

# The Authority of the Message

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In Matt 21:23 we read,

*Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?"*

Why did they ask him this question? Because in matters of religion, whether teaching, worship, moral behavior, or whatever, for it to be valid it must be "of God." If something is "of God," it has his authority behind it and we can rest assured that he is pleased with our actions.

Why is this important? Because pleasing God is what true religion is all about. Pleasing self is the antithesis of true religion. This is the *litmus paper test* of every man's religion. If the intent of his religious quest is to find God and to live so as to have fellowship with God, then his religion will lead him to God and his life will truly be filled with God. If, however, the intent of his religious quest is to find ways of exalting himself to the place of God and to live his life so as to please himself, then he will never find God and his life will be a self-willed, self-serving, self-centered existence, even though all is done in the name of religion.

The primary cause of conflict between man and God, from the early chapters of Genesis to the present day, has centered in the issue we have introduced here. In a word we are talking about "lordship." God, as man's Creator, and as Creator of the universe, is Lord of all he created. Man has a problem with this! Especially is this evident in

the present day. Man seems to be endeavoring to systematically eliminate God and any influence of God from the face of the earth. The great "religion" of the 20th century is "humanism," which is, in essence, a philosophical ideology that sets man at the center of the world, with all authority in heaven and on earth given unto him.

What has all this to do with the issue of the authority in matters of religion? Everything! If our religion is going to be "of God," the source of our religious beliefs and practices must be rooted in God, not man. How can we know what is "of God" and what is "of man?" We must have some way of determining that what we believe is truly "of God" and not "of man."

This has not been the common practice in the religious quest of man. His rule of faith (i.e., his criteria for deciding what he should or should not do in matters of religion) has been "himself." It is what the majority of men say, or what the theologians, scholars, or the leading religious figures say, or what our traditions (the orthodox viewpoint) say, or what I personally feel, or what one's conscience says that serves as man's rule of faith in matters of religion. All of this is religion that centers in man as the authoritative figure - and all of this is the religion "of man."

## The Authority Of Man

### *The Rule of the Majority*

It is very hard to believe that something is wrong if everyone believes it is right. But, as the study of history shows, the masses can be, and most often are, wrong. From the beginning of recorded history to the present this fact can be demonstrated, again and again. Nation after nation, in fact, whole civilizations have destroyed themselves by wrong thinking and behavior. This is a fact repeatedly stressed in the Biblical record of man. From the very beginning of his existence this has been so. In the days of Noah the majority opinion was that Noah was wrong in his beliefs that God was going to destroy the world; a universal flood was out of the question. But the flood did come and the majority of the human race died as a result of

their arrogance and ignorance. Only eight people were saved from the destruction of the flood because they were the only ones who would listen to the revelation of God.

Jesus taught that it was the tendency of the masses not to follow the truths revealed by God. In Matt 7:13-14 he says:

*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*

This fact is demonstrated in the ministry of Jesus. The masses that followed him also rejected him. In John 5 Jesus fed 5,000 people; in chapter 6, however, all, with exception of the twelve, rejected him. But the majority was wrong in their thinking and the few were right. On the day Jesus was crucified the majority of the people rejected him as the Messiah, crying out, "Crucify him!" (Matt 27:15-26.) Again, "the majority" was wrong. Majority opinion does not appear to be a reliable rule of faith in matters of religion.

### *The Rule of Dogma*

People have forever tended to let their religious leaders do their thinking for them. For some reason, in matters of religion, "indoctrination" is far more popular than "education." In indoctrination one is taught *what* to think and is discouraged from thinking differently than he has been taught. This teaching is usually determined by religious scholars and is approved as the orthodox teaching, or dogma, to be following by the faithful. In education, however, one is taught *how* to think and is confronted with questions or issues designed to make him think. In this way the believer is encouraged to think for himself and draw those conclusion he thinks justified by the information given him. Sad to say, indoctrination is, by far, the most common method of teaching religion - and always has been.

Men known as scholars, theologians, ministers, elders, etc. usually have informed or learned opinions on most religious issues.

Their opinions, however, may be flawed, as were those of the scribes, lawyers, elders, priests and rabbis of Jesus' day. With few exceptions, all of them were wrong on the most critical religious issue of their time. In Matt 22 Jesus decisively defeats the Jewish leaders in debate and, in chapter 23, gave a devastating critique of the "religious truth" they taught. Their teachings were anything but a reliable rule of faith in matters of religion. Teachers of religion may serve as a source of data or provide information for consideration by those they teach, but the people they are instructing should be encouraged to take the data given them and draw their own conclusions from it. If there is every good reason to accept it and no good reason to reject it, then it may be considered believable. If, however, there is no good reason to believe it and good reason to reject it, they should reject it. The truth we seek should always be found in the text of Scripture, not in our religious leaders' interpretation or pontification on the meaning of the text. We should not be concerned with *who* is right, but *what* is right. Any man, no matter how learned, can be wrong.

