

Christ Community Covenant Church
April 7, 2013
By Whose Authority?

We are going to spend the spring time talking about a very important issue in our society. We are going to talk authority and leadership and servant-hood. There is a lot in this subject to talk about. It is a big and complex thing to try and wrap your brain around this, even though we all understand authority. We bump into it every day. Still perhaps because it is such a broad topic with all kinds of applications it becomes a tricky subject.

*Discussion: Let's define authority for a bit. What is the evidence that a person has authority?
Is it possible for a person to have authority w/o true authority?*

The dictionary defines authority as:

1. power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior
2. persons in command; like the military or government

Is authority the same as 'influence'?

Is authority the same as 'respect'?

Is authority the same as 'someone people follow'?

Over the next few weeks we will spend some more time getting clear on some of these things but I want to focus here on a bit on two kinds of authority:

Gifted Authority Vs. Earned Authority

Gifted Authority is when society bestows the position of influence and command by virtue of the culture not the individual. Society establishes the position or circumstance where the person has authority.

Teachers have authority over their class. The governor and president have authority that has been established by a Constitution. Police have authority and CEO's have authority.

Now as I say that some of you are thinking, but society doesn't recognize or respect those authorities anymore. I might agree that some of the positions that once had authority no longer get their due, but that just means that society has picked a different position or system to be the authority.

Earned Authority is when the individual establishes influence and control as a result of their personal command of their subject or their experience in their field or discipline. It may be based on life experience, study, practice or it may simply be based on time, a long marriage or life gives a person a kind of authority.

Coercion is different yet. It is raw power that comes from physical strength or a weapon or hired strength through money. It is forced authority.

Why this is a big issue in the 21st Century

- It impacts families. We no longer give parents and I think they especially have lost or given up their rightful authority.
- It impact churches. As congregants we have become consumer driven and have a feeling of suspicion and disrespect for the way church used to be run. We want church done our way and traditional eldership no longer has sway as it used to.
- Poor use of authority impacts society's governance and results in injustice and inequities.
- It impacts society and traditional ways we hold culture together. We no longer give our Senior Citizens authority. We give it to youth and the beautiful, but not necessarily to those who have earned it. We say they have authority, but in our culture we do not heed those authorities.

Who is at fault when we give away our allegiance to a false authority?

Let's take the case of the most authoritative personality that has ever lived on earth and look at how the issue of authority came up in His life. That would be Jesus Christ.

The Authority of Christ

At the command of Christ waves and the sea obeyed him. At the command of Christ disease had to obey. At the command of Christ unclean demons who fought against his rule and reign had to submit. Death itself was at His command; nothing escaped his power and rule. He ***had granted authority*** from His Father in Heaven and ***earned authority*** by His teaching and miracles. Still that did not keep the so called religious authorities of the day from challenging the words of Christ.

Let's take Matthew 21 as a case in point. Christ has just been recognized by the people as their preferred King with his triumphant entry. Then he comes into the temple area and chases out the money changers.

Matthew 21:23

²³ And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

This is what happens when you threaten the so called authorities. They ask questions:

- Who are you?
- Where did you come from?
- Who gave you the right to teach here?
- What school did you attend? Where is your diploma?
- Why didn't you ask us for permission?
- Who do you think you are, anyway?

The religious gatekeepers felt profoundly threatened by Jesus. He just seemed like a troublemaker. The throngs that greeted his entrance into Jerusalem proved that he was a public menace and a disturber of the peace. And of course you've got to get rid of troublemakers or they will make life and rule difficult for you. That line of paranoid thinking led eventually to the plot to kill Jesus.

It's fascinating that the Jewish leaders don't attack his teaching or his character because there was nothing to attack. So they go after his authority. That same attack has been made many times since then.

