

Understanding Biblical Authority

Explore Your Faith Teaching Series - Explo-15 ©

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OUTLINE

Introduction:

What is our criterion for truth? What can we appeal to when we have differences and conflicts? How can we determine what is correct teaching? Whenever issues are constantly debated, isn't it true that the underlying issue is really a disagreement on 'authority'? Why is this so? It is because 'authority' gives force to what we hold to be true in any area of life! Most of the beliefs we hold, or the behaviour we engage in, are largely determined by a prior decision (whether deliberately or even unconsciously) about where *authority* lie, regardless of whether it be a religious or secular matter. In fact, every time we take a stand on some doctrinal issue, whether it be 'the incarnation or the virgin birth (or whatever); we rely on 'authority' to win the day.

Whilst raising the question of 'authority' for a particular belief or behaviour may not resolve a disagreement (church history shows us that!), it does help to clarify **real points of difference**. **Understanding 'Authority' is therefore a vitally important basis for any exposition of Christian belief (doctrine).**

So, what is 'Authority'? What does it mean? What is its source? What are its implications for us as Christians? In this session we are going to examine 'Authority' from a Biblical (i.e., theological) perspective.

Here we examine its meaning, its source, its legitimate use and in whom invested. Knowing where proper authority lies is of paramount importance in the avoidance of abuse.

The meaning of Authority

One definition of authority is 'the right or power to require obedience'.

Usage in NT:

- The Greek word translated 'authority' is *exousia* = **rightful, actual, and unimpeded power to act, or to possess, control, use, dispose of, something or somebody**. The word signifies power that is in some sense lawful, the stress being on the rightfulness of power really held or possessed. Sometimes used in a general secular sense to describe self-control (e.g. Acts 5:4)

- Different from the Gk. word *dynamis* (or *dunamis*) which means 'power to act', but is more related to physical power.

Both **directly** and **by implication**, the Bible asserts that the only rightful power within the creation is, ultimately, the Creator's. That it was always God's intention to give 'authority' to man can be clearly seen in the first chapters of Genesis, and thence on at various stages through the Bible. Whatever authority men may rightfully exercise is delegated to them by God, to whom they must answer for the way they use it.

Think about this: because all authority is ultimately God's, submission to authority in all walks of life is a religious duty, part of our service to God. Once the Christian grasps this fundamental principle, the question of authority then simply becomes one of finding out what God's will is (for his own life) and doing it! (In the light of this, how do you see 'rebellion'?)

Note: it is important to not confuse the authority of an office with that of a person.

A. AUTHORITY IN PERSONS

1. God's authority

- Unalterable, universal and eternal dominion over his world (see Ex. 15:18; Ps.29: 10; Deut.4: 32 -39. ET al) *as Creator*
- Kingly authority
 - unchallengeable right to dispose of men as he pleases (potter /clay-Rom. 9:21)
 - Indisputable claim that men should be subject to him and live for his glory

-His authority exercised (in OT times) **through prophets** [*proclaiming* his messages (Jer. 1:7 ff.), **priests** [*teaching* his laws (Deut. 31:11), and **kings** [*ruling* in accordance with his laws (Deut. 17:18: ff)].

2. Jesus Christ's authority

- Personal (son of man, 'messianic man') and official (Son of God) and real (delegated by God - recognized by the centurion in Mt. 8:9).
- Authority to judge (Divine Messiah; office of human servant & divine Son)
 - As 'Son of God', as God himself, (because judgment is **god's** work)
 - As 'son of man', as man (because judgment is the messiah's work; Jn.5: 22, 27)
- Demonstrated in his teaching (Mt. 7:28 f); his claim to forgive sins (Mk 2:5-12 et al); His power to cast out demons (Mk 1:27); his power over the elements (/forces of nature (Lk. 8:24 f) etc.

3. Authority delegated

a) Specifically to the Apostles: (n.b. "*exousia*")

- To regulate his universal church (2 Cor. 10:8). This includes prescribing discipline, giving orders in His name (1 Cor. 5:4; 2 Thess. 3:6), appointing deacons (Acts 3:6), presenting teaching (e.g., 1 Cor. 2:9-13) and norms for faith (e.g., 2 Thess. 2:15; Gal 1:8) and codes of behaviour (e.g. 2 Thess. 3:4 f.)
- *Under this authority*, leaders may claim obedience because they are Christ's servants, commissioned to look after the flock of Christ (Heb. 13 :17; 1 Pe. 5:1-6)

b) Specifically to Men and to Parents (i.e., both men *and* women)

- Men over women (1 Cor. 11:3; 1 Tim.2: 12) (***important to get a good understanding of this, because it is a contentious issue in worldly thinking***)
- Parents over children (1 Tim 3:4, 12)
- God's order is for wives to obey their husbands (Eph. 5:22; 1 Pe. 3:1-6) and for children to obey their parents (Eph. 6:1ff.) *However, we must never forget that there are also safeguards that are to be in place* so that authority is not abused.

c) Specifically to Civil Authorities.

- Regarded as God's servants, to punish wrong -doers and encourage law-abiding (Rom. 13:1-6)
- Regarded as God ordained and to be obeyed as long as as it does not involve disobedience of God's direct commands (e.g., Acts 4:19; 5:29)

Think about this: does Satan have authority? If so how can he exercise it and why? Is it 'delegated' authority? How would you describe it?

B. THE AUTHORITY OF GOD'S WORD

This topic has been dealt with at length in a previous session.

C. OTHER SOURCES OF AUTHORITY

It is important to remember that all of these only serve as secondary forms of authority. *Not one of them is complete or adequate in itself and so should not be relied upon as a conclusive or absolute of final source of authority. They have their uses and their limitations.*

1. The Creeds (why and when were they formulated?)
2. The Historic Confessions (e.g. Westminster Confession)
3. Consensus as to what one should believe (how safe is this?)
4. Subjective experience (how can this substantiate doctrines?)

5. Reason or Rationalization as a means of acceptance

Conclusion