

**THE ISSUE IS AUTHORITY**  
**A Sermon by Stan Hasteley**  
**Crossroads Church, Kansas City**  
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Today we come to dedicate this building, or meetinghouse, to resurrect the word first used by churches in America to describe the place of gathering. For me it is an honor to participate and to do so in the name of the Alliance of Baptists. In behalf of your sisters and brothers in the Alliance, I've come to congratulate you and help you consecrate this space to the glory of God. We come to this hour to be reminded that this meetinghouse is to be dedicated to the One who, though rejected by the builders, has become the cornerstone.

Buildings tell us much about churches, just as they help define cities and societies. To be sure, a meetinghouse does not a church make any more than city hall makes Kansas City what it is or any of the dozens of governmental buildings in Washington, D.C., makes our nation what it is. Yet our buildings convey much about our sense of the institutions of church and city and nationhood.

Of all the buildings and monuments in the nation's capital, perhaps none symbolizes the authority of our country's form of government as does the marble palace that houses the Supreme Court of the United States. Although such a statement may invite debate over the relative power of the three branches of government, it is the Supreme Court that wields the final legal authority in our system. Congress enacts the laws, the executive branch enforces and implements the laws, but it is the nation's high court that has the power to uphold or strike down the laws.

What most impressed me as a young journalist about the majestic chamber inside the Supreme Court building is the sheer finality of what happens there. One cannot be present and observe the proceedings without sensing that in that place resides the final authority in our legal system, a system that in recent decades has been much emulated by many of the world's newer nations.

Ultimate legal authority -- that is what the Supreme Court of the United States symbolizes for citizens of this nation and particularly for the legally dispossessed and disinherited who historically have looked to that highest of all our tribunals for their relief.

Authority -- spiritual authority -- is the issue in religion as well. It always has been the issue in religion.

In the Christian religion, ultimate authority rests in the person of Jesus Christ himself, an authority recognized by the author of Mark's gospel, where we read that Jesus taught "as one having authority, and not as the scribes." This theme of Jesus' authority is well documented in all of the gospels. Matthew notes that from the very beginning of his public ministry, following the delivery of the Sermon on the Mount, "the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes." All the gospel writers repeatedly report that Jesus claimed authority to heal the sick, cast out demons, even to forgive sins.

Near the end of his public ministry, already in Jerusalem where those fateful final events were to be played out, Jesus swept through the temple in a fit of righteous rage, upsetting the money tables of those who did their business on temple premises, a final act of defiance that perhaps more than any other sealed his fate at the hands of the religious leaders of the day. Matthew, Mark and Luke all relate that the chief priests and scribes confronted him with the demand, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

Perhaps more maddening than anything else was Jesus' refusal to fall into the trap these self-ascribed religious authorities thought they had set so expertly. You remember the sequence of events. Jesus replied to their question with one of his own, one which if they could answer, he promised, he then would answer theirs: "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"

Jesus' adversaries now realized they had entrapped themselves, for the gospels state further:

They argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'Of human origin'?" -- they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet. So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

Now the point of the incident is that Jesus did not have to cite the source of his authority. It was there for all who had eyes to see and ears to hear. He did not have to claim to be the

Son of God; he lived his life as only the Son of God could. To those healed of life-long diseases, to those delivered from the demons that had terrorized them, to those like Mary and Martha who had seen him raise their loved ones from the dead, the question posed by the chief priests and scribes was an irrelevancy. "By whose authority?"

So confident was Jesus of his authority, in fact, that he felt perfectly comfortable doing the entirely unpredictable. Think of all the social occasions Jesus chose to bless with his presence, often in the homes of people ostracized by the religious authorities. So filled with God's authority was Jesus that he did not have to curry the favor of the presumed figures of authority. In God's realm, Jesus taught by example, banquets were for publicans and sinners and prostitutes, outcasts by any measure, and particularly so in the eyes of these self-righteous religious leaders.

So complete was his sense of authority that Jesus' teachings themselves were unconventional to the point of seeming outrageous, at least from the vantage point of these same would-be inquisitors. The summation of the realm he came preaching was set in paradoxes, paradoxes which to the learned experts made no sense at all.

The paradoxes of this coming reign of God were that to be exalted, one first must humble oneself; to be born into new life, one first must die; to be rich, one must give it all away. Beyond that Jesus, as no one else, embodied all those paradoxes -

- and more. In him, the just was sacrificed for the unjust; the innocent paid the price for the guilty; the Son of God became the son of man; the Rose of Sharon was given a crown of thorns; the Lamb of God was led to the slaughter; the creator of the universe was crucified by and for his creatures. And yet they could ask, "By whose authority?"

In pitiable contrast, the people known as Baptists periodically have engaged in battles over authority considerably less noble in their methods and objectives than those that characterized our Lord's approach to life and the realm of God. From the perspective of our Baptist history, one would think we would understand that the kind of battle over authority in which we occasionally indulge ourselves might easily be settled.

For historically, we always have declared, "Christ over creed!" If we Baptists have had a credo, that is it. Truth be known, that in itself went an important step beyond Martin Luther's Reformation slogan of "Sola Scriptura!" ("Scripture alone!") Even Scripture is to be judged by Christ.

