Surrendering to His Lordship

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The Principle of Authority in the Bible

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Perhaps no other doctrine is emphasized so frequently in scripture as the principle of authority. Yet, perhaps no other doctrine is so discounted, ignored, rejected, or misunderstood. But the Scriptures make clear that, from the beginning of human history, God has required people to structure their behavior based upon His will. We human beings have no **right** to formulate our own ideas concerning religious truth. **We must have God's approval for everything we do.**

Who could successfully deny that current culture is characterized by disrespect for authority? The "do your own thing" mentality that has been so pervasive since the 1960s has resulted in subsequent generations viewing themselves as autonomous (self-governing) with no higher authority than oneself. Authority is seen to reside inherently within the individual. This circumstance is reminiscent of the dark ages of Jewish history (the period of the Judges) when "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

COLOSSIANS 3:17: "IN THE NAME OF"

If the Bible teaches anything, it teaches that all human beings are under obligation to submit to the authority of God and Christ. Paul articulated this extremely important principle in his letter to the Colossians: "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (3:17). What did the apostle mean by that statement? What is the meaning of the expression "**in the name of the Lord**"?

Luke corroborated Paul's statement by providing the answer. Shortly after the establishment of the church of Christ on Earth (Acts 2), the Jewish authorities were extremely upset that the apostles were spreading Christian concepts throughout Jerusalem. So, they hauled Peter and John into their assembly and demanded to know, "By what power or by what name have you done this?" (Acts 4:7). The word "power" (*dunamei*) bears a close correlation to and relationship with the concept of **authority** (Perschbacher, 1990, p. 108), and is closely aligned with *exousia*—the usual word for authority (cf. Luke 4:36; Revelation 17:12-13). W.E. Vine listed both terms under "power" (1966, p. 196). "Authority" (*exousia*) refers to power, rule, authority, or jurisdiction (cf. Betz, 1976, 2:608)—"the power of authority, the right to exercise power" and "the right to act" (Vine, pp. 152,89,196). It includes the ideas of "absolute power" and "warrant" (Arndt and Gingrich, 1957, p. 277), as well as "the 'claim,' or 'right,' or 'control,' one has over anything" (Moulton and Milligan, 1982, p. 225). These religious leaders were demanding to know by what authority the

apostles were acting. Who was giving them the **right** to teach what they were teaching? What authoritative source **approved** or **sanctioned** their particular actions? Peter's answer was "by the name of Jesus Christ" (vs. 10). In other words, the apostles had not been advocating their **own** ideas. They were simply presenting what Jesus had previously **authorized** and commissioned them to present (cf. Matthew 16:19; 18:18; 28:18-20). He placed closure on the incident by concluding: "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is **no other name** under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (vs. 12). Salvation may be achieved only by the authority, approval, sanction, and requirements of Christ. No one else on the planet has any **right or authorization** to extend salvation to anyone.

"In the name of " frequently is used in Scripture as a parallel expression to "by what power/authority." Hans Bietenhard noted that the formula "in the name of Jesus" means "according to his will and instruction" (1976, 2:654). In Acts 4:7, therefore, "[n]ame and 'power'...are used parallel to one another" (2:654). Vine said "name" in Colossians 3:17 means "in recognition of the authority of " (1966, p. 100; cf. Perschbacher, p. 294). Moulton and Milligan said that "name" refers to "the authority of the person" and cited Philippians 2:9 and Hebrews 1:4 as further examples (p. 451). Observe carefully: "Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the **name which is above every name**, that at **the name of Jesus** every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth" (Philippians 2:9-10, emp. added; cf. Ephesians 1:21). This is precisely what Jesus claimed for Himself when He issued the "Great

Commission" to the apostles: "All **authority** has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18, emp. added). Paul's reference to the **name** of Jesus was a reference to the **authority and jurisdiction** of Christ. Jesus' name being above every name means that His authority transcends all other authority. As Findlay explained: " 'The name of the Lord Jesus' is the expression of his **authority** as 'Lord' " (Spence and Exell, 1958, p. 155, emp. added). A.T. Robertson cited the use of *onoma* in Matthew 28:19 as another example where "name" "has the idea of 'the authority of ' " (1934, p. 740).

