

**Question Authority**

David Orendorff

Matthew 21:23-27

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When I was thinking about this scripture and I used the word "submission" in relationship to authority, I stopped and remembered that "submission" is a red flag word. Submission is equated with abuse of power and is frightening. Authority is not a thing we easily give for we love our independence and distrust anyone who would take it away. And besides, we have been burned by the authority of others. At work, at home, in schools, by our government, by our friends and lovers, even in our churches, we have been burned by authority.

When on a silence retreat, I had a reaction to submission when my spiritual director used the word "dependent." My insides started to knot and I felt myself become ready to defend myself from some unseen enemy; I realized that deep inside I wanted control over my life. I did not want to be "dependent," not even on God.

This resistance to submission and dependency is humorously applied to men. There are an abundance of jokes about men who are reluctant to ask directions when lost (as if we ever get lost), or read directions on how to assemble something (as if we didn't already know how it went together). There is truth in the joke, but not just for men, because women also have an allergy to dependency and submission.

Still, as much as we don't like it, there are people in our lives that have authority over us. We all have bosses, spouses, children, friends, doctors, and teachers who have been granted by a power, evidently greater than ourselves, the right to make demands upon us and expect our submission. As a consequence, when we are given the choice of who will have authority over us, when we are asked, "Who's the boss?" we are cautious to the point of great resistance. And so having raised the issue of authority I expect most of you to be warily alert.

It seems to me there are two kinds of authority. One kind is authority by credential and the other is authority by person.

Authority by credential is a common experience. A doctor is given authority over our medical lives by his or her credentials, they are the doctor and we are the patient. A teacher has authority over our educational lives because she or he is the teacher and we are the student. Our boss or supervisor has authority over our work lives because they are the boss and we are the employee. Authority by credential demands submission.

Authority by person is harder to define. There are people in our lives to whom we give authority not because they are our parent, or pastor, or teacher, or doctor, but because we sense that listening to them is best for us. There is a moral authority in these folks which compels us to follow them, to seek their advice and to be obedient to their direction. These people are the Martin Luther King Jrs., the Mohandas Gandhis, the Mother Teresa's among us that command our obedience and gain our loyalty not because of title or position, but because of who they are in their person. Authority by person invites submission.

When the elders and chief priests come to Jesus and say to him, "By

what authority do you do these things?" they are asking for his credentials. Is he an elder? Is he one of those directed by scripture and defined by institution as chosen to speak for the people to God? No, he is not. Is he a priest? Is he from one of Levi's families, appointed by scripture and confirmed by institution, as chosen to speak for God to the people? No, he is not. So by what authority does he speak either for the people or for God?

And furthermore, everybody knows that he was conceived out of wedlock; that he is from Nazareth, a little town of no consequence named for foreigners; that he is a carpenter, a laborer, the lowest class of worker. A plan to execute this non-credentialed troublemaker as a terrorist has already been set in motion.

Yet when Jesus asks them about John the Baptist's authority they are afraid to speak what they believe and so they say, "We don't know". They do too know. They know that the crowd knows authority when it sees and hears it. There is an authority in the persons of John and of Jesus that the credentialed authorities are afraid to admit. In Jesus' words and in Jesus' deeds the people perceive one who speaks with God for them, and speaks of God to them.

One of the persons to whom I have granted authority in my life is E. Stanley Jones. His writings are a gift to me from my father and grandmother. Dr. Jones was for most of his career a Christian Methodist evangelist in India. He spent exactly one day as a Methodist Bishop, resigning the day after his election because God told him to do so. He wrote wonderful books and daily devotions. In his devotional book The Word Became Flesh, he writes this of Jesus' authority:

A great many people think Jesus was a moralist imposing a moral code upon humanity - a code for which humanity is badly made. It is an impossible code which humanity, being what it is, cannot fulfill. But Jesus was not a moralist in that sense at all. He was a revealer of the nature of reality. First of God - He said if you want to know what God is like look at me. "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." We see the Father in the face of His Son. God is like Jesus in character.....Jesus is God simplified. God approachable, God understandable, God lovable. When I say God I think Jesus....

...When He finished the Sermon on the Mount "the people were astonished at His teaching for He taught them as one who had authority and not as their Scribes." The Scribes quoted authorities, secondhand teaching - He spoke with authority, firsthand teaching...

So the Christian faith is not a set of propositions to be accepted - it is a Person to be followed.