I've done some checking on this subject in the authoritative volume in the field, William L. Lumpkin's **Baptist Confessions of Faith**. There I discovered that the early confessions were written in response to external attacks upon Baptists in an effort to explain the Christian faith from a Baptist perspective to persons and groups of people openly hostile to our Baptist forebears.

The commonly held understanding among these Baptist ancestors of ours was that such statements were not binding --

indeed, they could not be binding -- on the free conscience.

Even within the Southern Baptist Convention, prior to the year 2000, the official statement of faith stated clearly and emphatically, "Confessions are only guides in interpretation, having no authority over the conscience." And it went even further to say: "Baptists are a people who profess a living faith. This faith is rooted and grounded in Jesus Christ who is 'the same yesterday, and today, and for ever.' Therefore, the sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is Jesus Christ whose will is revealed in the Holy Scriptures." It was this last sentence that was ingloriously deleted from Southern Baptists' revised confession of 2000.

It was a ferocious battle over that same confession's statement on Holy Scripture, specifically on the proposition that biblical inerrancy ought to be the final source of our authority, that consumed the nation's largest Protestant body for more than three decades, a battle that finally and mercifully ended in 1990.

It occurs to me that the statement on Jesus Christ as the ultimate source of authority puts the issue in proper perspective. It tells us that Jesus is the Author behind the authors of Holy Scripture. Indeed, he is the Word of God behind the words of the Bible (John 1:1-14).

An important facet of Jesus' authoritative teaching was his mastery of and authority over the Hebrew Scriptures both he and the religious leaders of his day knew so well. But he was no

slave to those writings. Repeatedly, in fact, Jesus confounded the biblicists of his day with refutations of what then was considered holy writ. Again and again, he would say, "You have heard that it was said of old ... but I say to you...."

Several of these refutations of Old Testament Scriptures he made during the Sermon on the Mount at the outset of his public ministry. "You have heard that it was said ... of old, 'You shall not kill ...' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment...." Again, he said: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Or: "Again you have heard that it was said ... of old, 'You shall not swear falsely....' But I say to you, Do not swear at all...." / "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to the same the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let that one have your cloak as well...." / "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...."

Our Baptist argument over the Scriptures is misplaced, I suggest, whether in the old and now lost Southern Baptist Convention or the still-struggling American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. For example, I hear no one today -- not even

inerrantists -- defending slavery from the Bible. Yet it is there, if one chooses so to misuse Scripture, as indeed my own Southern Baptist forebears did with such vehemence that they were willing to divide the body of Christ and separate from their abolitionist brothers and sisters in the North in a futile defense -- albeit scripturally based -- of the institution of human servitude.

Nor do I hear many Baptist inerrantists in the North or South championing glossolalia or healing as gifts of the Spirit, the practitioners of which are roundly condemned by our own legalists, although these gifts plainly are contained in and presumably considered to be holy writ. No, the problem with biblical inerrancy is not that it takes the Bible too seriously, but not seriously enough.

Yet is that not likewise our common failing, regardless of the label we wear? Can any of us make a serious claim that we are living by its precepts? Are we not, all of us, more like the scribes and Pharisees than we will admit, especially in our attitudes, words and actions toward one another?

What this book reveals to us are words from God as filtered through human minds, voices and pens. But what not even this book can contain or constrain is the very Word of God who was in the beginning with God and without whom was nothing created that was created and who is indeed very God.

It is this Word who declared in his final commission to the disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given

to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

But if inerrancy is not our ultimate authority, I would add, neither is denominationalism. The fierceness with which the Southern Baptist war was waged actually had to do more with power and property than either side was willing to admit. There were prophets among us who recognized that fact, one of whom was the venerable Stewart A. Newman, one of the most distinguished Baptist theologians of the past generation. Dr. Newman wrote:

Southern Baptists have worked themselves into a pathetic posture. The convention itself has become almost a sacred fetish. We should remind ourselves often that the organization is man-made, is not yet two centuries old, and that it came into being because our forebears took the wrong side of the slavery question. That realization should have made us a much more humble group than we have been. The only sacred thing about the current convention structure is the habitual manner in which we are devoted to it.

Finally, let us remember that Jesus' ultimate demonstration of authority is yet to be seen. That will come on the great and final day described in Matthew 25:31 ff., "When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him...." You know the scene well, for it is a fearful thing indeed to contemplate.

For Jesus said we are to be judged that day according to our deeds and, more specifically, on how we responded to the hungry and thirsty and stranger, to the naked and sick and imprisoned.

On that terrible day, Jesus will judge us, but not on the

basis of our theological orthodoxy or on how carefully we observed all the minutiae of our own Baptist corpus of required beliefs and practices. Nor will we be judged according to our level of loyal denominationalism.

We will be judged rather on the much harder measure of those deeds done -- or those left undone -- in behalf of the powerless and helpless. On that day, it will not matter whether one subscribed to a test of orthodoxy or signed a confession of faith. Nor will any plaques be handed out for superior denominational loyalty or outstanding church architecture.

No, there will be none of that. Nor, thank God, will any of it seem very important any longer. On that day, I suggest, provided we are not found wanting in the Lord's requirements of doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with our God, it will be sufficient that we join our voices with those of God's saints of all the ages and the angelic choir and together sing:

All hail the power of Jesus' name!  
Let angels prostrate fall;  
Bring forth the royal diadem,  
And crown him Lord of all.