

## OUR STANDARD OF AUTHORITY

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### *About the author...*

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### Part I: Do We Need a Standard of Authority?

To answer the question, we need to know one thing. What is a “standard of authority”? When we learn the answer to this question, the need for that standard will be evident.

C I define “standard” in this context, to be “a consistent and reliable basis.” Without a common foundation comes only confusion. Yet we know that “*God is not the author of confusion.*” (1 Corinthians 14:33). Jesus described the failure to follow God’s established standard as “*the broad way*” in Matthew 7:13, and taught that it leads to everlasting destruction. To the lover of God and subject of Jesus the Lord, the revealed truth is that standard, for Jesus said, “*He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day*” [cf. Romans 2:16].

C Authority I will define as, “having the right or power to act.” People sometimes do things which they have no right to do. When caught, they must pay the penalty. A preacher, for example, marries a man and woman, and that union is approved by God, but also by the civil government. Why the civil government? Because that government gives him permission, or authorizes him to marry them.

In this lesson, we will see that the same principle should be applied to spiritual matters.

### II. How Is the Principle of Authority Taught in the Bible?

#### Jesus is our ruler

In the Christian era, Jesus is to be recognized as the sole source of authority — “*And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth*” (Matthew 28:18). In John 5:18-27, Jesus explained this principle very well as he was challenged by certain of the Jews.

*“Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God. Then*

*answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise. For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth: and he will shew him greater works than these, that ye may marvel. For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will. For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgement unto the Son: That all men should honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He that honoreth not the Son honoreth not the Father which hath sent him. Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; and hath given him authority to execute judgement also, because he is the Son of man."*

According to Ephesians 1:20-23, the mighty power of God to save is revealed through his works;

*"which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all."*

Furthermore, Jesus will maintain this authority until HE "puts it down" and delivers the kingdom up to the father [cf. 1 Corinthians 15:22-28]. Christ's authority is further illustrated in Colossians 3:17 we learn that all things done or taught by any man are to be *"in the name of Jesus Christ"*. But what does this mean?

- C Jesus promised the apostles in John 14:13-14, that whatever they asked of God in his name would be granted, this being in the context of their special work of spreading the gospel with the confirmation by the Holy Spirit of that gospel (miracles). The fulfillment of this promise is demonstrated early in church history.
- C In Acts 3:1-8, Peter and John, as we went up to the temple, saw a man asking alms who had been crippled from birth. In verse 6, Peter said, *"Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk."* As the story goes, the man was healed immediately, leaped up walked and was seen praising God. In Acts 4:5-12, we read what happened the next day. Those who questioned Peter and John asked, *"By what power, or by what name, have ye done this?"* Peter made it clear that it was done *"by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth"*. He then continued to show that both the

miraculous works AND proclamation of the gospel were *in the name* of Jesus'. This second part is further emphasized in Luke 24:47, where Jesus said that *"repentance and remission of sins"* are to be *"preached in his name among all nations."*

- C Consider also Matthew 7:21-24 where Jesus taught, *"many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?"*, to which Jesus will reply, *"...I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity."* You see, **saying** something is in the name of Jesus does not make it so! Keeping his word (or commandments) makes it so!

We conclude then, that the Christian needs no other source of approval and therefore needs to seek no other's permission to act! The apostle Paul understood this clearly when he said: *"For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ"* (Galatians 1:10), *"Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels..."* (Colossians 2:18).

### Jesus' Delegates

Ok then. Christ Jesus is the Lord, the King, the true Majestic One. How does this fact translate into the everyday lives of Christians? Christ has authorized some men to govern various aspects of our lives. This is all part of the standard of authority taught in the Bible. Why? Because Jesus, through is word, has taught us to be governed in this way.

#### 1. Civil government

To obey Christ, one must be subject to the civil government. Romans 13:1-7 gives an excellent explanation of this, making it clear that "every soul" must be "subject to the higher powers". In context, it is impossible to misunderstand that he speaks of civil rulers.

#### 2. The Apostles of Jesus

The obey Christ, one must, as those commended in Acts 2, continue "steadfastly in the apostles doctrine...". In John 15:20, Jesus made it clear that those who would be obedient to himself, would also be obedient to the apostles, when he taught, *"...if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also."* The authority of the Christ's apostles is, after all, merely an extension of his own authority, since he is the one for whom they both worked and taught. Their doctrine was Christ's doctrine, their gospel was Christ's gospel, and their work, Christ's work.