After Moses presented God's demands to Pharaoh, he returned to the Lord and complained that Pharaoh's reaction was retaliatory: "For since I came to Pharaoh to speak **in Your name**, he has done evil to this people" (Exodus 5:23, emp. added). For Moses to speak **in God's name** meant to speak **only those things that God wanted said**. After healing the lame man, Peter explained to the people: "And **His name**...has made this man strong" (Acts 3:16, emp. added). He meant that it was Christ's authority and power that achieved the healing. Likewise, when Paul became annoyed at the condition of the demon possessed slave girl, he declared: "I command you **in the name** of Jesus Christ to come out of her" (Acts 16:18, emp. added). He, too, meant that he had Christ's backing and authorization to do such a thing.

So when Paul stated that everyone is obligated to speak and act "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Colossians 3:17), he was indicating that all human conduct must be

conformed to the directives of Jesus Christ. Everything a person says or does must have the prior approval and sanction of God. Writing in 1855 from Glasgow, New Testament scholar John Eadie well summarized the thrust of Colossians 3:17: "It...strictly means—**by his authority**, or generally, in recognition of it. To speak in His name, or to act in His name, is to speak and act not to His honour, but **under His sanction** and with the conviction of His approval" (1884, 4:249, emp. added).

OLD TESTAMENT ILLUSTRATIONS

This biblical principle has enormous implications. No human being has the **right** to introduce into religious practice an activity for which the Scriptures provide no approval. We human beings are simply not free in God's sight to fashion religion and morality according to our own desires. Cain learned that the hard way when he did not offer the precise sacrifice that God had designated (Genesis 4:5-7; Hebrews 11:4; 1 John 3:12). The lives of Nadab and Abihu were snuffed out by God because of what they viewed as a minor adjustment in their offering (Leviticus 10:1-2). They were the right boys, at the right time and place, with the right censers, and the right incense—but the wrong fire. This deviation from God's precise specifications was "unauthorized" (NIV) fire "which He had not commanded them" (NKJV). The change failed to show God as **holy** and give Him the **respect** He deserves (Leviticus 10:3).

Saul was rejected by God when he presumed to offer a sacrifice he was not authorized to offer (1 Samuel 13:8-14). He was censured a second time for making

slight adjustments in God's instructions (1 Samuel 15:22-23). He lost His crown and the approval of God. Justifying his adjustments on the grounds that he was merely attempting to be "culturally relevant" would not have altered his status in God's sight. Uzzah was struck dead simply because he touched the ark of the covenant—though his apparent motive was to **protect** the ark (2 Samuel 6:6-7). David admitted that they had deserved the Lord's displeasure because they were not seeking God "after the due order" (1 Chronicles 15:13; cf. Numbers 4:15; 7:9; 10:21). In other words, God had given previous information concerning proper or **authorized** transportation of the ark, but these instructions were not followed. Their handling of the ark was not done "in the name of the Lord," in that they did it **their** way instead of according to the **divine prescription**.

Notice that these cases involved people who were engaged in **religious** activities. These people were religious. They were not pagans, skeptics, or atheists. They were attempting to worship the **one true God**. They were **believers**! Yet their failure to comform precisely to divine instructions elicited the disapproval of God for the simple reason that their actions were not **authorized**.

NEW TESTAMENT ILLUSTRATIONS

The New Testament illustrates this principle repeatedly. Authority begins with God. He delegated authority to Jesus (Matthew 28:18; John 5:27). Only Jesus, therefore, has the authority to define and designate the parameters of human behavior in general, and religious practice in particular. Consequently, no human being

on Earth has the right to do **anything** without the prior approval of Christ. John said that those who believe on Christ's **name** (i.e., those who accept His **authority**) have the **power or right** to become children of God. In other words, faith is a necessary prerequisite that gives a person divine **authority** to become a child of God. All other human beings, i.e., unbelievers, lack divine sanction to become children of God.

A Roman centurion, an officer who commanded one hundred men, understood the principle of authority. He said to Jesus: "For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it" (Matthew 8:9). This centurion recognized that individuals who are subject to the authority of a higher power must receive **permission** for everything they do. They must conform themselves precisely to the will of their superior.

Even the religious enemies of Jesus understood and acknowledged the principle of authority. One day when Jesus was teaching in the temple, the chief priests and elders confronted Him with this question: "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority" (Matthew 21:23). Commenting on the use of the term "authority" in this passage, Betz noted that the Pharisees used the term *exousia* to refer to "the power to act which given as of right to anyone by virtue of the position he holds" (1976, p. 601). They were asking, in essence, "Who was it that conferred upon you this authority which you presume to exercise? Was it some earthly ruler, or was it God himself?" (Spence

and Exell, 1961, 15:321). Even these religiously warped opponents of our Lord at least grasped correctly the concept that **one must have prior approval from a legitimate authoritative source** before one can advocate religious viewpoints. As Williams noted: "No one could presume to teach without a proper commission: where was his authorization?" (quoted in Spence and Exell, 1961, 15:320). If Jesus agreed with the majority of religionists today, He would have said, "What do you mean 'by what authority'? God doesn't require us to have authority for what we do in religion as long as we do not violate a direct command that forbids it, and as long as one is sincere."

