

All Authority

Jesus' parting instructions to his disciples arose out of his conviction that his father had committed all authority into his hand. He chose to delegate that authority to his followers, and proceeded, as it were, to sit down in heaven (Heb 1:3).

When a busy housewife finally sits down, it is a sign that all her jobs for the day have been finished. Onlookers presume that any remaining tasks, such as the washing up, fall to someone else in the family. So it is here; the job that Jesus came to do was finished, and the responsibility for carrying on his work now rests with his disciples.

Not that he has abdicated his role; the opening phrase of the book of Acts refers to all that Jesus 'began' to do and to teach (Acts 1:1). This implies that he went on doing and teaching through his followers, as recorded in the book of Acts. So today, Jesus is still at work, but it is his followers who are his hands and feet (1 Cor 12:27). So often in churches, when prayers are offered, people request that God should do something. This is alright as far as it goes, but Christians are in danger of ignoring the fact that they have been given authority to act themselves. Jesus was sent by the father to do a job, which he did. Now he says to his followers, "As the father has sent me, so I am sending you" (John 20:21). The easiest way of understanding this is, "You have seen what I have done. Now you do it." Jesus has played his part; it is now up to believers to do theirs. It is important that we have a clear idea of what this authority comprises. In this chapter we will discuss what believers are not to do, and what they are encouraged to do, in the area of exercising authority.

The church's authority has clearly defined limits. Christians are not to alter the programme that the Father gave to Jesus. They are to continue that programme. This is stressed in Scripture. Paul wrote to the believers at Corinth, "You are God's building" (1 Cor 3:11). He stressed that any building work had to be done on the foundation that Jesus had laid.

When work begins on a new building, it is possible to form a clear idea of the shape of the end result from the foundations. I recall walking round a building site near my home one Sunday, years ago. Blocks of flats were under construction. I could see how large the ground floor living room and bathroom would be, and work out whether the flat had one or two bedrooms. I expected the foundations and walls to match each other.

So it is with Christianity. Jesus has laid down what it is to be his follower. We are not at liberty to alter the design specification. This may seem obvious, but in practice, it is all too easy to deviate from the chosen course. On a motorway, the main road and a slip-road off it may appear to go in the same direction, at any rate to begin with. Only a small movement of the steering wheel moves the car off the road at the junction. Similarly, although the deviation may have appeared small to begin with, there have been times when the Christian church has gone off on a side route, and the end result has been a

considerable change from what Jesus taught.

In Jesus' day, one failure was in the area of tradition. The religious leaders of the time had a system of tradition which caused them to behave in ways contrary to what God had intended, so much so that Jesus said, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!" (Mark 7:9).

Such practices are clearly unacceptable if we wish to say that we are Christians. However, bending Jesus' teaching to suit ourselves is so easily done. Paul wrote to the Galatian church that they had turned aside to a different gospel, one which was not good news at all (Gal 1:6-7). He insisted, "If we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned (v8)". To make it crystal clear, he then repeated the sentence (v9).

Later generations of Christians have no authority to alter what Jesus said to his followers. He said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away (Luke 21:33)". Jesus is described as being the same yesterday and today and forever by the writer to the Hebrews (Heb 13:8). In addition, we have the voice from heaven.

We discussed in the Introduction God's reluctance to interfere. However, on one occasion during Jesus' lifetime, the Father broke silence, and called out, "This is my son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (Matt 17:5). This may have been because people then as now needed to know that what Jesus said and did had his father's complete approval. Another danger for us is that although we do not attempt to alter what was said, we ignore it. Jesus once told a story about houses built on sand and on rock. Both builders were people who heard the words of Jesus, but the one with the rock foundation put them into practice, while the one with the sand foundation did not (Luke 6:47-49).

Perhaps a lesson can be learnt from our village baker. When I tried to buy a rum truffle one morning, she questioned me carefully - did I really want it? It turned out that she herself strongly disliked rum truffles, and wanted to be sure I knew what I was doing. I noticed that she was prepared to sell what she did not like personally, for the sake of her business. So in the church, believers need to promote what God wants rather than what they want, even if it seems distasteful to them.

A good example of this can be found in the book of Jeremiah. For 25 years, he was told to prophesy disaster and destruction from the North, but it never seemed to arrive. In chapter 19, he was given a particularly violent message along these lines, and ended up in the stocks for it (20:2). Jeremiah then gave vent to his feelings in prayer (20:7-18). He was so upset by his experiences that he cursed the day of his birth and bitterly regretted that he had lived at all (v13-18). In all this, the significant thing is that he kept on with the messages God gave, despite the deep pain they caused him personally, until finally they came to pass (Jer 52:4-27).

To exercise Christian authority, then, involves commitment to all of Jesus' teaching. This may not be easy. But then, no promise was made that it would be easy.