#### Hebrews 2:1-4

*"Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip. For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompence of reward; how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him;*

*God bearing witness with them, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to his own will?"*

Men would also do well to remember John 16:12-13, *"I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth..."*. Those who would presume to exclude the doctrine taught throughout the New Testament as a part of the gospel and therefore essential to both salvation and fellowship, need to learn the fear of God.

### 3. **Elders (or Presbyters, or Pastor, of Shepherds, or Bishops, or Overseers)**

To obey Christ, one must follow the elders who pastor him. In 1 Timothy 3:2-5 Paul clearly taught that the work of these men includes a degree of ruling, else these verses would be meaningless, *"a bishop then must be...one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (for if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)"* Peter shows their work to be that of *"feeding the flock"* and *"taking the oversight"*, but not *"as being lords"* (1 Peter 5:1-3). The authority, given by Christ, is not that of creating doctrine (any more than any other mortal). Instead their oversight includes (1) see to it that only the truth is taught and followed; (2) if someone teaches error, leading the flock astray, stop their mouths through the sound doctrine (see Titus 1:9-11).

This "overseeing" incorporates very practical leadership regarding the congregation as a whole, as shepherds lead the sheep, protecting from prowlers, seeing to it that wholesome food is supplied, persuading the sheep to not stray from the flock and seeking to retrieve the ones who do.

### 4. **Husbands**

To obey Christ, a wife must obey her husband.

#### **Titus 2:4-5**

*"That they may teach the young women to be...obedient to their own husbands..."*

#### **Ephesians 5:22-24**

*"Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so [let] the wives [be] to their own husbands in every thing."*

### 5. **Parents**

To obey Christ, children must obey their parents.

#### **Colossians 3:20**

*"Children, obey [your] parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord."*

### III. Some guidelines for proper use of authority and understanding the Bible

#### Accept being “governed”

Some people will reject all government in their lives.

#### 2 Peter 2:1-2, 9-10

*“But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of...The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptation, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished: but chiefly them that walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness, and despise government. Presumptuous are they, selfwilled, they are not afraid to speak evil of dignities.”*

These individuals believe that to be subject to anyone other than Jesus (even his apostles) takes away their freedom in Christ. But folks, this is a flawed view of “freedom.” As Peter continues, we learn more in verse 19 about the false teachers, *“While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption...”*

In my limited experience, without exception, these individuals are looking for an excuse, a reason to **not** abide in the sound doctrine of the New Testament. They apparently fail to recognize that in rejecting government through the system of authority outlined by Christ in the New Testament, they are failing to be subject to God himself.

#### Christ’s governing delegates are governed

We must remember, too, that the only reason we are subject to others besides Christ himself, is because he made it so. The individuals holding these lower offices possess no inherent powers. They are authorized to act under the rule of Christ, and thus their authority begins and ends with the voice of Christ. I can teach this with authority, because Jesus said so through the scriptures.

Note the following:

1. **Civil government** has no authority to make one disobey God. Peter and John made it clear that “we ought to obey God rather than men.” [see Acts 4:18-20; Acts 5:27-29]
2. The **apostles** had no authority to alter the gospel of Christ by changing it’s doctrine.  
**Galatians 1:8**  
*“Though we or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel than what we have preached unto you, let him be accursed”.*
3. The **elders** have limited authority as well. Their authority is within only their home congregation. “Feed the flock which is among you taking the oversight” [see Acts

20:28; 1 Peter 5:2]. The plurality of elders within each congregation in the New Testament [c.f. Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5] suggests that their authority exists as an eldership (not individually). Even within the home congregation, and functioning together, they can neither create new doctrine nor ignore the doctrine of the gospel of Christ. It is this “sound doctrine” which provides them with the necessary tools to “stop the mouths” of those who stir things up, causing division [Titus 1:9]. No place in scripture are they authorized to work outside the parameters of that which was already taught by the apostles. They cannot bind doctrinally anything not already bound in scripture by Jesus and his apostles.

4. The **husband** must use Christ’s relationship to and love for the church as his example for ruling and loving his wife, seeking her purity and sanctification. [Ephesians 5:25-27]. He has no authority to keep his wife from following Christ. This is exactly the context and meaning of 1 Corinthians 7:12-16. If the unbelieving [spouse] decides to leave, simply not content to live with a faithful Christian, be it husband or wife, let that person leave. Serving Christ is job one in the Christian’s life.
5. Even the obedience of the **children** falls within the parameter of that which is “in the Lord” (Ephesians 6:1). So, even parents have no authority to keep a child from following God.

### Seek to correctly understand the doctrine of Christ

To be governed by Christ, we must comprehend the teaching of Christ. This takes diligence! This is what Paul taught Timothy to have; 2 Timothy 2:15, *“study [give diligence] to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing [teaching] the word of truth.”* But how can we know we understand the truth of Christ? Here is where many will part ways with the sound teaching of God’s word.