But Jesus was not in sympathy with today's permissive, antinomian spirit. In fact, His response to the Jewish leaders showed that He fully agreed with the principle of authority. He proceeded to show them that His teaching was **authorized** by the same source that authorized the teaching of John the Immerser. Yet, these hardhearted religious leaders rejected John and, by implication, his source of authority. So neither would they accept Jesus Who received His authority from the same source (i.e., heaven). In any case, both Jesus and His enemies agreed that **one must have God's prior permission** for what one advocates in religion.

What did Peter mean when he wrote, "If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God" (1 Peter 4:11)? He meant that whatever a person advocates in religion must be found in God's Word. But everyone knows that baby dedication services, handclapping, instrumental music, choirs, praise teams, the worship

of Mary, non-weekly observance of the Lord's Supper, and church raffles are not authorized by God's Word. Thus, their use violates the principle of authority—failing to "speak as the oracles of God."

What did Paul mean when he wrote, "...that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written" (1 Corinthians 4:6)? He meant that whatever we do in religion, first must be found in the Scriptures. But everyone knows that "sacred drama," swaying arms, and religious observance of Christmas and Easter are not found in scripture. Their use violates the principle of authority—thinking and going "beyond what is written."

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM SECULAR SOCIETY

Interestingly enough, even secular society acknowledges the principle of authority. The average American citizen will walk into a restaurant and see two doors. The first door has the word "Restrooms" on it, while the second door has the words "Authorized Personnel." These messages are immediately interpreted to mean that the customer has authority to enter the door that reads "Restrooms," while he or she is not permitted to enter the other door. In fact, one instantly knows that no **authority** exists to enter the second door—even though the sign does not **explicitly** command the customer **not** to enter the door. The sign does not indicate who may **NOT** enter. It only specifies who **may** enter—who has **permission or authority** to enter. The customer is under obligation to use reasoning powers, and to deduce that he or she has no authority to pass through the second door.

Entering the first door, the customer encounters two additional doors. The first door has a stick figure of a woman on it, while the second door has a stick figure of a man. Once again, the customer is expected to understand that only women are authorized to enter the first door, and only men have permission to pass through the second door—**though the word "only" does not appear**. People fathom the principle of authority so easily and so thoroughly that they can ascertain what they may or may not do even from pictures—stick figures! But when it comes to the Christian religion and those who wish to broaden the parameters of God's Word, recognition of the principle of authority is set aside in exchange for irrational, emotional desire to do what one **wants** to do.

When a person purchases a new vacuum cleaner or a new car, the product comes with a factory warranty. This warranty provides the customer with free repair service for the specified warranty period. However, should a malfunction occur, the customer is instructed to take the product to a "Factory Authorized Representative." Failure to do so will void the warranty. Does the average person understand the principle of authority in this case? Of course she does. She understands that the manufacturer has given prior approval to a select group of repairpersons that is **authorized** to repair the product. She understands that she has **authority/permission** to take the product to any of those places, but that she is **not authorized** to take the product anywhere else—even though other repairpersons are not specifically singled out as unacceptable repairpersons.

When a person enters the hospital for surgery, he or she signs a document authorizing the physician to operate on the patient. What would you think of a doctor, whom you have authorized to perform surgery on you, if he were to go out into the waiting room where, say, your child is awaiting your return, and commence to operate on your child? In addition to thinking he may be mentally ill, you would protest his **lack of authority** for his action. What if he justified his action by insisting that **you did not specifically forbid** his performing surgery on your loved one? Neither you—nor the medical and legal professions—would put up with such nonsense. Why? Normal people understand and live by the principle of authority. But religion is different. Nonsense and abnormality seem to have become the order of the day.

