

DISCOVERY

BIBLE STUDY COURSE

Lesson Three: Authority in Religion

What would you think if, while attending a football game, the

kicker suddenly threw the football into the stands and yelled,

“Touchdown,” then turned a flip and yelled, “Extra-Point!”?

After getting over the initial shock, you would think, “He can’t do that—that’s against the rules.” The rules established for football provide guidelines for the game and cannot be violated without penalty or confusion.

“Authority” is “the power or right to give commands, enforce obedience, take action, or make final decisions” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary*). In other words, authority establishes and enforces “the rules.” If there is no authority, if there are no rules, chaos is the result.

Suppose there were no authority in your place of business—Who would determine the location of the business? Who would decide what product or service the business would sell? Who would determine each employee’s responsibilities? Who would set hours of operation? Who would determine salaries? Without authority, there would be no business because there would be no rules or regulations. While we might not particularly like

LOOKING BACK...

The Bible contains sixty-six books organized according to their content...

The Bible tells the story of God’s love for us and His desire to save us from sin...

There is objective evidence proving that the Bible is God’s Word...



the guidelines established in the place of business where we work, we must all agree that some set of guidelines is necessary.

Every organization requires a system of authority in order to exist and function. In our nation, there is authority—our behavior is governed by federal, state, and local laws, and there are police officers and court systems set up to see that those laws are obeyed. In our homes, there is authority—parents have natural authority over their children. In business, there is a framework of authority—owners make administrative decisions and managers see that those decisions are carried out. In order for nations, homes, and businesses to succeed, there must be some form of orderly rule; there must be someone or some group in authority.

Likewise, there is authority in religion. When we consider “religious authority,” we are considering questions such as:

- Who or what has the right to govern our lives (i.e., tell us what to do) in matters of religion?
- Where can we go for accurate answers to questions of a spiritual nature?
- Who has final spiritual jurisdiction?
- Who passes judgment, determining reward and punishment?

There are hundreds of religious denominations in the world today, and among these groups there exists a host of conflicting teaching concerning right and wrong. How are we to know who or what is right? How are we to know who or what is wrong? How are we to determine our responsibilities to God? This lesson is designed to help answer these questions.

➤ **The Authority of God**

If I create something, I naturally own it and have control over it. According to the Scriptures, God created us (Genesis 1–2). This gives Him the natural right of authority over us. Further, He continues to sustain our existence to this very moment. Paul spoke these fitting words to the Athenians concerning God’s authority:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. “For in him we live and move and have our being.” As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring” (Acts 17:24–28, NIV).

God’s authority is demonstrated throughout the Scriptures. From the beginning, God established rules for Adam and Eve and then punished them when they disobeyed those rules (Genesis 2–3). When humanity became totally corrupt, God cleansed the earth with a universal flood of water (Genesis 6). He gave a written law to the Israelites (Exodus 20–40), and proceeded to reward the obedient and punish the disobedient. Based on the rules given to humanity, God has consistently blessed those whom He promised to bless and punished those whom He promised to punish. This is authority—the right to make and enforce rules. It should be noted that our God loves us very much, so the rules that He has established are for our well-being and happiness.

The very fact that we refer to God as our “Lord,” “Master,” “King,” and “Father” suggests that we recognize His ultimate authority over us. It is He who governs every aspect of life: the natural and the supernatural, the temporal and the eternal, the physical and the spiritual. Those who believe in God also believe in His supreme authority. If God were devoid of authority, He would not be God.

➤ **The Authority of Jesus**

Supreme authority also resides in Jesus Christ, for He is God. Before His ascension, Jesus explained to His disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18). The writer of Hebrews notes:

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds (Hebrews 1:1–2).

Speaking of the supreme authority of Jesus, Paul said:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy (Colossians 1:15–18, NIV).

Paul says that Jesus has authority over every aspect of our existence. He is the Son of God. All things in heaven and earth were created by Him and for Him. All these things are held together unto this very hour by His authority. And He also has all spiritual authority—He is the head of the church (v. 18; Ephesians 1:22–23). As the head of the church, or body, He is the governor, the director, and the decision-maker. In a physical body, the foot does not tell the body what to do; the head gives instruction to the other members of the body and they act accordingly. The same is true in the church. Jesus is the head. Jesus naturally has authority over the church, for He built it and purchased it with His blood (Matthew 16:16–18; Acts 20:28; Romans 16:16).

