

THE NEED FOR AUTHORITY

Men recognize that in all facets of society there is a need for authority, whether it is in the home, in school, in a community, in the army or in a country. *Authority* is defined in a Webster dictionary as “legal or rightful power, dominion, a right to command.” Someone must have this legal or rightful power to rule, command and maintain law and order, or lawlessness and chaos results. Imagine what would happen if there was no standards of authority even in such things as time, weights and measurements, traffic regulations, quality in food and drugs, or money?

The need for proper authority is more important in religious and spiritual matters because the salvation of our souls is at stake. Man left to himself is unable to determine what is pleasing to God (I Corinthians 2:11), nor able to guide himself (Jeremiah 10:23). One of the most confusing periods in Old Testament history was during the period of the judges when “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). What one can or cannot do, or should or should not do in matters of religion has long been a point of contention. Man has failed to arrive at a common, unified religion. We see division and confusion, a multiplicity of conflicting doctrines. As a result, many suggest that “it doesn’t make any difference what you believe or practice as long as you’re sincere.” Now is that what God says, what Jesus says?

Only two possible sources of authority exist in spiritual matters: God or man (Matthew 21:23-27). Jews confronted Jesus and said, “By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?” Jesus turned the question back on them, “The baptism of John, where was it from? From heaven or from men?” Despite the Jews’ dilemma, the answer was obvious (Compare John 1:6; Luke 7:29-30). Jesus recognized that if a person’s words and actions are not from God, then there is only one other alternative. Therefore, we need to test all things to see if they rest upon Divine authority or human authority.

From the beginning, men have been substituting their words and will for God’s will and words. Man’s religious convictions and practices often rest upon human authority. Many people are what they are and believe what they do for no better reason than that is the way their *parents* raised them. The apostle Paul forsook the religion of his parents in order to follow Christ (Galatians 1:14). Others live by the motto – “Let your *conscience* be your guide.” Paul learned that one’s conscience can mislead him. “I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day. . . . Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.” (Acts 23:1; 26:9). *Emotions* can be very deceptive, too. For example, Jacob was told a lie about his favorite son Joseph, and he wept as if it was the truth (Genesis 37:29-36). The better-felt-than-told feeling relates to the physical man. Salvation has to do with the spiritual man. Many put their trust in the *wisdom* and philosophies of religious scholars, but we must remember that they are simply men. “For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, ‘He catches the wise in their own craftiness;’ and again, ‘The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.’ Therefore let no one glory in men.” (I Corinthians 3:19-21). The faith of others is built upon what *preachers*, the clergy, say. The holy Scriptures give us this warning, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.” (Galatians 1:8). For that reason the apostle of Christ instructed Timothy to preach the Word (II Timothy 4:2). Religious people often rely on the authority of *human creeds*. Church manuals and disciplines supposedly summarize and explain the New Testament. Someone once said, “If the creed contains less than the New Testament, it does not contain enough; if it contains more than the New Testament, it contains too much.” The Holy Spirit directed John to pen these words, “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.” (II John 9). None of these sources of human authority will save us; nor will they unite us in one faith and practice.

Therefore, God must be our standard of authority in moral, spiritual and religious matters. He possesses the rightful power to rule and to command because He is the source of absolute truth. “Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from

the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure.’” (Isaiah 46:9-10). “Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.” (James 1:16-18). He has supplied the absolute standard in matters of religion. “. . . His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, . . .” (II Peter 1:3) The apostle Paul wrote, “For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual.” (I Corinthians 2:11-13).

God revealed His divine standard in words, which we may understand. What is the nature of that standard which has been revealed and preserved? First of all, it is **inspired of God**. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable . . .” (II Timothy 3:16). “. . . no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” (II Peter 1:20-21). Since the revealed message is from God, the standard is the absolute and infallible truth. Secondly, this divinely inspired standard is **complete**. “. . . I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” (Jude 3). There are no missing parts; there will be no additions or revisions. We have all that we need to direct us in godliness (II Peter 1:3), and the inspired Scriptures are able to make us complete men of God (II Timothy 3:16-17). Thirdly, the inspired word of God is the **sole authority** to which all men are accountable. Jesus taught, “He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him – the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day. 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.” (John 12:48-49). The word of God is able to save the soul (James 1:21); the gospel is the power of God to salvation (Romans 1:16). “As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you that what you have received, let him be accursed.” (Galatians 1:9).

“God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things,” (Hebrews 1:1-2). God’s final word, His standard of authority for modern man, was revealed through His Son Jesus Christ. “The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (John 1:17). This should compel us to respect His word as the sole authority by which we must live because we are accountable to it. God intends for us to use a single standard of authority in spiritual matters – HIS. Paul directed Christians in Philippi to live by the same authority. “Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind. Brethren, join in following my example and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern.” (Philippians 3:16-17). That word will judge us on the last day. “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him?” (Hebrews 2:3)

Stepping out of the realm of God’s authority is sin, lawlessness (I John 3:4). It opens the floodgates for disobedience and division. When men usurp God’s authority by following their own authority, they commit transgression. Religious and spiritual chaos occurs. Most choose the *broad way* because they can do whatever they want to do, but the *narrow way*, which leads to life, is more difficult because the few who choose the less traveled path submit to God’s authority in Christ.