### *The Rule of Tradition*

Tradition simply means, "that which is handed down." Tradition, in and of itself, is not bad, if what has been handed down is truly "of God." When, however, a given interpretation of Scripture or religious practice is given authoritative status by time and tradition, thus becoming the orthodox (right or authoritative) teaching, the tradition has become the rule of faith and not the text of Scripture. This is "traditionalism" and traditionalism has given tradition a bad name. Tradition is not a bad thing, it is only when it becomes an authoritative way of determining religious truth that it becomes "traditionalism." It was "traditionalism" Jesus spoke of in Mark 7:1-13.

*The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were unclean, that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to **the tradition of the elders**. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they*

observe many other **traditions**, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.) So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to **the tradition of the elders** instead of eating their food with unclean hands?" He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to **the traditions of men.**" And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe **your own traditions!** For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by **your tradition that you have handed down.** And you do many things like that."

By "tradition," here in these verses, Jesus is talking about the established or "orthodox" interpretations of Scripture attributed to certain revered rabbis and elders of established Judaism. This was the body of teaching making up the "Oral Torah" which was claimed to be very ancient and was considered equal in authority to the Law of Moses. Considering something to be to be authoritative by virtue of its status as "tradition," is a common practice still. We hear such expressions as, "the orthodox teaching," "the official position," "sound doctrine," and "the truth on the matter." What one must always keep in mind is that anything taught by a man is simply "that man's teachings." If we do not draw the same conclusions, then we must say, "We do not believe what he believes." The truth is found in the "text" not in the interpretation of the text. A given interpretation may be true, but not because it is the interpretation of an authoritative religious figure or learned teacher; rather, it is the truth to us because we are convinced by the exegetical data or the reasoning and argumentation presented. One should draw only such conclusions as are warranted by adequate evidence, especially if that evidence is drawn from the text of Scripture. If "the orthodox teaching" or

"traditional position" does not appear to be supported by the text of Scripture, it may not be the truth on the matter at all, and the weight of tradition cannot make it true.

### *Personal Feelings, Sincerity, Conscience*

In the name of "following one's heart" one can justify almost any practice no matter how wrong, immoral, or condemned by God. Untold numbers have been led to devastation and ruin, crying as they go, "I only know what I feel!" But if what we feel cannot be shown to be truly of God, then it is wrong and no amount of emotion, no matter how strongly felt, can make it the right thing to do or believe.

If one feels strongly about a given religious teaching, or, even more, if one is "made to feel good" by a certain religious teaching, it is the next thing to impossible to convince him that what he believes is in need of re-thinking. Emotion is that powerful. In a conflict between emotion and intellect, emotion will win out almost every time. Human reason is no match for human emotion, no doubt because our feelings can cancel out our thinking.

The world is filled with opinions that are more informed by emotion than reason. It is critical that in matters of religion we not let our feelings about a given belief displace a responsible and thorough hearing of the text. If we are to hear God we must listen to him with our total being. Jesus was addressing just this point when he added to Deut 6:5 the phrase, "with all your mind." The OT text of Deut 6:4-5 reads:

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*

In Mark 12:29-30, when Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment of the Law, he quotes Deut 6:4-5, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul **and with all your mind** and with all

your strength." He adds to the Hebrew text of Deut 6, the phrase, "and with all your mind." In the teaching of Jesus, we are to love God "with all of our minds" as much as loving him "with all of our hearts." If we are to hear him, we must listen with our minds as well as our hearts, our strength (or energies), and all of our souls (our total being).

Why such an emphasis here? Because here is where we are most vulnerable. God repeatedly instructs us concerning this danger. In Proverbs 14:12 and 16:25 we are told, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." Even Paul the apostle of Christ, in his quest for religious truth, listened to his emotions rather than the revelation of God and erred in his beliefs and actions. In Acts 26:9 he states, "I verily thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth." He followed his feelings and his feelings were inadequate at this point. In fact, his feelings led him to attempt to destroy those who differed with him in their religious beliefs, something true religion will never do. Neither the weight of numbers, nor the authority of years, nor the intensity of sincerity can make a thing right if it is, in fact, wrong.

