

“Authority”
by Rev. Frances Savill
World Communion Day
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Matthew 21:23-32

Authority – it seems to me that we do a lot of questioning about authority now. We’re not really sure who is an authority, and who we should believe. In days gone, be it if you wrote a book, or if you were an elected official, or if you were some kind of a professional, you were a person of authority.

But now there are so many people who claim to be authorities and then we read contradictory opinions, or the so-called authority is found to be a fraud, and if you’re found cheating or lying about one thing, no one trusts you about anything and you have no authority anymore.

And then we call out the person who claims to be an authority about everything. Who or what (has) authority for you?

Our Bible passage begins with a conversation between Jesus and some of the religious authorities. They want to know who has given Jesus’ authority to teach and to heal. The crowd once described Jesus as one who taught with authority, not like the other religion teachers.

Where does this authority come from? Why should the chief priests and elders listen to Jesus? Who gave Him authority? Where does Jesus’ authority come from?

Jesus is like John, either He was sent from God, and his authority is from heaven, or He is making it up as he goes and is on his own with no real authority.

In this exchange we see Jesus’ wisdom in answering the leaders. What do you believe about Jesus’ authority? Does He have authority from God?

As you're considering your answer, Jesus continues his.

Suppose a man has two sons. The father tells them both to go out and work. One of them tells the father to forget it, and then goes and does what his father asked. The other son says "yes" to the father but doesn't actually do as he was asked.

"So", says Jesus, "who did the will of the father"?

And the clear answer is that it doesn't matter what we say, but what we do.

How is this related to the original teaching about authority?

Well, as I read it, I think - which son really accepted the father's authority?

And again, it's the one who actually did what the father asked.

The one son said the right words – "yes sir, I will go." It sounds like he respects his father's authority. But he didn't actually go.

The Pharisees and elders talked a good game about being under God's authority, but they didn't actually do the will of the father. They didn't accept Jesus' teaching or John's witness.

The sinners, on the other hand, didn't claim to respect the Father, they deny his authority, but in the end, they reconsider, and they actually do the Father's will. In this case they accept Jesus and his authority, and many sinners became Jesus' followers.

So let's get back to us. What do you believe about Jesus' authority?

And do you follow Jesus' words?

The Presbyterian Church in Canada confesses that Jesus Christ is the only King and head of the church. We believe in the Bible as God's word to us, and the authority on how we are to live as Jesus' disciples.

We say at the end of the scripture readings "this is the word of the Lord."
"Thanks be to God!"

I had a conversation with a young woman. She had a decision to make. And being the logical, bright young woman she is, she lined up arguments for making her decision one way and the other. On one side there was the advice of her friends, the evidence of sociologists and scientists. On the other side was the Bible. The wisdom of the scripture was different from the wisdom of the world.

In the end, as I reflected on her decision, and my own questions about following the Bible and what it says, I asked her to consider, that maybe God did know better, better than science, better than her friends, better than sociologists, what was best for her.

God who created her and loved her, who is the source of all wisdom has good plans for her and for all of us.

Who is the authority we believe, we trust, and we follow, not just with our words, but in our actions, that's one of the discipleship questions we face day by day.

I was reading a blog by Tim Keller, and he reflects on the question of authority. I'd like to read you part of the blog:

Keller says: "I had decided that I believed in Jesus Christ, but I struggled with the idea that I had to believe everything in the Bible. Stott answered that we do *not* believe it simply because we want to be dogmatic and certain about our own beliefs, nor because the church has consistently taught this (though it has), nor because we just 'feel' the Bible is true as we read it. "No. The overriding reason for accepting the divine inspiration and authority of Scripture is plain loyalty to Jesus...Our understanding of *everything* is conditioned by what Jesus taught. And that includes his teaching about the Bible. We have no liberty to exclude anything from Jesus' teaching and say, 'I believe what he taught about this but not what he taught about that.' What possible right do we have to be selective?" (p.7)

Stott's question— 'what possible right do we have to be selective?'—is like a hammer blow to our contemporary way of life. We feel strongly that we have the right, even the obligation to select what parts of Jesus' teaching we can accept and what parts we cannot. But that makes no sense. Why should you trust in him as Savior if you are wiser and smarter than he is? Either He is who he said he is, and his views judge our views, or he was lying or deluded about being the Son of God. Jesus' authority and the absolute authority of the Bible stand or fall together. If we believe he was who he said he was, then we must accept the entire Bible as God's word."

That's a challenge, to trust Jesus' wisdom, to trust Jesus' love, to trust that God's word is trustworthy and true, especially when there are so many voices in our world, calling us in other directions.

And then says Jesus, we are not only to agree with our heads and our hearts, but we must live out these words in our lives.

I confess that I fall away short of this. Thankfully, we have a Saviour who forgives us. And our standing in Jesus is by faith alone, by the grace or gift of Jesus alone. Those are the other pillars of our faith.

The basis of Christian assurance is not how much our hearts are set on God, but how unshakably God's heart and the heart of Jesus is set on us.

We come to our Lord's table and see again how unshakably the heart of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is set on us, and so we learn to trust God and His ways and His word.

Here, at our Lord's Table, we gather with Christians around the world, celebrating one faith, one hope, one Saviour, one Lord who is in overall, and who has all authority in heaven and on earth, who we are learning to follow together.

Thanks be to God.