

By What Authority?

Exodus 3:1-15, Luke 20:1-26 (ESV)

November 13, 2005

“Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority.” Thus the religious leaders of the day questioned Jesus. By what authority do you do these things? Who gave you this authority? That is, Who do you think you are? Why do you think you can get away with this? These questions are not unlike the questions asked today to those who would follow Jesus. Who do you think you are? Why do you think Jesus is so special? What gives you the right to tell me about him? Why should I be interested? Are not all religions the same, anyway? Or, Are they not all contradictory? And, Do they not all lead to war and hatred? Why should anyone pay any attention? I can be moral without them. Keep Jesus and your beliefs about him to yourself!

Thus, By what authority do you do these things? And, Who gave you this authority? We have heard them all before, these hostile and faithless questions. We shall hear them all again. Even at Thanksgiving, later this month, some people will not realize that it is the God and Father of Jesus Christ to whom we give thanks. Even at Christmas, next month, some people will be embarrassed to name the name of Jesus Christ and will say instead, “Happy Holidays!” Even at Easter, next spring, some people will think that Easter has to do with pagan celebrations of the return of life at spring rather than with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even in America, today, a nation founded by people seeking freedom of religion, freedom of worship, and freedom of expression, there is tremendous pressure to think of the Christian faith as personal, private, and therefore insignificant, if not juvenile and downright false.

So, By what authority do you do these things? Who gave you this authority? Thus the chief priests and the scribes with the elders questioned Jesus. These are not bad questions, really. Admittedly, they were hostile questions. And if you have to ask these questions to Jesus you may never grasp the answers. Nevertheless, Luke has preserved these questions for us in his gospel, which in many ways seems to function as a catechism, a question and answer teaching device, and I believe that Luke has preserved these questions for us in order to set before us the answers of the true nature of the authority of Jesus Christ and of the true source of that authority. And with that, Luke himself is following Jesus in “teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel.”

By what authority do you do these things? Who gave you this authority? There is, of course, a short answer, and then there is a long answer. There is a short answer which Jesus gave when he responded to their question by asking them another question. “Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?” That was a tough one. It could have been received as an invitation to faith, an invitation to discipleship, an invitation to follow Jesus. But since it was not so received, this question became a conversation stopper. “Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?” They realized that if they said, “From heaven,” he would say, “Why did you not believe him?” But if they said, “From man,” all the people would stone them to death, for the people were convinced that John was a prophet. So the questioners answered that they did not know where John’s baptism came from. And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.” Jesus did not answer his questioners directly, which was a very powerful way of saying that he did not answer to them. He was not there to be a conversation partner. He was there to teach. He was there to preach. The point is not for us to give a witty reply. The point is for us to listen, to learn, to believe, and to obey. The fact that they failed to do so stands as a warning for us not to fail to do so.

And yet, the question remains, By what authority do you do these things? Who gave you this authority? We have heard the short answer. There is also a longer answer, a fuller answer, one Jesus articulates here in a parable and its application, which the questioners did not miss, an answer also embodied in his life and in his subsequent death and resurrection.¹ After his refusal to give a direct answer, Jesus does go on immediately to establish before the same hearers that he is the Son of God, that his rejection will become the occasion of their judgment, that precisely as the rejected stone he will become the cornerstone, which is to say of a new building, a new temple, a new people of God, and finally that he did not mind mixing it up with the rabid worshipers of Caesar. That is not bad for an indirect answer. Let us take these up one at a time.

By what authority do you do these things? Who gave you this authority? First of all, Jesus does these things by his authority as the Son of God. And, by definition, it was God who gave him this authority. He made this point by telling them an old

¹Paul Tillich, *The New Being*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1965, pp. 79-91, in sermon 10, “By What Authority?” on Luke 20:1-8, asserts that Jesus refuses to answer the question and even that an answer is impossible. I disagree. Yes, Jesus refuses to answer the question directly. But Luke 20:9-26 includes several answers, albeit indirect, and the text also indicates that the religious authorities realized exactly what Jesus was saying.

story with a new twist. The parable of the vineyard came right out of Isaiah chapter five, written hundreds of years earlier. His hearers knew it well. Their own rabbis preached on it from time to time. A man had a vineyard. He cared for it. But it did not yield to him the harvest he was due. And there were consequences to this failure. As Isaiah tells the story, the vineyard is the people of Israel, and it is the vineyard itself which is at fault. As Jesus retells the story, he introduces a new level of detail. The vineyard had been entrusted to the care of tenants, and that was where the problem was. The vineyard itself was productive, but the persons who were responsible for it failed to yield the harvest to the owner of the vineyard. In that the vineyard was still Israel, these tenants, these caretakers, were the leaders of the people, that is to say, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders, the very people questioning Jesus. And there would be consequences to their failures.

Jesus also introduces another level of detail to this old story. The owner was not an unreasonable man. He sent a series of servants to the tenants, seeking the harvest that was due to him. That is to say, he gave them every opportunity to do what was right, to do what was honorable, to do what was good, to give to him what was his own. Clearly, the servants were the prophets sent from God to the people of Israel: Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and so forth. Their messages had not been heeded. The official leadership of the nation was in constant tension with the prophets. So were the servants rejected and beaten.