It is apparent that man, in and of himself, is not a reliable or legitimate source of authority in matters of religion: neither large numbers, or scholarship, or established tradition, or the depth of feeling, sincerity, or conscience can serve us well as a faithful rule of faith in matters of religion. As Jer 10:23 says: "O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps." If man is to find religion that is "of God," perhaps he would do well to find a rule of faith that is "of God."

## The Authority Of God

### *The Authority Of The Message*

The God of Christianity is a God of revelation who can be found in and through that revelation. He has revealed himself in creation and through reason man can come to the conclusion that behind the "effect" we know as creation there must be a "cause"

adequate enough to have produced it. Further, this Creator has revealed something of himself to us in his name. He is the God who makes his name known and each name reveals something of who he is. Further, he has revealed his nature to us. The supernatural and moral attributes of God are revealed to us in Scripture, but his greatest revelation of himself came in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In him God walked in our midst. He has been here as "one of us" and all the while he was "God with us."

What we are talking about here is the story of God's revelation of himself to man. This story is preserved for us in Christianity's most valued earthly treasure, an ancient collection of writings called "the Scriptures." This is why these writings are so important to us, within their pages is preserved the story of God's revelation of himself to his creation. This is why these writings are considered authoritative to those who believe them. Within these writings we are confronted with God's revelation of himself to man. Why he would do this is difficult to understand, but the answer is found in the story of God's creation of man. Man is created in the image of God and is to reflect this uniqueness in his own existence. In order for man to fulfill this desire of God, he must know his God in order to know himself and be what he was created to be. This is why God came down and walked among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus we see our Creator, the Father; and we see who we should be if we are to live as beings created in the image of God.

### *The Message of Jesus*

Although God has revealed himself to man throughout his sojourn on this earth, man has over and over again failed to see what God has attempted to show him. Through the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (the Hebrew Scriptures), God gave man instruction in moral and ethical behavior. Because God is Holy and Good he has revealed to man that he is to be holy and good, but the greater part of mankind did not, and would not, hear this message. He then came down to give mankind a revelation of himself unlike any revelation given before. He came in person to show us who he was and to tell us who he created us to be. In Jesus God came into our midst to

redeem us from our existence "in Adam" and provide us a way to become new creations "in Christ." This redemption drama is the story proclaimed as the gospel (God's story) by Jesus himself and by those he chose and sent out as his messengers or apostles. The message they proclaimed was that in Jesus God had been here to reclaim his creation. The opening lines of the epistle to the Hebrews addresses this very point:

*God, who at various times and in various 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, through whom also he made the worlds; who being the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become so much better than the angels, as he has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they (Heb 1:1-4).*

The superiority of the revelation of God in Christ over all prior revelation is a theme that runs throughout the New Testament, and is explicitly expressed by Jesus himself in Matt 28:18-20:

*Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

### *The Apostolic Message*

Possessing all authority "in heaven and on earth" makes Jesus Lord of the whole of our realm of existence. This is who Jesus was proclaimed to be by the early Christians, from the first sermon on Pentecost:

*God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the*

*promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, "'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:32-36).*

In Paul's letters, Jesus is proclaimed as Lord absolute and the one in whom God's kingdom/reign on earth is revealed:

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:9-11; see also 1 Cor 15:27).*

The name above every name, which has been given to Jesus, is *Kurios* or Lord. This is the very name by which God himself was called by first century Jews and Christians. As Paul writes in 2 Cor 5:19, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." In the person of Jesus of Nazareth God was here. To believe this is to believe in the greatest of all divine revelations. In this revelation redemption is found and the transformation of our existence is effected. At the heart of this revelation stands Jesus as Lord. Seeing him in the midst of this revelation and confessing him as our Lord is what saves us and makes us new creations in Christ. As Paul says in Rom 10:9, "if you confess with your mouth, '**Jesus is Lord,**' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Christianity is a religion born in revelation. Our record of this revelation is preserved in the Old and New Testament Scriptures. These writings are important to us because they are believed to be authoritative documentation of God's revelation of himself in Christ. They are "of God" and the authors of these documents saw themselves as agents or trustees of this revelation and believed their preaching, teaching, and literary productions to be inspired of God.

The speeches of Jesus and his apostles, as contained in the Gospels, Acts of Apostles, and the writings of the apostles, contain the message that Jesus instructed his disciples to carry into all the world. The apostles of Christ were essentially the messengers with whom Jesus entrusted the message. That message is, essentially, that in the person Jesus of Nazareth God has been here and he came to re-claim his creation. This message contains the story of how God redeemed the human race and the means by which men may experience this redemption. This message is the message Jesus entrusted to those he called his apostles. This message was invested with his authority. His authority as Lord of heaven and earth is intrinsic within the message. The authority of the message is the authority of the one sending the message, the one who is Lord of heaven and earth.