In a small pamphlet entitled "How does God Guide Us?" E. Stanley Jones, speaks of several ways in which we get guidance for our lives. As you might guess he turns first to the life and teachings of Jesus. Dr. Jones writes:

...Here is the center and core of our guidance - to do and be like Jesus. God interprets (God's) will in Him. Here is our general life strategy: to be like Jesus. When in doubt, do the most Christ-like thing and you will not go wrong. If any guidance seems to be at variance at any point with what you see in Christ,

then doubt that guidance, for it cannot be of God, however implemented it may be by reason or emotion. God cannot ask you to do an un-Christlike thing - that would be contrary to (God's) own nature, for (God) is Christlike and ... asks the Christlike and only the Christlike.

If we follow the guidance of what we see in Jesus, we will always be led into paths of supreme sanity. He was the most balanced and sane figure that ever moved down through history...

I found some very sincere Christians getting guidance through Martin Luther who communicated to them through a spiritualistic medium. Apart from the question of whether it was Martin Luther speaking to them - suppose it was - would it be safe to surrender one's mind and will and life to Luther, however good a man he was or is? Hardly. For Christ, not Luther, nor any other (person), is the center of our faith. I can only submit my mind to a Divine Mind, and to a Divine Mind as revealed to me in history.

The Jesus of history is our supreme guidance...

Youth understand what E. Stanley Jones is saying in a very direct way. There was a fad among Christian youth to wear bracelets with the letters WWJD. When I asked what the letters stood for I was told "What would Jesus do?" This is exactly E. Stanley's point.

On my prayer altar at home is a saying I brought back from a summer retreat. It describes what authority Jesus has over me;

It is Jesus you want to see,  
to gaze upon,  
to think about deeply,  
And with desire to imitate.

In my heart, when I read Jesus' story, when I ponder his words, when I imagine his deeds, I am convinced in mind and heart that no one has more authority over me than does Jesus. I can learn from E. Stanley Jones, and Lao Tze, Black Elk and the Buddha. But when I see Jesus take children into his arms, hold them close to his heart proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is made of these; I want to take children into my arms. And when I see Jesus heal the leper and send him home, I want to heal the leper. And when Jesus saves the adulterous woman with the shield of his body and the depth of his love, I want to do that also.

And when I hear Jesus tell of the father receiving his lost son home, I want to welcome home the lost. And when I hear him speak of the Samaritan caring for the wounded stranger on the road, I want to care for the wounded. And when I hear Jesus speak of the widow who gives her last coin for the poor, I want to give.

Jesus is an authority who has only the credentials of compassion and truth. It is the only credentials he needs to have my obedience for in his love I see God. It is upon Jesus I depend and to Jesus I submit.

I want, with all my heart, to love God in the way Jesus loves God, and to love people in the way Jesus loves people and to love myself as Jesus loves me. I know that I fall short and that others suffer from my failings. But still Jesus calls me to come closer, to love deeper, to trust more completely. Still Jesus loves me.

If it is to Jesus you wish to give your life then I recommend regular worship, study and service. These three are how we make ourselves available to the influence of Jesus and the means by which we

are healed and made whole and holy. If we do not know Jesus then we cannot follow him to the world's salvation.

We question authority because we have been used and abused by those to whom we have given power over us. Our fears of authority are deep seated with good reason. But we make a fatal mistake when we cast this fear upon God and resist Jesus' love. God's authority will not fail us for God's love is perfect love.

Did not the sun rise this morning upon you, no matter what you did last night? Did not the music of bird and breeze visit you even when you would not visit them? Did not someone touch your hand even as you considered your loneliness? Did not your heart feel moved, and your mind cleared when you earnestly wept and prayed for mercy? When you gave a gift of love, did you not get joy that was equal to or greater than the one to whom you gave? When you set a prisoner free, someone for whom you harbored anger or resentment, were you not the one truly set free? When you last had lost all faith, and had gone to the depths of despair, did you not find God there, and were you not delivered by a surprise resurrection, by a grace? When the world was at war and you made peace, did not peace come to you and offer you rest in the weariness? When life has been its hardest, has not God been present; induced or not induced, has not God been there with you and for you always? The God Jesus reveals does not fail us, does not abuse us, but loves us always. This is the authority that claims us, not by credential, but by person; not by intellect, but by the heart.

I end with a prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola. It is a prayer difficult to pray when taken seriously because it is a prayer of submission. But for those whose hearts are captured by Jesus, it is a prayer worth the surrender:

Teach us, good Lord,  
to serve you as you deserve;  
to give and not to count the cost;  
to fight and not to heed the wounds'  
to toil and not to seek for rest;  
to labor and not to ask for any reward,  
except that of knowing that we do your will;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

May this prayer be our prayer. Shalom and Amen.