

The Bedrock Principle of Authority

AUTHORITY (*noun*) — the power or right to determine, control, command, judge, or prohibit the action of others; dominion; jurisdiction.

We interact with authority every day. We submit ourselves to authority every day. We depend on authority every day. At the gas pump. In the grocery store. When we look at our watches. As we use our money. When we drive our motor vehicles. As we leave the pharmacy.

We expect the fresh fruits and vegetables that we buy to meet a certain standard of cleanliness and quality. We take for granted the fact that the prescriptions our pharmacists fill have been regulated and approved by a governing authority. Every single time we cruise beside someone on the highway or fly by another car on a narrow two-way street, we assume that all involved are going to abide by the regulating standards of lawful authority.

Standards of authority have power to teach, reprove, correct and train. When different people with differing ideas and varying histories and conflicting agendas agree to abide under a common standard of authority, unity of mind and purpose is possible. There is potential for peaceful and constructive coexistence. Disagreements can be settled and a clear vision for collective purpose and action in the future can be established.

If I were to ask you how long this line is...

...what would you say? What would you do? Is there anyone who would disagree that we *can* come to a common understanding of exactly how long that line is? And is there any doubt as to how we would come to agreement? By appealing to a common standard of measuring authority.

God as the Ultimate Authority

With those simple principles in mind, carefully read God's communication to the Israelites in Leviticus 18.1-5.

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the LORD your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD."

In Leviticus 19.1-2, he continued,

"Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy."

It is a principle that is reiterated in the New Testament.

Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (1 Pet 1.13-16)

Why would God act as if he has the right to define, command, prohibit and judge? Why should we feel compelled to be as he is? He is the Creator of all things (Genesis 1-2). He is the Giver of all good things (James 1.17). He is the Owner of all things (Psalm 50.10), including our spirits (Ecclesiastes 12.7). Therefore, we ought not be surprised that he presents himself as sovereign and authoritative.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isa 55.1-2)

Which means...

- ▶ My **feelings** and **hunches** and **goals** are not the ultimate standard of authority.

There is a way that seems right to a man,
but its end is the way to death. (Prov 14.12)

- ▶ My **past personal experiences** are not the ultimate standard of authority.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" (Matt 7.21-23)

- ▶ My **relatives** are not the ultimate standard of authority.

"Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." (Matt 10.37)

- ▶ The **majority** is not the ultimate standard of authority.

“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.”
(Matt 7.13)

- ▶ **Religious leaders** are not the ultimate standard of authority.

And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’

You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.” (Mark 7.6-8)

- ▶ My own **conscience** is not the ultimate standard of authority.

“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth.” (Acts 26.9)

- ▶ **God is the ultimate standard of authority.**

Concrete Old Testament Examples

A great many examples of men and women who interacted with, submitted themselves to and faithfully depended upon God as the ultimate standard of authority have been preserved for us in the Old Testament. These accounts have been providentially preserved “for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom 15.4). For instance,

Noah, in Genesis 6:

- ▶ Was given the responsibility by God to build an ark (6.14).
- ▶ Did all that God commanded him to do (6.22).
- ▶ Was preserved by God (7.23; Heb 11.7).

Abel, in Genesis 4:

- ▶ Offered the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions as a sacrifice to God (4.4).
- ▶ Was regarded as offering “a more acceptable sacrifice” to God than Cain (Heb 11.4-5).
- ▶ Pleas'd the LORD (Gen 4.4).

Abraham, in Genesis 12:

- ▶ Was told to leave his country and go to the land that God would show him (12.1).
- ▶ Obeyed, as the LORD had told him (12.4).
- ▶ Was richly blessed and powerfully used by God (Heb 11.12).

But not everyone was willing to submit themselves to God in the Old Testament. Consider a few examples on the other side of the spectrum.

Cain, in Genesis 4:

- ▶ Brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground (4.3).
- ▶ Did not “do well” (4.7)
- ▶ Did not enjoy the regard of God for his offering and was reproved (4.5-7).

Nadab and Abihu, Leviticus 10:

- ▶ Were assigned the task of offering sacrifices to God with “authorized” fire (Exo 30.9).
- ▶ Offered “unauthorized fire before the LORD” (Lev 10.1).
- ▶ Were consumed with fire from the LORD (Lev 10.2).