The following principles will help guide anyone into an accurate understanding of the word of God. If we disagree on what the word teaches, by following these guidelines, and maintaining a humble spirit, truth will prevail every time.

1. First, we must accept what we observed earlier, that every part of the doctrine taught throughout the ENTIRE New Testament is Christ’s message and gospel to the world. If we do not know what part of scripture constitutes Jesus’ doctrine, how can we possibly understand his teaching?
2. Then, we must apply a sound hermeneutic that will allow us to discern the meaning and intent of every part of the word as it was originally revealed. Hermeneutic simply means “method of interpreting”. Some want to apply a “loose interpretation” to very precise statements in the scripture; others refuse to acknowledge figures of speech and symbolic texts attempting to take everything literally, even when reading a text that says about itself that it is “symbolic”, such as Revelation. Neither practice is sound.

Some want to interpret everything in light of contemporary culture and language. This suggests that the Bible if precisely interpreted, is outdated and unusable in modern society. However, the Biblical principle would have us seek original teaching and understanding [consider Matthew 19:8; 2 Peter 1:12-15; Jude 3]. Here is where people err who, for example, think of “alcoholic” wine every time the word “wine” appears in the Bible or others will ignore the straight forward teaching of Paul that no woman may “teach or usurp authority over” men in the church.

It can work the other way too, leading to the creation of some new doctrine when the Bible says it is speaking of cultural things, such as in 1 Corinthians 11:4-6, 14-16 regarding length of hair and head coverings.

This, by the way, is one reason we seek a version of the Bible which is as close as possible to a word by word translation. Let me read what God originally “said” and I will examine it using a sound hermeneutic instead of having the translator(s) interpret it’s meaning or relevance for me. **A sound hermeneutic applied to an erroneous translation will always lead to an erroneous conclusion.**

Careless students of the word might decide what they believe, then look for any verse that might seem on the surface to support the idea. This is what the Sadducees did in Matthew 22:23-32 in trying to prove that there is no resurrection. Today many use John 3:16 or some other similar verse attempting to “prove” that salvation is by faith alone, with no other conditions.

3. Proper interpretation incorporates the best methods which allow the fullest comprehension of the original idea the author meant to convey. Accomplishing this means getting familiar with and using word study helps, such as Bible Greek and Hebrew dictionaries and basic lexicons. Even concordances will have basic dictionaries which can be useful. It will help us to apply first century meanings to first century words (getting us beyond the problem of contemporary changes in word usage).

Sound interpretation also means considering the context of the statement, verse, sentence or paragraph. Context includes the immediate chapter (or set of chapters as seen in John 13-17 and 1 Corinthians 12-14); it can also relate to the entire book (as in the letter to Hebrews or the Revelation). Finally, a correct interpretation will always be in harmony with the complete New Testament and indeed the entire Bible.

To illustrate this last point, I ask a simple question. Is there a contradiction between Acts 2:38 and Romans 10:9? One states, “...*repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...*” and the second teaches, “...*if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.*” Are these two alternative methods of salvation? Or are they two passages which can be harmonized in the context of the entire New Testament? Of course the latter is true! When considering Mark 16:15-16;

Luke 24:47; Acts 22:16; Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:26-27; 1 Peter 3:21 and many other passages, one gets a more complete picture of what the non-believer must do to come into *“the general assembly and church of the firstborn ones”* Hebrews 12:33). And as one becomes familiar with more texts, he begins to recognize just how many allusions to these various steps toward salvation are contained in Holy Scriptures. Whereas, if the conclusion from our interpretation is wrong, the more passages we study on the matter, we will find increasing scriptural opposition to that conclusion. Even in very specific contexts, however, broad principles can appear which may not be taught anywhere else. For example, in 1 Corinthians 14 the principle of maintaining order in the assemblies of saints is stressed as an underlying principle. This principle is applied in that chapter to explain the orderly and practical use of miraculous gifts in assemblies. A broader application, however, is accurately made, which would govern our assemblies today. Even without verse 33, this would seem obvious, but perhaps only to eliminate any doubt on the matter, Christ made an explicit statement, *“For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches (assemblies) of the saints.”*

Proper interpretation will take into account who is speaking. Is it set forth in scripture as truth or as error? Is the one speaking inspired, or are we simply reading an inspired record of something an uninspired person said?

Proper interpretation will also consider, who is being addressed?. Was it meant for all Christians? Was it directed specifically to the apostles? Was it intended for non-believers? All of these things can make a difference in whether the passage has a direct application in our own lives today.

