

Religious Authority

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The challenges of recent years to authority in home, school, marketplace and military were bound to have their parallels in religion. The very foundations of pontifical authority in Roman Catholicism have been jarred in late years with unprecedented open debate between priests and pope over such matters as contraception and a celibate priesthood. In recent months Italian legislators ignored the pope's objections to a national divorce law and passed such a law. Among other results, many sources indicate that previously unheard-of numbers of priests and nuns are deserting their orders. Some predict that within twenty years or less Catholicism will not be distinguishable from Protestantism. All of this is happening because, one by one, the legs are being knocked from under the pontifical chair, the seat of authority.

Protestantism has felt the effects of this challenge, too. Until a few decades ago, most claimed to believe in the Bible and its authority; but in the intervening years the seminaries have all but destroyed that faith by producing a constant stream of unbelieving pulpiteers. Many Protestants have quit in disgust, but many others have gladly embraced the non-authoritarian approach. (The Protestant slogans professing that "one church is as good as another" and "it makes no difference what you believe as long as you're sincere" did a good job of preparing the soil for several generations!) I judge that many other Protestants are bewilderedly hanging on to the only vestige of religion they know, sickened at what they see and hear on Sunday, but knowing nothing better.

The crumbling and discarding of their traditional authorities have gone on long enough to produce an off-setting reaction among both groups. Especially can this be seen in Protestantism. While the "anything-goes" liberals have occupied the headlines with their attempts at out blaspheming each other, there has been a quiet, but steady, new interest generated in conservative, Bible study and teaching. This is visible in both pew and pulpit. Widespread religious liberalism has served to accent the folly of a non-authoritarian approach to religion! I expect this trend to grow.

In the church of the Lord, the source of religious authority has never been a matter for discussion on any great scale. It is the Bible, particularly the New Testament. There have been those in every age since Pentecost (both in pulpit and pew) who would not endure the sound doctrine and have turned away from the Truth (2 Tim. 4:3-4), but upon exposure they have either been restored or have left the church entirely. It now appears, however, that we live in a

day when the question of religious authority is an open issue, perhaps even a divisive issue, in the church. Such statements as “not one of us can give chapter and verse for everything we do in our worship, nor do we need to” and “The right spirit is more important than the truth” and “There is no one right way” are frightful indications. It is a sad fact that some of our brethren have decided they have “outgrown” the need for Biblical authority.

For a Christian to outgrow his need for scriptural authority might be comparable to a man’s outgrowing his need for a mind. Man is distinguished from all other creatures and is constituted a man by the possession of a mind. Likewise, a Christian is distinguished from all other religionists and is constituted a Christian by virtue of his submission to the authority of Christ through the scriptures. There is no such thing as a Christian without the scriptures. Since a church is simply a body of Christians, it is evident that the church, by Scriptural definition, cannot exist in the absence of Scriptural authority. The seed of the kingdom is still the Word of God (Luke. 8:11).

In the face of this incontrovertible principle, it becomes all the more lamentable that there are those in the church (including Bible class teachers, preachers and elders), who have lost their respect for the authority of God’s Word. Even more sad is the fact that they feel comfortable and are tolerated in many quarters. Some have fallen into the old error of conceiving of the church as merely a human denomination begun by A. Campbell. Some no longer have a conscience about instrumental music in worship, or the observance of the Lord’s Supper every Lord’s day. This same loose attitude toward Scripture has set some up for embracing Neo-Pentecostalism. Others have a difficult time deciding what to tell people to do who want to become Christians. Perhaps none of these openly attack the scriptures, but the result of their position is the same. The **disguised** wolf is always more dangerous than the naked one (Mat. 7:15).

The church has weathered many stormy issues through the centuries. Some of the great issues of the first century involved Judaism (Acts 15), the coming of the Lord (2 Pet. 3), and Gnosticism (1 Tim. 6:20-21; 1 John). These were all met with an appeal to authoritative preaching by inspired men. When their voices ceased to be heard, apostasy resulted, and the church of Christ disappeared from the history books. In the previous and current centuries all of the issues (from the missionary society to orphans’ homes) have been faced with an open Bible, its authority has been appealed to in countless sermons, debates, and articles. Brethren on both sides of most of these issues agreed on one point: the only court of appeal is the Word of

God. Because of this appeal to God's authority, the Truth on these matters has shone forth to the majority of God's people and one by one these issues have died a natural death.

The issue before us now is not so simple or singular as those before. It revolves around a certain type of "worldly wisdom". It thrives upon what it considers to be super intellectualism (Let no one understand me to be opposed either to wisdom or scholarship, except those which operate at the expense of Biblical Truth). Its proponents are loud on "spirituality" (by their own definition) and are correspondingly soft on strict adherence to God's Word (as though these were at opposite poles!)

All the saints should weep that the time has come in the kingdom when there are those who almost boastfully disregard the finality of Scriptural authority. It is now being preached that one cannot take a definite stand on any Scripture Truth, because what we "think" is truth may only be our "subjective interpretation." If that be true, then conversely, that which by Scriptural definition has been termed "error" may also be merely "subjective interpretation" and in reality, may be Truth! (Are those who are preaching this absolutely sure that it is not merely their own "subjective interpretation"?) If this line is followed, there is no way to discern Truth from error with certainty; therefore, doctrine becomes altogether inconsequential (2 John. 9:11). Consequently, lines of fellowship cannot be drawn over whether one is Scripturally baptized, whether one is dedicated to the Lord's teaching on worship, or the Divine pattern for the church, or any number of other things. To these "free" brethren (as they conceive themselves), such matters are "legalistic," "traditional." To contend for such things makes one "judgmental," "intolerant", "pharisaical."

To stand firmly upon God's definition of a Christian, and upon what terms the Lord adds one to His church is to "play God," or to be derisively called a "five-stepper" by those loose-thinkers. If contending earnestly for the faith once for all delivered (Jude. 3) makes me a legalist, that's what the Lord wants me to be, for he gave that directive. If insisting that only those immersed for remission of sins following faith, repentance and confession, are in the Lord's church means that I am an intolerant judge, then I am such with Heaven's approval. If standing for the Lord's terms of Spiritual fellowship with my fellowman (1 John. 1:7; 2 John. 9) is to "play God," then so be it. Better to play God than to play the Devil. Don't forget: **The issue of today centers upon Biblical authority!**

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