But the authority of Christ was recognized by everyone who saw Him with eyes to see and ears to hear. The people could see it right away:

Matthew 7:24-29

²⁴ "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

²⁸ And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, ²⁹ for he was ***teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.***

This is a fascinating observation. The scribes had institutional authority. They interpreted the law and they told people what was right to do and what was wrong to do. They had a certain amount of power, for if a person disobeyed, they had the right to hold court in the temple and to convict a person against Jewish law. But Jesus was different. His authority did not come from an institution. He had no granted authority, at least from worldly systems. No he had none of the normal ways that people are granted authority:

- He was poor. He came from the wrong side of the tracks with Nathaniel complaining to Philip, “*Does anything good come out of Nazareth?*”
- He was largely self-taught in Scripture - he did not have the advantage of Paul who could say he was taught by the noted scholar Gamaliel the Elder.
- He was not a Levite; He did not have the status of his family background.

He was not anything. However His teaching had the ring of authority. Why was that? What did the people see? Where does Scripture say this so easily seen authority come from?

John 14:6

⁶ Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Jesus did not just speak the truth but in some mysterious manner he was truth in the flesh. Jesus was sent by the Father, his authority came from God. That's why he didn't have to appeal to human tradition or to the opinions of fallible men. He spoke the truth because he is the truth.

Matthew 24:35

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

And this is when people start to balk. We like our authority a little more scientific than that. Many today say the same things about Jesus as the Pharisees and Scribes of His day. “What makes you think this man who lived so long ago still has authority today? Prove it!” they say.

I find it somewhat ironic that scientists, people whose success in their profession depends entirely upon their *authority* as a scientist, are often so completely opposed to religion of pretty much any kind. We believe so many things on authority. Some of the simplest things are believed based on authority and nothing alone.

Like the fact that excessive exposure to sunlight can lead to skin cancer. Or the fact that the world is round. Or how your body works. Or...or...or...I could keep going for a while. Practically everything we know is, in some way, believed on authority. You believe it because your parents told you. Or your teacher. Or the local news anchor. Or your friend. Or whomever. Someone you trust told you something and so you believe that it is true. We tend to give authority away and then at other times resist authority ‘just cuz’.

Do not be scared by the word authority. Believing things on authority only means believing them because you have been told them by someone you think is trustworthy. Ninety-nine per cent of the things you believe are believed on authority. I believe there is such a place as New York. I have not seen it myself. I could not prove by abstract reasoning that there must be such a place. I believe it because reliable people have told me so. The ordinary man believes in the Solar System, atoms, evolution, and the circulation of the blood on authority — because the scientists say so. Every historical statement in the world is believed on authority. None of us has seen the Norman Conquest or the defeat of the Armada. None of us could prove them by pure logic as you prove a thing in mathematics. We believe them simply because people who did see them have left writings that tell us about them: in fact, on authority. A man who jibbed at authority in other things as some people do in religion would have to be content to know nothing all his life.

~ *CS Lewis*

We hold to this principle in nearly every aspect of our life. *Except* religion. I think at least part of the reason we have a hard time applying this "on authority" principle to religion is because, unlike taking facts about science or language on authority, if you take religion on authority, it changes *everything*.

Whether or not the Revolutionary War actually happened does not affect your every day actions. In fact,

our tendency is to go about each day completely taking for granted the fact that our forefathers fought and *died* so we could live in freedom.

That's why it's harder to take religion — especially something like Christianity — on authority. Because if you take Christianity on authority, you've got a lot of things that need to change. You can't just do what you want anymore. Your life is no longer your own. Christ and Christ alone has authority.

How are we to then live?

If we believe in Christ as incarnate truth, who has absolute authority in our lives then we must yield to His Rule and Reign; to His kingdom authority. If you do not believe then you will challenge His authority, as Pilate did. In the Gospel of John we read this account of one of Jesus' last conversations (John 19:7-11):

The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God." When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.

So this passage answers the last question standing perhaps; If Jesus had so much authority, why did he die? How did these underlings who had no authority succeed in bringing Jesus down? You see Jesus, on His own authority given to Him by His Heavenly Father, laid His life down willingly. On His own authority. That is why this table is a table of authority.

This is the table that celebrates the absolute authority of Jesus Christ. He chose to die for us. And another wonderful truth emerges at this table - the authority that Christ enjoys is ours as well. Through the power of the Holy Spirit and the Obedience of the Son, we too have the same authority. Jesus said. "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these."

Table/Communion