

The Crucial Issue of Authority

Batsell Baxter

Every thinking person realizes that authority plays a very significant role in all of our lives. Before we may drive a car, we must have the authority of a license. A doctor must have a diploma from a reputable medical school before he can practice. A policeman must have a badge which authorizes him to carry out his duties. To get married, we must have a license. There is little that we can do in Life without proper authorization.

Especially in the realm of religion must we have proper authority for all that we do. In the worship and service of God we must do that which we are authorized to do and nothing else.

The question Jesus once faced, "BY WHAT AUTHORITY DOEST THOU THESE THINGS? AND WHO GAVE THEE THIS AUTHORITY?" (**Matthew 21:23**) is a good one for all of us.

Possible Sources Of Authority

Final or ultimate authority in religion rests in one of three possible sources. First of all, there are those who believe that final authority rests in the church. Councils, conclaves and synods meet and make decisions. From these human deliberations such doctrines as purgatory, the adoration of Mary, the seven sacraments, papal infallibility and others have come.

It was Martin Luther who pointed out the problem of such human authority when he said, "...I cannot trust in either the decisions of Councils, or of Popes, for it is plain that they have not only erred but have contradicted each other..." (Friedenthal, *Luther: His Life and Times*, p. 278).

Second, others conceive final authority to rest in the reasoning power of men. One's own conscience, inner feelings, or reason is the final arbiter. Saul of Tarsus demonstrated this view to be erroneous. In spite of his honesty of purpose and intensity of zeal, he was wrong. Many a person, guided by his own inner feelings, believes and practices that is contrary to the will of God.

The whole blight of denominationalism is a result a man's trusting his own views, rather than conforming his convictions to Gods teaching. Liberalism makes the mistake of thinking that man's reason is the infallible authority in religion.

The third possibility, as the absolute source of authority, is the Bible, the inspired word of God. God the creator of the universe and of man is the only ultimate, final source of authority. He has spoken in his word. It is our responsibility to read the scriptures, understand them and obey them. Let us say, as Samuel did, "SPEAK, LORD, FOR THY SERVANT HEARETH." (**1 Samuel 3:10**).

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Never With Men

Authority always rests with divinity. "IN THE BEGINNING GOD TREATED THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH" (**Genesis 1:1**) and in so doing established his ultimate supreme authority.

Later, when Jesus was upon the earth he said, "ALL AUTHORITY HATH BEEN GIVEN UNTO ME IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH," (**Matthew 28:18**). He further announced to his apostles that when he left the earth, the Holy Spirit would come in his place and "...SHALL GUIDE YOU INTO ALL TRUTH." (**John 16:13**). Authority has always rested with the Godhead and never with men. The prophets, the apostles and others miraculously guided by God were simply spokesmen. God's word has always been the final authority among men.

Our Only Guide

The Bible is our guide – our only guide. For this reason, it is encouraging to hear people say, "Let us have a 'thus saith the Lord' for all that we do in our religious faith and practice." Still, another way of saying it is "Let us speak where the scriptures speak, and be silent where the scriptures are silent." Each of these is a statement indicating the acceptance of the authority of the scriptures.

At this point let us examine two opposite positions on the matter of authority of the scriptures. Martin Luther championed the idea that "*Whatever is not expressly prohibited in the scriptures is permissible.*" (*History of the Great Reformation of the Sixteenth Century.* by D'Aybigbe, Book II, page 297.) Luther's view opens the door to all kinds of innovations, such as the burning of incense, the lighting of candles, the use of images, instrumental music and even adding other elements to the Lord's Supper.

Huldreich Zwingli championed the second view which said, "Whatever is not expressly authorized in the scriptures is prohibited" (*History of the Christian Church*, by W. Walker, 1959, p. 322). This is the view set forth in the scriptures themselves. In **Galatians 1:8**, Paul wrote, "BUT THOUGH WE, OR AN ANGEL FROM HEAVEN, SHOULD PREACH UNTO YOU ANY GOSPEL OTHER THAN WHICH WE PREACHED UNTO YOU, LET HIM BE ANATHEMA." The apostle John said the same thing in these words: "WHOSOEVER TRANGRESSETH AND ABIDETH NOT IN THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST, HATH NOT GOD. HE THAT ABIDETH IN THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST, HE HATH BOTH THE FATHER AND THE SON." (**II John 9**).

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Three Avenues

In determining what the scriptures authorize, there are three avenues through which we may receive guidance. First, there are direct commands, such as **Acts 2:38**. In the second place, there are approved apostolic examples, such as the apostle Paul's eating of the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week. (**Acts 20:7**). And finally, there is necessary inference. Each command of God authorizes whatever is necessary to carry it out. When the Lord commanded Christians to meet for worship, he necessarily authorized the providing of a place for Christians to assemble for worship.

Our religion – our relationship to God – is our most important relationship. We must be absolutely certain about everything that we believe and practice.