

By What Standard?

The 16th century in Europe was a defining time in world history. It's when one man, Martin Luther, challenged the massive institution of the Roman Catholic Church . . . and won! Well, I'm convinced that he won. The material issue then was justification. Reading Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Luther said that justification is by faith alone, contrary to what the RCC claimed. But the far more important issue that had to be decided during that extended controversy was the prior and deeper, more formal one: Who has the authority to determine the justification issue? The RCC alleged that the institution of the Church, through its Councils and Papal directives, has that authority. Luther said "No. The Scriptures – and *only* the Scriptures – have authority." The traditions of the Roman Church that their learned theologians had so carefully crafted don't have authority; the Church only *receives* the Scriptures. It's the Scriptures that have authority. It's the Scriptures that constitute the standard by which we're to live.

What does "authority" mean? Authority means the right to impose obligation. Wow!! Read that again! The Scriptures have *the right to impose obligation* on the Church, on every follower of Christ, on every human being. The Scriptures have the authority of God. We are required – *required* – to be in submission to the Scriptures. Let's unpack this.

God identifies with His Word. He esteems the one who trembles at His Word as if trembling at God Himself (Isaiah 66:2b). God's Word is holy and true, which means it expresses God's own Person. So God obliges us, requires us, to live according to His Word. We must think according to His Word, we must understand life, indeed, understand all reality, according to His Word. The Scriptures are to determine how we live, what we do with life, what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is not. When we stand before God some day, we will be evaluated according to our conformity with the Scriptures or our failure to do that. The Scriptures are the absolute standard by which all assertions are evaluated. There is a standard by which all moral issues, all theological issues, all matters relating to life, are to be evaluated, and that's the Scriptures. To love and obey and trust the Scriptures is to love, obey and trust God. To ignore His Word is to ignore Him.

Can we grasp this? I fear we don't get it. We live today in an era when all authority is denied – including the authority of Scripture. Our American culture is spectacularly amoral. All forms of sexual perversion are not only tolerated but celebrated. All sorts of truth claims fill our society, not any of which even attempt to establish *why* they should be accepted as true. It's gotten so bad that no one even thinks to ask how we *know* that such-and-such is true. And this licentiousness has thoroughly infiltrated the Church. Evangelicals live as they please without reference to Scripture. We suppose that the Scriptures are there to inform us about certain things, such as history and biographies, and doctrines and promises. Information. That's all. To require how we live, however? No way! We live as we please, according to our own lights. We'll do and think what we want when we want. We have a crisis of authority in the Church.

Here are a few examples. Is it OK to adopt Darwinian evolution as the explanation of origins. It is not! Yet many of our most famous theologians and expositors do it, even teach it. Is it OK for openly homosexual people to be pastors? It certainly is not. Yet we have that ghastly situation in our churches right now. Is it OK to ignore our needy neighbors in the city? Of course not. Is our thought-life private, irrelevant to God? No to that too. Is it OK to ignore the Great Commission? It is not. Yet almost all evangelicals permanently ignore personal evangelism without a trace of guilt. Is it OK to be proud, contemptuous of others, critical of things or people, in search of greater comfort and security, and spend my money as I please? No, no, no and no. None of these things. God will judge us one day for failing to conform our lives according to the Scriptures. Do we even know what the Scriptures say for how we're to live? I suspect not, nor (worse) do we even care.

This crisis of authority has multiple causes. Let me list some of the reasons:

- As Americans, we're imbued with the idea of personal freedom and rights. We eschew the very thought of being subject to another person. We don't even know what "authority" is or means.
- We see how other believers live, as they please, and so we assume that that's the normal Christian life.
- We suppose that attending Sunday worship services satisfies God. Nothing further is needed.
- Hardness of heart always affects the other guy, never myself. The biblical love of God is abstract, theoretical, not a reality in our lives. We don't even know, I strongly suspect, what it means to love God. If there's no love for God, there's certainly not going to be love for His Word, and if there's no love for the Word, there's obviously no submission to it.

