

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ! In this edition I'll be looking at the subject of authority as described in the scriptures.

I'm extending an invitation for submissions to be published in The Gospel Notes Newsletter. The primary criteria for inclusion are these:

1. It should be oriented towards the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
2. It should use the scriptures as a source of information.
3. It should include the references for any quoted 3rd party sources.
4. It should not be political.

Also, if you have particular subjects that you would like me to cover in the Newsletter, please let me know.

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Mark 1:19-20 Inspired Version), 1:21-22 (King James Version 21-22)

19 And they went into Capernaum; and straightway on the Sabbath day he entered into the synagogue and taught.

20 **And they were astonished at his doctrine; for he taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes.**

Matthew 21:21-25 (Inspired Version), 21:23-27 (King James Version)

21 And when he was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching and said, **By what authority doest thou these things? And who gave thee this authority?**

22 And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I, likewise, will tell you by what authority I do these things.

23 The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven or of men?

24 And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven, he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him? But if we shall say, Of men, we fear the people. For all people held John as a prophet. And they answered Jesus and said, We cannot tell.

25 And he said, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.

Luke 9:1 Then he called his twelve disciples together, and **he gave them power and authority** over all devils and to cure diseases.

There have been divisions in Christendom concerning authority, some of which comes down to the question of, “Authority **for what?**” Most Catholics would confess that authority originates with Christ, but is passed down to the Pope, and to the church in general, and the authority to interpret scripture in particular. Note the following:

“The scope of this authority concerns the official teachings of the Church on matters of faith, morals, and worship (liturgy & sacraments). **We believe that, because of Christ's continued presence and guarantee, his Church cannot lead people astray with its official teachings** (which are distinct from the individual failings and opinions of its members, priests, bishops, and Popes).”

- <https://www.beginningcatholic.com/church-authority>

“Vatican II explained the doctrine of infallibility as follows: **‘Although the individual bishops do not enjoy the prerogative of infallibility, they can nevertheless proclaim Christ's doctrine infallibly**. This is so, even when they are dispersed around the world, provided that while maintaining the bond of unity among themselves and with Peter's successor, and while teaching authentically on a matter of faith or morals, they concur in a single viewpoint as the one which must be held conclusively. This authority is even more clearly verified when, gathered together in an ecumenical council, they are teachers and judges of faith and morals for the universal Church. Their definitions must then be adhered to with the submission of faith’ (Lumen Gentium 25).”

- <https://www.catholic.com/tract/papal-infallibility>

(My note: This is a bit of philosophical nonsense, on the one hand claiming individual Catholic bishops are not infallible and yet as a body they are.)

Further, in the same article,

“It is the Holy Spirit who prevents the pope from officially teaching error, and this charism follows necessarily from the existence of the Church itself. If, as Christ promised, the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church then it must be protected from fundamentally falling into error and thus away from Christ. It must prove itself to be a perfectly steady guide in matters pertaining to salvation.”

And later again,

“Of course, **infallibility does not include a guarantee that any particular pope won't ‘neglect’ to teach the truth, or that he will be sinless, or that mere disciplinary decisions will be intelligently made**. It would be nice if he were omniscient or impeccable, but his not being so will fail to bring about the destruction of the Church.”

In sum, there is in the Catholic doctrine a series of self-justifications that necessarily contradict one another to provide the pope and his bishops an easy explanation for any number of errors that might be found throughout the history of the Catholic church, essentially giving permission for the pope to be called “infallible” when it is suitable for enforcing preferred doctrines, and “speaking on his own behalf” when his decrees fall unfavorably upon the history of that institution.

It is not my intent to denigrate the Catholic church, but to show here that true authority is not designated by the voice of men – ***Jesus spoke as one having authority, and not as the scribes***, not only because his words were consistent, but because they carried spiritual power with them. One cannot justify authority on the basis of the continuity of the organization alone, as we see described later in the same article:

“Since Christ said the gates of hell would not prevail against his Church (Matt. 16:18b), ***this means that his Church can never pass out of existence. But if the Church ever apostasized by teaching heresy, then it would cease to exist; because it would cease to be Jesus’ Church. Thus the Church cannot teach heresy***, meaning that anything it solemnly defines for the faithful to believe is true.”

The Catholic church is not alone in beliefs such as this despite the fallacy of logic it presents. Protestant churches take a different view on authority as being found in the scriptures themselves.

“The reformers rejected the authority of the pope as well as many of the principles and practices of Catholicism of that time. ***The essential tenets of the Reformation are that the Bible is the sole authority for all matters of faith and conduct*** and that salvation is by God’s grace and by faith in Jesus Christ.”

- <https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/article/protestant-reformation/>

This view that ***“the Bible is the sole authority for all matters of faith and conduct”*** is prevalent among Protestant churches even today, which comes from a history of rejecting Catholic church authority, hence the “protesting” aspect of their church identity.

There is something valuable to understand about these two different views on authority. One, they each provide a justification for believing the authority that they hold onto as an earthly representation of something they recognize in the scriptures. That is to say, Jesus did establish a church, and he did give authority to his disciples. And this is where the discussion typically ends because of the particular tenets, or beliefs, centering around the origins of the respective religious body.

