inference in New Testament. If the means of authority is general then anything included within the scope of what is authorized is permissible. But if God specified the kind or method of execution then no substitute or addition is allowed.

Is your faith from heaven or from men? May God help us to truly study the scriptures that we might be approved. We must seriously investigate the means by which we establish our right to act in the sight of God.