A man gathering sticks, Numbers 15:

- ▶ Was to do no work nor kindle a fire on the Sabbath (Exo 20.10; 35.3).
- ▶ Gathered sticks on the Sabbath (15.32).
- ▶ Was stoned to death by commandment of the LORD (15.35).

In each case, there was some sort of expectation defined by God, there were actions on the part of the people created in his image, and there were consequences of those actions. When these people interacted with God, they were interacting with the ultimate standard of authority. By their actions, they either submitted to God as the ultimate standard of authority, or they did not. Either way, they enjoyed or suffered the consequences of their actions in light of God’s authority.

Authority as Established in the *New Testament*

We clearly discover in Matthew 21.23-27 that the chief priests and elders of the people in Jesus’ day appreciated the need for and expected (at least when it suited their purposes) a source of authority to back up human actions.

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?**” Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” And they discussed it among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

Jesus, as he so masterfully did on other occasions, exposes the true condition of their hearts by raising the issue of the baptism of John. “From where did it come?” John needed authority for his actions, but who was the source of that authority? “From heaven?” Did God grant John the authority to preach and do what he was doing, thereby making it legitimate and authoritative?

“Or from man?” There can be only two ultimate sources of authority—heaven or human. If heaven, why wouldn’t we respond? If human, why couldn’t we take it or leave it?

Throughout his ministry, Jesus acted as one who had authority. When he had finished his famous sermon overlooking the Sea of Galilee, “the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt 7.28-29). In Matthew 9:1-8,

And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city. And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.” And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.” But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he then said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.” And he rose and went home. When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

But the clearest statement of Jesus concerning his authority was delivered after his resurrection from the dead, prior to his ascension into heaven.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28.16-20)

From this point on, these appointed ambassadors of Jesus acted with an important measure of delegated authority. Remember that Jesus had promised that they would be guided by the Holy Spirit of God (John 16.7-14; 14.26; 15.26; 17.8, 14). They consistently preached Jesus as their authoritative King and head over the church (Eph 1.22-23), but they also made claims like this:

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Cor 5.20)

Those who say we need only to give heed to the words of Jesus would do well to remember his charge to his earliest followers in Luke 10.16. “The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me.” Conversely, in John 13.20, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.”

In John 20.19-23, Jesus commissioned these specially chosen men with an awesome responsibility.

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

Jesus sent the apostles—with authority—just as his Father had sent him. He commanded them, as the source of all authority in heaven and on earth, to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy, teaching them to observe all that they had received from him.

In Acts 2, Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed a great multitude of Jews with authority. Jesus had promised to give "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" in Matthew 16, and those keys were authoritatively used on the Day of Pentecost following Jesus' atoning sacrifice to open the doors of access to God.

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2.41-42)

From this point forward, the apostles' teaching was held as authoritative. They were commissioned envoys of the risen Christ—empowered by the Holy Spirit with "the good news" of Jesus and verified by incredible miraculous signs (Mark 16.17-18). Wherever they went, they proclaimed "the doctrine of Christ" (2 John 4-9). In the words of the apostle Paul,

I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. (1 Cor 4.16-17)

What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (Phil 4.9)

We interact with heavenly authority as we handle the New Testament. It is only a question of whether or not we will submit ourselves to it and depend upon it during our time on the earth.

Questions for Growth and Discussion

1. In your own words, what is authority and why is it important?
2. Take the time to reread God's words in Leviticus 18.1-5 and 19.1-2. What is he saying?
3. Why would God follow up his commandments, prohibitions and promises of judgment with straightforward statements like those that we read in Isaiah 55.1-2?
4. Why would my feelings hunches and goals be an inadequate source of ultimate authority?
5. *Vox populi, vox dei* is a famous ancient Latin phrase that means, "the voice of the people is the voice of God." Why is that not the case?
6. We briefly looked at three Old Testament examples of people who interacted with, submitted themselves to and faithfully depended upon God as the ultimate standard of authority? Can you think of other Old Testament examples?
7. And what about Old Testament examples of people who were unwilling to submit themselves to God? Can you list a few more examples than were mentioned in the material?
8. What were the "keys of the kingdom of heaven" that Jesus promised in Matthew 16?
9. Why is "from heaven or from men" still a valid gauge for modern religious authority and practice?
10. In your own words, what is "the doctrine of Christ" referenced in 2 John 4-9?