Two, these two primary different beliefs about authority made the institutions they represent necessary. Today there are dozens or maybe hundreds of denominations that possess very different doctrines from one another, but they each lay hold on the authority

of scripture preferentially to other institutions in some cases, while others might claim all Christian churches are equally attended by the authority of scripture. This, despite the scriptures themselves having been translated and interpreted very differently from one another.

Martin Luther, the “founder,” if he may so be called, of the Lutheran church was dissatisfied with the idea that authority could reside in an institution that made decidedly poor decisions about common things. The founders of other churches in the years following made similar doctrinal realizations that led to their particular brand of beliefs.

The authority “bug” that seems prevalent in most religious institutions is that, somehow, the church itself has been given authority. This is plainly obvious for the Catholic church, but it is equally prevalent among Protestant churches. It has also unfortunately become, to a greater or lesser extent, common language to members of the Church of Jesus Christ.

This view stems from perhaps a misread of the Doctrine and Covenants, Section 1, which reads thus:

D&C Section 1

2a **Behold, this is mine authority, and the authority of my servants**, and my preface unto the book of my commandments, which I have given them to publish unto you, O inhabitants of the earth;

2b wherefore, fear and tremble, O ye people, for what I, the Lord, have decreed in them shall be fulfilled.

....

5a Behold, I am God and have spoken it; these commandments are of me and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding;

5b and inasmuch as they erred, it might be made known; and inasmuch as they sought wisdom, they might be instructed;

5c and inasmuch as they sinned, they might be chastened, that they might repent; and inasmuch as they were humble, they might be made strong, and blessed from on high, and receive knowledge from time to time;

5d and after having received the record of the Nephites, yea, even my servant Joseph Smith, Jr., might have power to translate, through the mercy of God, by the power of God, the Book of Mormon;

5e and also those to whom these commandments were given might have power to lay the foundation of this church and to bring it forth out of obscurity and out of darkness, **the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth with which I, the Lord, am well pleased, speaking unto the church collectively and not individually.**

There seems to be a subtle but important conclusion made by people in the church when they draw a line between “***authority of my servants***” and “***the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth with which I, the Lord am well pleased.***” That

conclusion is that the Lord has given his church, the only true and living church on the face of the earth, authority. Yet that is neither what the scripture says nor what it implies.

The implication that this is the only church with authority from God needs to be understood for what that would mean if that were the case.

Authority means that someone has been given a responsibility to perform certain things, whether as the butler to a king it is his “authority” to test the king’s food to ensure it doesn’t have poison before giving it his approval, or a police officer being given authority to arrest criminals, or a business owner giving authority to a subordinate to approve a contract. In spiritual matters the meaning is the same, but this is where the meaning seems to get lost sometimes.

Authority in church matters, as we understand it in the Church of Jesus Christ, is as Jesus described it for his disciples when he ordained them as apostles. He called them, ordained them, and gave them “orders” such as preaching the Gospel, healing the sick, casting out devils, baptizing, giving the Holy Ghost, and so on. These “orders” are the hallmark of authority, for it would be unthinkable to give someone orders without authority to perform those orders. It would be a contradiction.

But to many these orders were for all believers, and not just to the disciples whom Jesus ordained, whether referring to the twelve apostles or to the seventy elders. It is easy to get carried away with the excitement of what Jesus did and what the apostles did, but that is no excuse for misreading the scriptures.

In reality Jesus gave relatively few church-related instructions at all in the New Testament. He gave commandments to those who would follow him, but he did not ordain his church. Such would be the case if Jesus gave his church authority. But Jesus did not give the church authority. He gave his authority to servants.

The problem of church authority is that any member of that church would have equal authority on the basis of membership alone. What members of the Church of Jesus Christ enjoy is equal privileges, not equal authority. The difference is that, for example, any member that has been baptized by one having authority is entitled, along with anyone else in the church that has likewise been baptized, to receive the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper from someone who has been ordained to the authority to administer that sacrament. But not all members may administer the sacrament because they have not been given this authority.

The writer of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament put it this way:

Hebrews 5

4 And no man taketh this honor unto himself but he that is called of God, as was Aaron.

5 So also Christ glorified not himself to be made a high priest, but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, today have I begotten thee--

6 As he saith also in another place, **Thou art a priest forever** after the order of Melchizedek,

This is the established means for how authority is supposed to be handled – it must be a calling of God and not the private will of any man. But some might say, wouldn't it be more efficient if all the church members had authority to perform the ordinances of baptism, or to administer the sacraments, or to preach, and so build up the kingdom of God?

One might equally ask why God reduced the numbers of Gideon's army from the more than 22,000 they started with down to just 300?

Judges 7

2 And the Lord said unto Gideon, **The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands,** lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me.

3 Now, therefore, go to; proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early from Mount Gilead. And there returned of the people twenty and two thousand; and there remained ten thousand.

4 And the Lord said unto Gideon, The people are yet too many; bring them down unto the water, and I will try them for thee there; and it shall be that of whom I say unto thee, This shall go with thee, the same shall go with thee; and of whomsoever I say unto thee, This shall not go with thee, the same shall not go.