What if your doctor wrote you a prescription for antibiotics, and you took the prescription to the pharmacist, who then filled the prescription by giving you the antibiotic—laced with strychnine? Upon reading the label, you would immediately protest the pharmacist's action and demand an explanation. Would the pharmacist be considered in her right mind if she offered as her explanation, "The doctor did not say I was **not** to give you the poison. I interpreted his silence to be permissive"? What if she insisted: "The doctor's command neither prescribes nor prohibits strychnine"? Yet proponents of instrumental music insist that "New Testament commands to sing neither prescribe nor prohibit instrumental music." **Their statement is precisely parallel to: "The doctor's command to give antibiotic neither prescribes nor prohibits strychnine."**

Suppose you send your child to the grocery store to purchase a gallon of 2% milk and a 1 lb. loaf of wheat bread. He returns with a gallon of 2% milk, a 1 lb. loaf of **white** bread, and a box of Twinkies™. Do you pat him on the head and compliment him for his faithful obedience? Do you praise him for his effort and sincerity? Or do you challenge his behavior as being **unauthorized**? What if he justifies his actions by insisting that **you said nothing** about the purchase of white bread and Twinkies? Those who seek to justify instrumental music in worship declare: "You can't open your Bible and show me where God forbids it." So what if your child hands you the written note you sent to him and declares: "You can't open your note and show me where you forbade it." No, both you and he would know that he had engaged in unauthorized behavior. He did not have your **permission** to purchase white bread or Twinkies—even though you did not specifically forbid it.

When you place an order at a drive through window of a fast food restaurant, you expect them to conform to your instructions precisely, neither adding to nor subtracting from your order. Suppose at the speaker, you order a Chicken Sandwich Combo on a wheat bun, with waffle fries, and a large Diet Lemonade. You then pull forward to the window and the cashier says, "That will be $435.87," as she and her co-workers begin handing bag after bag of food to you, bags that contain large quantities of every food item on the menu. You would immediately ask her to stop, and you would insist that you did not order all that food. What would you think if she responded: "You did not order a Chicken Sandwich Combo on a wheat bun, with waffle fries, and a large

Diet Lemonade **ONLY**. You did not **forbid** us to give you additional food." You would think this person is either joking—or crazy. The restaurant workers receive authority from you based on **what you say** to them—not based on what you do **not** say. You do not give them authority for their actions on the basis of your **silence**. You authorize them by your **words**, your instructions, your directions. If they go beyond the parameters of your words—though you do not specifically forbid such actions—they are proceeding **without your authority**. So it is with our relationship with God and His Word (cf. Deuteronomy 4:2; 5:32; 12:32; Joshua 1:7; Proverbs 30:6). God instructed us to worship Him by singing. He did not instruct us to worship Him by playing. Hence, to worship with instruments is to worship God without His approval.

AUTHORITY FOR EVERYTHING?

But does that mean that we must have authority for **everything** we do in religion? **Everything**? What about the many things we do that the Bible does not mention? For example, where is our authority for church buildings, pews, lighting, carpet, television programs, songbooks, and communion trays?

Consider the case of Noah. He was instructed by God to construct a large wooden boat. God's instructions included such details as dimensions, type of wood, a door and window, and decks (Genesis 6:14-16). The principle of authority applied to Noah in the following fashion. He was authorized to build a boat, but not authorized to build an alternative mode of transportation (e.g., car,

plane, or balloon). He was authorized to make the boat out of wood, but not authorized to make it out of some other material (e.g., plastic, steel, or fiberglass). He was authorized to use "gopher wood," but not authorized to use some other kind of wood (e.g., oak, poplar, or pine). He was authorized to utilize whatever tools and assistance were necessary to comply with God's command (e.g., hammers, nails, saws, hired help).

Consider the Great Commission. God commanded His emissaries to "Go" (Mark 16:15). The Bible describes with approval inspired preachers **going** by a variety of means, including by chariot (Acts 8:31), by rope and basket (Acts 9:25), on foot (Acts 14:14), and by ship (Acts 16:11). Gathering together everything in the Scriptures pertaining to this matter, it becomes clear that the mode of transportation was **optional**. Therefore, the Bible interpreter is forced to conclude that every mode is authorized today (including, for example, television) as long as it does not violate some other biblical principle (e.g., the principle of stewardship).

This process of gathering biblical evidence and drawing only warranted conclusions is divinely mandatory for every human being (see 1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 John 4:1). We are under obligation to weigh the biblical data on every subject, and conclude only what God wants us to conclude. [For concise, definitive analyses of the principle of authority, see Warren, 1975; Deaver, 1987].

The Bible enjoins upon us the act of assembling together for worship (e.g., Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 5:4; 11:17-18; Hebrews 10:25). But it is physically impossible

for a plurality of individuals to assemble together without an assembly place. To obey the requirement to assemble, one must assemble **somewhere**. We have approved instances of the early church assembling together in a third-story room (Acts 20:8-9), in private residences, as well as in non-private settings (1 Corinthians 16:19; 11:22; cf. Acts 20:20). We are forced to conclude that the location is **optional and authorized**, as long as it does not violate other biblical principles (cf. John 4:21). Hence, the Scriptures authorize church buildings and the necessary furnishings (e.g., carpet, chairs, electricity, air conditioning, lights, restrooms, indoor plumbing, microphones, drinking fountains).