There is more. “Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’” Does this language sound familiar? It appears once earlier in Luke, at chapter three, verse twenty-two, at the baptism of Jesus, where a voice said from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” That is to say, God is the owner of the vineyard. The vineyard is the people of Israel, the people of God. The tenants are the rulers and leaders of the people. The servants were the prophets. And now the owner sends his beloved son to the vineyard, which is to say that God sends his beloved Son to Israel, and God has already identified his beloved Son as none other than Jesus Christ. That is at least part of what this parable means. That is the first part of the longer answer. Those who say simply that Jesus did not answer the question asked of him must have failed to read this longer answer. This says that Jesus does these things by his authority as the Son of God. And, by definition, it was God who gave him this authority. And there is more to this answer.

By what authority do you do these things? Who gave you this authority? Second, the parable of the vineyard prophesies that the leaders of the people of Israel will reject and kill the beloved Son of God, and of course we all know that this prophecy came true. Moreover, Jesus concludes the parable of the vineyard with the prophecy that his rejection will become the occasion of their judgment.

That is to say, Jesus, as the Son of God, is the one who has such authority that the leaders of the people of God will be judged on the basis of how they treat or mistreat him. If the leaders of the people of God do not honor, believe, respect, worship, and serve Jesus Christ, God will destroy them and raise up other leaders in their place. The people were horrified at this. But we all know that it came true.

Of course, it is a word of warning that continues to speak to us today. If the leaders of the Christian church do not honor, believe, respect, worship, and serve Jesus Christ, God will destroy them and raise up other leaders in their place. If the leaders of the Presbyterian Church do not honor, believe, respect, worship, and serve Jesus Christ, God will destroy them and raise up other leaders in their place. If the leaders of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church do not honor, believe, respect, worship, and serve Jesus Christ, God will destroy us and raise up other leaders in our place. That is the way it is. This ancient question and answer continue to speak to us today. Jesus, as the Son of God, is the one who has such authority that the leaders of the people of God will be judged on the basis of how they treat or mistreat him.

By what authority do you do these things? Who gave you this authority? Turning directly to those who objected to his parable of the vineyard Jesus added the third point to his longer answer by saying that precisely as the rejected stone he will become the cornerstone, which is to say of a new building, a new temple, a new people of God. This image, of course, comes from Psalm 118, verse 22, another portion of scripture with which they were familiar, indeed the very hymn which the people had sung to Jesus during his entry into Jerusalem in the reading immediately prior to this one. They had to know that verse. Again, by applying this to himself, Jesus prophesied his own rejection. He also prophesied his resurrection and glorification. And again he emphasized that people would be judged by their relationship to him. "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him." Jesus carries the authority not only of the Son of God, and not only of the crucified One, but also as the risen, living, and final Judge of the universe.

By what authority do you do these things? Who gave you this authority? Fourth and finally, as the scribes and chief priests perceived that he had told his parable against them, and as they sent spies to catch him in something he might say, Jesus also showed that he had the freedom, the courage, and therefore the authority of one who did not mind mixing it up with the rabid worshipers of Caesar. This was no inconsiderable courage in and of itself. Caesar himself was hailed as a son of god, but Jesus taught that his own authority as the Son of God was greater. The governor did indeed have authority and jurisdiction, and Jesus would come into contact with that soon enough, but his own authority was greater. So he was free,

and he was brave. Jesus did not mind a bit mixing it up even with the rabid worshipers of Caesar.

“Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God.” They did not really believe that. If they had, they would have followed him! But they thought it sounded nice, as if it might have drawn them into his favor before they asked their hard question. “Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?” This is not a question seeking information for an answer. This is a trap. Given the volatility of the day, this could have been a death sentence. Speaking in favor of taxes is never a popular thing. Speaking against Caesar is seldom a wise thing. “But he perceived their craftiness, and said to them, “Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?” They said, “Caesar’s.” That is, once again he responded to their question with a question of his own and put them in the position of answering him. Then he said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” This, again, was a conversation stopper. They could not reply at all. Apparently, the state can legitimately demand some things from us. At the same time, there are some things which the state cannot demand from us. There is a higher power. There is One to whom all things, including ourselves and the state itself, belong. There is One who demands and deserves our all. And this One is present with us and for us in the person of Jesus Christ. He is not afraid of Caesar. He is not afraid of those who are afraid of Caesar. This, too, is part of his longer answer to the question of his authority. And his answer continues to stand until this day. Enough said?

By what authority do you do these things? Who gave you this authority? That is, Who do you think you are? Why do you think you can get away with this? These questions asked to Jesus are not unlike the questions asked today to those who would follow Jesus. Who do you think you are? Why do you think Jesus is so special? What gives you the right to tell me about him? Why should I be interested? Jesus looked directly at them and said, “What then is this that is written: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone”? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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