5 So he brought down the people unto the water; and the Lord said unto Gideon, Everyone that lappeth of the water with his tongue as a dog lappeth, him shalt thou set by himself; likewise, everyone that boweth down upon his knees to drink.

6 And the number of them that lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, were three hundred men; but all the rest of the people bowed down upon their knees to drink water.

7 And the Lord said unto Gideon, **By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you and deliver the Midianites into thine hand; and let all the other people go, every man unto his place.**

Wouldn't it have been more efficient for God to ordain all his people to deliver Israel instead of just using 300 men? Perhaps, but that is not what God wanted, and so it is in the church and with his priesthood. God doesn't want everyone to be an apostle, or a prophet, etc. Paul even explicitly said why:

1 Corinthians 12

14 For the body is not one member, but many.

15 If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body, **is it, therefore, not of the body?**

16 And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body, **is it, therefore, not of the body?**

17 If the whole body were an eye, **where were the hearing?** If the whole were hearing, **where were the smelling?**

18 **But now hath God set the members, every one of them, in the body as it hath pleased him.**

19 And if they were all one member, where were the body?

20 But now are they many members, yet but one body.

21 And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee; nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.

22 Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary;

23 And those members of the body, which we think to be less honorable, upon these we bestow more abundant honor; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness.

Perhaps the most apparent verse of this is that “***God set the members, every one of them, in the body as it hath pleased him.***” This was a matter of God’s choosing, not a blanket statement that made every member an eye, or a leg, or an ear, which would be a pretty weird looking body.

Just as importantly, Paul later wrote to the Ephesians:

Ephesians 4:11 And he gave **some**, apostles; and **some**, prophets; and **some**, evangelists; and **some**, pastors and teachers—

Or in other words, he did not give them all to be apostles, all to be prophets, all to be evangelists, all to be pastors and teachers – but each according to a plan that he has set forth.

Exodus 4

10 And Moses said unto the Lord, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant; but I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue.

11 And the Lord said unto him, Who hath made man's mouth? Or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? Have not I, the Lord?

12 Now, therefore, go; and I will be with thy mouth and teach thee what thou shalt say.

13 And he said, O my Lord, send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom thou wilt send.

14 And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, **Is not Aaron, the Levite, thy brother? I know that he can speak well. And also, behold, he cometh forth to meet thee; and when he seeth thee, he will be glad in his heart.**

15 And thou shalt speak unto him and put words in his mouth; and I will be with thy mouth and with his mouth and will teach you what ye shall do.

16 And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people; and he shall be, even he shall be to thee instead of a mouth; and thou shalt be to him instead of God.

17 And thou shalt take this rod in thine hand, wherewith thou shalt do signs.

Exodus 4:27 And the Lord said unto Aaron, Go into the wilderness to meet Moses. And he went and met him in the mount of God, in the mount where God appeared unto him; and Aaron kissed him.

The pattern given by Hebrews 5:4 is that no man calls himself to serve, but that he must be called of God as was Aaron. In this passage from Exodus we see this pattern described by the events in the lives of Moses and Aaron – God spoke to Moses and God spoke to Aaron, and this served as the two witnesses for the calling to be true, with Moses having already received priesthood authority.

In this we see the remarkable – the idea that the calling of God is sufficient to establish authority, but if we needed any further explanation we find it in Acts when Saul and Barnabas were ordained apostles.

Acts 13

1 Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers, as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

2 As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, **the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.**

3 And when they had **fasted, and prayed, and laid their hands on them**, they sent them away.

The responsibility for this calling is the Holy Ghost. From the Holy Ghost instructions were given to ordain them, and it was done. Had Saul or Barnabas decided on their own to claim authority there would not have been the signature of the Holy Ghost in their ministry.

We must ask ourselves if this is the order of operations for other churches? No doubt some will say “yes” but it cannot just be the good feelings of someone that wants to serve. It must be the designation of the Holy Ghost with two or more witnesses including one having authority and the one being called.

In other words, this is not a church action, nor can one simply read the scriptures and claim authority because the scriptures tell us it is so. Without God to approve and authorize it the individual must remain alone in ministry, only hoping that God will step in to assist, whereas the Holy Ghost brings the riches of God to the ministry.

It is important to understand where we stand and what we believe in matters of doctrine. We may not all be called to be preachers, but often enough we are given opportunities to tell others what we believe, and sometimes that means being able to explain ***why*** we believe ***what*** we believe. With conversations on subjects like this we can build up those areas that we lack most, and sometimes get our eyes opened to things that we might not have realized before.

The important thing in studying **why** we believe something is that we often learn more about **what** we believe than we might otherwise realize. Explore what you understand and see what you find in the scriptures. You may find yourself on a journey of discovery that you never knew existed. I often find that I have assumed something that is not really supported in scripture. In that respect, it is important to firstly obtain **what** we believe from the scriptures, and then God can add the **why** to it so that it becomes a refreshing pool of knowledge and faith that can sustain us in the hardest of times. He will add the increase.