The same may be said of songbooks. Christians are commanded to sing (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16), and to worship in an orderly manner (1 Corinthians 14:40). God wants us to sing the same song together (as opposed to singing different songs at the same time). Ways to comply with these stipulations would be to use songbooks, sheet music, or projectors that give the entire assembly access to the same song at the same time. Therefore, all such tools are **authorized as expedient ways** to comply with the command to sing.

Instrumental music in worship is not authorized. While some people may think it qualifies as an expedient—an aid to their singing—it does not. It may drown out their singing, or so overshadow their singing that they **think** it sounds better, but in actuality a musical instrument merely **supplements** singing. It is **another form of music** in the same way that seeing and hearing are two distinct ways of perceiving. Seeing does not aid

hearing; it supplements one form of perception/observation with another. **Singing** with the voice and **playing** on a mechanical instrument are two separate ways of making music. Singing is authorized because the New Testament enjoins it (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). God has told us **He wants us to sing**. Instrumental music is not authorized—not because Ephesians and Colossians exclude it or don't mention it—but because **no New Testament passage enjoins it**. Nowhere does God inform us that He desires that we play on an instrument to Him. To do so is to "add to His words" (Proverbs 30:6) and to "go beyond what is written" (1 Corinthians 4:6).

The Lord's Supper is to be eaten when the church is assembled for worship (Matthew 26:29; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:20). God wants each worshipper to partake of both the bread and the grape juice. How may this be accomplished? Containers or trays are necessarily required—unless grapes are hand carried to each person who would then squeeze the juice into his or her own mouth. We do have the account of Jesus instituting the Lord's Supper and apparently using a single cup. However, the context makes clear that the container was incidental—representing a figure of speech known as "metonymy of the subject," in which the container is put for the contained (Dungan, 1888, p. 279). The content of the cup—the juice—was what they were to drink, and upon which they were to reflect symbolically. We are forced to conclude that the manner of distribution of the elements of the Lord's Supper is **authorized as optional**.

CONCLUSION

Every single facet of our behavior, in and out of worship, may be determined in the same way. God so requires. He expects us to give heed to His Word, studying it carefully and consistently in order to know how to live life in harmony with His will. For true Christianity to be practiced, we must be true to God's directions. We must be faithful to the book. Indeed, for Jesus to be the "Lord of my life" 24-7, I must ascertain **His** will in every decision of my life. Hezekiah "did what was good and right and true before the Lord his God" (2 Chronicles 31:20). To what do the words "good," "right," and "true" refer? The next verse explains: "And in every work that he began in the service of the house of God, in the law and in the commandment, to seek his God, he did it with all his heart" (2 Chronicles 31:32). Hezekiah was faithful to God, doing what was good, right, and true—in the sense that **he obeyed precisely the law and commandment** of God, and did so from the heart (cf. John 4:24).

Many churches that claim to be Christian have introduced into their belief and practice all sorts of activities, programs, and practices that have no basis in scripture—i.e., no indication from God that He approves. Upon what basis are these innovations justified? "Well, it meets our needs"; "It gets more people involved"; "It brings in lots of people"; "It generates enthusiasm"; "It allows us to get things done"; "We really like it"; "It stimulates interest"; "It keeps our young people's attention"; "It creates a warm, accepting environment"; "it is a good mission strategy." It is absolutely incredible that so

many Christians could drift so far from biblical moorings. However, their failure to recognize the principle of Bible authority will not exempt them from God's disfavor (1 Samuel 13:13).

When all is said and done, when we've gone through all the rationalizing as to why we do what we choose to do in religion, we still are faced with whether what we do is, in fact, in accordance with God's instructions. By definition, being **faithful** to God entails conformity to divine directives—right doing (1 John 3:7; Acts 10:35). When one "transgresses (i.e., goes ahead), and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ" (2 John 9), he becomes **unfaithful** and removes himself from the benefits of God's grace (2 Peter 2:20-22; Hebrews 10:26-31; Galatians 5:4). Remaining within the grace and favor of God is dependent upon our compliance with the all-important, God-ordained principle of authority.

Must we conform ourselves to **the name** of Christ? That is, in order to be saved, must I have His prior approval, His sanction, His authorization, for everything I do in religion? Listen to Peter: "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is **no other name** under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

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