- Our loathing of “works salvation” makes us ignore pleas to obey . . . anything! We suppose that because of grace we’re “free” from law and from obedience to it. We’ve all become experts at theology!
- We’re way too enamored of all that’s freely on offer in our modern world. We suppose we have a right to it and don’t want to miss out. After all, there’s only this one life, so we need to pack in as much enjoyment as we can.
- The self-righteousness in today’s professing church is appalling. “I’m a good person, and I’ve always been a good person. I don’t know what I have to change.” Sadly, we moderns have very little understanding of sin, and we mistake the biblical values that long ago were incorporated into the traditions of the Western world, that we adopt just by growing up here in America, for personal godliness.
- We suppose that, having the assurance of forgiveness of sins and escape from hell, we may live as we please. God’s banner over us is Love. Well, wrong! Faith in Christ is the entry point into a life-long, personal relationship with God that’s defined and controlled by the Scriptures.
- A few Christians claim that the Scriptures aren’t necessary because the Holy Spirit guides them into all truth. That’s nonsense. The Holy Spirit gave us those Scriptures and we have to have them in our minds for the Holy Spirit to work with. Sanctification is synergic, that is, the Spirit empowers us as we willfully and deliberately obey the written Word.

And a grotesque misunderstanding of Jesus I suspect is prevalent among modern Christians: Jesus is the agent of rescue, the means by which we get salvation. Thus, “I’m now a child of God. While Jesus offers good teachings about life, such as the importance of forgiving others, I’m assured of being in heaven *as I am*. I see no reason to have to change.” This purely instrumental view of Christ is bizarre. Yes, He is God’s prophetic Servant and He’s the Lamb of God. But Jesus is deity! After his necessary atoning humiliation was over, He could say, **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”** (Matthew 28:18). He has the authority to dispose of all life according to His holy will. (See John 17:2.) He has the authority to say, **“Depart from me, you who refuse to obey God’s righteous standard. I never knew you”** (Matthew 7:23). So much for the “salvation” such people thought they had!

The Nation of Israel was thrust from God’s presence (the Exile) into the hostile world of pagan nations not because they didn’t believe in Him, but because they refused to live by His revealed standard of righteousness. They wanted to live as they pleased, or live as the Gentiles in the surrounding nations did. They presumed upon their God. And God punished them severely. Jesus concluded His Sermon on the Mount by appealing to His hearers to enter the narrow gate (Him, and Him alone) and then to walk the narrow path (following Him by obeying Him). And He said, **“Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock . . . but everyone who hears these words of mind and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand”** (Matthew 7:24ff). Jesus’ words have authority, which means that some day Jesus will judge us according to our submission and obedience to His words. As Creator, Author of life, Savior and King, He has the right to demand submission to Him, to expect total obedience to His words. He has the absolute right to set the standard by which we live and hold us accountable. The salvation we treasure is defined this way: **“[R]epent and turn to God and prove [our] repentance by [our] deeds”** (Acts 26:20), where “deeds” refers to living out God’s righteous standards revealed in Scripture.

The Scriptures are, in addition to truth, an outpouring of love and wisdom and goodness from God. We need to saturate our minds with God’s Word, reflecting deeply and continually on it. And if we love the Word, the text will control us. That’s how we submit to its authority. This, by the way, is discipleship. Because of the gifting of the Spirit and since the formation of the N.T. canon, discipleship is learning from the Word to follow Christ and to be like Him. To say it differently: We are called to walk with God, and that “walk” is really our lives expressing the Scriptures. Salvation is, ultimately, Christ-likeness; and Jesus is the living Word. So to be Christ-like is to live out His life, His Word, the Scriptures.

Dear reader, there’s no greater issue facing us today than this crisis of authority. It’s not a societal crisis but one that affects every one of us as individuals. Our thinking needs to be radically transformed so that we can accept being under the authority of the Scriptures. And then we need to will, enabled by the Spirit, to obey them. That’s how we glorify God. It’s also how we say “Thank You” to Jesus, and show that we love Him.