We can now move on to consider some areas in which followers of Jesus do have authority. The first of these is to do things in the name of Jesus. Believers are to ask the Father for things in the name of Jesus, and they will receive them (John 16:23-24). This passage needs to be taken alongside James 4:2-3, which runs, "You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

In other words, Christians cannot expect God to give them whatever they want just by adding the words "in the name of Jesus" to the end of their prayer. A request is only truly in the name of Jesus if it is a request Jesus would have made. Jesus said, "I always do what pleases him", meaning his heavenly father (John 8:29). So any prayer which is genuinely in the name of Jesus has to be asking for something that pleases the father. For believers to attempt to use prayer "in the name of Jesus" as a way of pleasing themselves rather than the Father, is to fall into the trap we have just been discussing, of trying to adapt Christianity to suit their own preference. We can begin to see how easy it is to go wrong in this area.

It is even possible to be apparently carrying out Jesus' programme to the letter, and still be out of the father's will. Jesus once said "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven." There would be people who prophesied, drove out demons and performed many miracles who would be excluded because they did not do the will of the father in heaven (Matt 7:21-23). So the authority of disciples only extends to doing what is in the will of the father.

We can help ourselves understand this subject by considering the most obvious authority figure in our society, namely the policeman. The policeman cannot alter the law; he is only entitled to work within the law. Suppose a policeman sees a man buying a newspaper from a kiosk, and says to him "I arrest you in the name of the law". The man would rightly protest, and the newspaper vendor and passers-by would laugh, because there was no breach of law. The policeman would look foolish.

Now imagine instead that a few moments earlier, the man had been parking his car on double yellow lines. A policeman riding his bike saw this, and as he went past, called out over his shoulder, "You can't park there". However, he rode on, and when the man saw him rounding the corner, he thought that as he was only stopping to buy a newspaper, he would ignore the remark. In

this case, the policeman's authority failed because he did not use it properly. If the policeman had taken the trouble to stop and get off his bike, look the man in the eyes and quietly told him not to park there, the story would probably have ended differently.

So it is for Christians. They need to mean business, when doing something in the name of Jesus. Seven brothers were once driving out demons 'in the name of Jesus' at Ephesus, but the demonic powers in the man knew that they were not true followers of the Lord whose name they used, so they attacked the brothers (Acts 19:13-16). This incident caused serious soul-searching by the 'believers', who "openly confessed their evil deeds" as a result (v17-19). The lives and words of believers need to be consistent, especially when engaging in hand to hand combat with the enemy.

This leads us to another picture of authority found in the ancient world, namely the swordsman. The word of God is often likened to a sword (Eph 6:17, Heb 4:12). A sword lying on its own is no threat. Even in a beginner's hand, it can be overpowered. But in the hand of an expert, it commands respect. Indeed, the aim of an expert is to become so proficient with the sword, that sword and swordsman merge together to become one deadly fighting force. Such a man has authority in the sense that people don't argue with him. They soon do what he says.

We can sense this authority at work in Jesus' use of scripture in debate with the devil. Such was his handling of the word of God, that even after a forty day fast, he was able to defeat the fiercest temptations of the evil one by simply quoting from 2 chapters of Deuteronomy (Luke 4:1-13). The devil knew when he was beaten (v13).

In the book of Revelation, Jesus is himself described as the word of God, riding on a white horse, with a two-edged sword coming out of his mouth (Rev 19:11-16). This seems to underline that, as well as speaking God's message, Jesus also was God's message. As John put it, "The word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14)". Jesus did not just tell us about God, he represented God; he was God in

front of us (John 1:18, 1 John 1:1-2, 2 Peter 1:16-18).

This is the authority that is given to his followers. They are to be so identified with the word of God that they too become the message of God to their generation. As John Stott once put it, the very blood of believers is to become 'bibline'. God's thoughts and desires are to be fleshed out in the church today as in the days of Jesus. There are some areas where believers are to exercise authority that were specifically mentioned by Jesus. These include the ability to break down the gates of hell, presumably to let Satan's prisoners out (Matt 16:18); to bind and loose on earth in a way that unlocks the kingdom of heaven (v19), and to forgive or retain sins (John 20:23).

These are great responsibilities. From what we have seen, it is clear that to be effective, they are to be exercised according to the father's will, and in the faith that when the words are said, there is corresponding action in the unseen spiritual realm. Given the right set of attitudes, backed by a consistent life, it is amazing what power followers of Jesus have in defeating the forces of darkness. Jesus envisaged that his followers would wield power in a similar way to himself. It is the conviction of this book that these activities are central for those who want to follow Jesus. Future chapters will give some idea of how we can go about these tasks. But for now, it is clear that Christian faith is not a weak affair. The phrase "going on retreat" is often heard in churches these days, meaning a withdrawal from the business of life for a period to reflect and meditate. The practice may be valuable, but the phrase seems unhelpful, in that it can convey a sense of the church being a defeated body. Quite the reverse! The church, if it is learning to carry out the charge given to it by its founder, is on the advance, and as it becomes increasingly effective, nothing can stand up to it (Rev 11:3-6).

In this chapter, we have tried to show that a Christian is not only under authority, but is also to exercise authority over certain situations. A centurion grasped this principle in Jesus' day (Matt. 8:9). On hearing his words, Jesus' comment was that he had not come across faith like this in all Israel (v10). We see from this that the use of authority and having faith are closely connected. As we progress, we will grasp more clearly the ways in which Jesus wants his followers to become sword-bearing soldiers in his army.