### *All Authority Has Been Given to Me*

This is the significance of his instruction to these messengers in Matt 28:18-20.

*Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

The disciples to whom Jesus was speaking here later became known as the apostles of Christ, a title taken from the Greek word *apostolos*, from the verb *apostello*, meaning, "to send." The word "apostle" means, "one sent with a message," or "a messenger." Jesus sent out these messengers with a message containing the story of God's redemption of the human race. His message was filled with authority because he was filled with authority - all authority in heaven and on earth. His commission to his apostles invested them with authority, and that authority was limited to their Lord's mandate, "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to

obey everything I have commanded you." With God, one is only given as much authority as is necessary to fulfill the responsibilities given him. The authority of these men is directly connected to this commission and the one who gave it. These messengers or apostles of Christ were given the responsibility of proclaiming to their world the message their Lord had given them. Because of this they were authoritative representatives of the one sending them and their words were authoritative because they were spoken in fulfillment of Christ's instructions to them as their Lord.

As said earlier, Christianity is a religion of revelation and that revelation is authoritative, but we need to understand that this body of revelation only has authority because it is invested with the authority of the one sending it. The authority of any message resides not in the content of the message itself but in the authority of the one sending the message. The apostles were the messengers of Christ, thus it was Christ who gave the message its authority. We must be careful that our loyalty and devotion be centered in the one sending the message and not in the message itself. It is easy to allow the message to become an icon substituted for the one in whom the authority truly resides. In the first century Jewish culture, the scrolls of the *Torah* became a virtual icon representing the presence of God in the worship services of the synagogue. The very chest containing the scrolls was called "the Ark of the Covenant" and represented the presence of God. Devotion to *Torah* was so great to some Jews that it displaced God as the focus of their worship and the Jewish religion as a whole. Religion that centers in a collection of writings can be as idolatrous as any other practice that displaces God as the center of the worshippers' beliefs and practices. The Scriptures are important to us because the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth are preserved for us there, and it is he who has the words of eternal life.

## Conclusion

It is Jesus who is our Lord, not the writings containing the apostles' recollections of his life and teachings. As mentioned above, this error of first century Judaism can become our error. The Scriptures were given to reveal God to them; it was he who was their

Lord. They, however, made "the Law" their Lord. This is not to say that the Scriptures are not important, they are essential to our knowledge of God and his will for our lives. They may not, however, be allowed to displace Christ as the focal point of our religion. In John 5:39, Jesus said to the people of his time, "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and these are they which bear witness of me; and you will not come to me, that you may have life." The Scriptures are important because in them we see Christ and "in him" (not "in them") we find redemption, transformation, and eternal life. The Scriptures lead us to "him," not his commands or teaching, but "him!" His teachings are important because they are "his" teachings, and "he" is our Lord; thus, his teachings are authoritative for us.

We must make every effort not to reduce Christ and his lordship over our lives to a cataloguing of his teachings. Somehow, Jesus as Lord gets lost in all of this and the Scriptures become "a book of law" with its contents reigning as "lord of our lives" rather than the one who is the central figure of the divine revelation contained in Scripture. It is essential that we understand that our Lord is a person, not a book. This book that is so important to us is important because it reveals him, and that is the revelation we must see in order to embrace the religion of Christianity. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, he is to one who has sent this message to us, and this is why there is authority in the message.

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### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Was the question asked of Jesus in Matt 21:23 a legitimate question? Why or why not? Give a reason for your answer.
2. Do you think that majority opinion is usually a good criterion to follow in determining true belief? In a democracy this is the way things work, why is it not legitimate to follow this rule in religion?
3. Are theologians, scholars, and churchmen legitimate sources of

authority in matters of religion. In what ways should they be followed or not followed? Do they have a contribution to make to one's faith? If so, what is it?

4. Is following tradition always wrong? Why or why not? In what ways is tradition good and in what ways is it not good?

5. Why is following one's feelings not a safe guide in matters of religion? Is following one's heart ever the right thing to do? Why or why not?

6. Why is religion that centers in revelation such an important concept in the search for true religion?

7. Why are the New Testament writings given such importance in the Christian religion; especially as a rule of faith and practice?

8. Why is it important to stress the point that Christianity's lord is a person not a book? Is one undermining the value of the New Testament by giving such emphasis to the lordship of Christ?

9. What lesson can we learn from Jesus' statement in John 5:39, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me"?

10. Is the New Testament our rule of faith because it is a collection of Christ's commandments or is it our rule of faith because it contains the revelation of who God is as shown us by Jesus?