In connection with this point, one thing to keep in mind is this: **anything written to an individual Christian or congregation in the New Testament will apply to every Christian today, either specifically or in principal, unless it's application is impossible to duplicate**, such as matters dealing exclusively with the apostles or the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit [the reason our earlier example from 1 Corinthians 14 applies is because it did not deal exclusively with miraculous gifts, but included a discussion of something that does occur today, namely Christian assemblies].

Every Christian has the authority to teach and practice anything that is directly stated or implied to be truth in the New Testament. Implied truth can be determined by approved example or sound inference.

### Two Methods of Applying Authority

Once we understand what the New Testament really teaches, we must decide how to approach it's doctrine. There are fundamentally two methods of viewing authority

Method #1 suggests that we may practice only what has been either implicitly or explicitly authorized. This view leads to the following:



- a. It rejects restructuring the church;
- b. It rejects reformulating worship;
- c. It rejects infant baptism and/or infant dedications;
- d. It rejects polygamy;
- e. It rejects mechanical instruments of music in worship; etc.
- f. The person who approaches Christianity in this way humbly seeks God's approval before acting.
- g. This view is supported and approved in scripture [c.f. Leviticus 10:1; Hebrews 8:4; 7:12-16].

Method #2 takes the position that we may practice anything which has not been explicitly forbidden. This view does the following:

- a. It accepts restructuring the church;
- b. It accepts reformulating worship;
- c. It accepts infant baptism and/or infant dedications
- d. It must accept polygamy to be consistent;
- e. It accepts mechanical instruments of music in worship; etc.
- f. The person who approaches Christianity in this way proudly assumes God's approval.
- g. This view is not supported and in fact has been rejected in scripture [c.f. Leviticus 10:1; Hebrews 8:4; 7:12-16].

### Silence of Scriptures

Respecting the silence of the scriptures, as is consistent with Method #1, can seem difficult to understand and master. This fact has no doubt contributed to the rejection by some of this principle of authority. [Although most accept this principle regarding matters other than religion]. The silence of scriptures regarding a religious practice implies that we have no authority to have that religious practice. There are times, however, when the scriptures appear silent when they, in fact, are not (through implication). And this can work to either loosen restrictions brethren sometimes apply or to limit activities brethren sometimes practice. For example, if a Christian honestly believed he should keep a Sabbath day, there is nothing inherently wrong with that. Colossians 2:17 authorizes both the individual who keeps it and the one who does not keep it. On the other hand, teaching that one is more spiritual who keeps a Sabbath day would violate the context of the entire Chapter 2 of Colossians and therefore would be wrong. The same might be said of other religious holidays, which also are not part of the gospel of Christ, so long as they do not violate that gospel (Romans 14:1-10). At the same time, for the local church to introduce a practice of celebrating a religious day other than those which the churches observed in the first century (namely each first day of the week) moves it well beyond the scope of one's personal preference and into the realm of doctrine, if only by implication, just as when some in the church at Colossae wanted the whole church to practice keeping the Sabbaths.

Adding a piano or some other instrument has been implicitly rejected in scripture. Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 teach that we should "sing and make melody" and the melody is made "in the heart" not "in the ear". If a piano assisted in "teaching and admonishing" associated with that

singing, then it might then be an expedient, but it does not. If that instrument assisted in having thanks in our hearts to the Lord (making melody in the heart) it might be an expedient, but it does not. Instead the added instrument appeals to that for which spiritual singing was never intended. It appeals to the physical, the sensual and not the spiritual. The melody we are taught to make is for God's hearing, and the verbal expressions of teaching and admonishing are for Man's hearing.

### **Be Slow to Judge**

Furthermore, as we learn from both Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, some things that may be judged as "not expedient" by one or many mature Christians may still not be sinful! We must be slow to judge others until we understand what is going on. If one practices idolatry, that would be wrong, but eating meat that had been sacrificed to an idol, while opposed by some first century Christians, and perhaps not expedient in most instances, in an of itself would not constitute or even imply idolatry, even though some might think that it does. We must learn to properly apply this principle in our day. Proper use of authority demands it.

### **Conclusion**

We have discussed a great deal in this lesson. Good principles that, if applied, will help us to (1) understand what the Bible really teaches; (2) know what applies to ourselves today; (3) know who has the right to govern and what their limitations are; (4) realize that we must follow Christ's revealed word to be obedient to Christ; and (5) see that we must follow Christ to be saved.

With diligence, through prayer and a humble spirit, we can find ourselves pleasing to Christ and subject to his authority. May God help each of us to accomplish this in our lives.