As members of Jesus' spiritual body (the church, Ephesians 1:22–23), we do not have the authority to make the rules. Only Jesus, as head, has the authority to govern His body. Our responsibility is to follow the guidance of our spiritual head, Jesus. In matters of religion, He has ultimate authority (cf. John 5:22–23; Philippians 2:9–11).

➤ The Authority of the Apostles

Sometimes authority is natural and innate. Such is the case with the members of the Godhead (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). God has natural authority over us, for He created us. Jesus has natural authority over the church, for He purchased it with His blood (Acts 20:28). However, authority can also be delegated.

An Illustration. A print shop owner may instruct an employee to purchase a Macintosh computer. In this case, the owner of the business has natural authority (he controls that which he owns) and the employee has delegated authority (the owner has given him the right to act on behalf of the business). In this case, the employee does not have the right to sell the company car, make a stock trade, sign a payroll check, or even purchase an IBM computer—he can only do what he has been instructed (delegated) to do. Further, the owner has not relinquished his authority over the business—he retains full control. Neither has the employee gained permanent authority, for once he has purchased the Macintosh computer, his authority to act on behalf of the business ends (at least until the owner delegates additional authority to him).

Before Jesus ascended back to heaven, He delegated a certain amount of authority to His chosen apostles. “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19; 18:18). This concerns me, and should concern you. How could Jesus give divine authority to earthly men (the apostles) who were prone to make mistakes? The answer is that they were not left alone to make whatever decisions suited their fancy. They were given divine guidance. To these men, Jesus said:

These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you (John 14:25–26).

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all

truth: for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come (John 16:12–13).

During His earthly ministry, Jesus did not teach the apostles everything they needed to know. According to Jesus, the reason for this was twofold: (1) the disciples were not in a position to understand all they needed to know, and (2) many situations would come up in the church that would require special, specific instruction. Thus, Jesus promised to send them a Helper, a Comforter—the Holy Spirit. The instruction the Holy Spirit would provide for the apostles falls into two categories: (1) He reminded them of the teachings that Jesus had given to them, and (2) He gave them any additional spiritual instruction they needed. The ultimate goal of this guidance was to lead them, and us, into “all truth” (John 16:12).

Led and taught by the Spirit, the apostles presented spiritual teachings to the church both orally (Mark 13:11) and in written instructions (Ephesians 3:1–7). Paul assured the Christians in Corinth and Ephesus:

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual (1 Corinthians 2:12–13).

In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets (Ephesians 3:4–5, NIV).

Since the apostles were guided by the Spirit, they had religious authority in the first century, for they served as God’s messengers to the church. Their authority was delegated

by God. They were not free to teach their own opinions and ideas—they could only teach those things approved by the Holy Spirit. As Paul said, they did not write their own ideas and thoughts, but rather the ideas and thoughts of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:13).

Religious authority was given to the apostles by Jesus, the head of the church, and it was protected from error by the Holy Spirit. As human beings, the apostles were prone to error, just like you and I. But because they taught only those things the Holy Spirit gave them to teach, their teaching was without error. This is what we mean by “inspiration.” Sometimes we refer to the apostles as “inspired men.” In fact, only their teaching was inspired (2 Timothy 3:16). As humans, they were imperfect; but as teachers, they were perfect. As a result, the teachings of the apostles were authoritative.

➤ **The Authority of the Word of God**

After Jesus’ ministry was fulfilled, He ascended to heaven, taking His rightful place at the right hand of the Father (Acts 1:9–11; Philippians 2:9–11). He no longer lives on the earth in the form of a man. He does not speak directly to us in audible tones telling us what to do and what not to do, correcting our mistakes and encouraging proper behavior.

Likewise, the apostles, being human, have all died and their spirits have passed into the afterlife. They no longer live on the earth as inspired teachers, delivering God’s will to us by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Further, no apostolic lineage exists that would pass this inspired guidance down from generation to generation.

This being true, some questions regarding religious authority naturally arise. Who has religious authority today? How can we know right from wrong? How can we identify our responsibilities to God? Is spiritual truth today a purely subjective matter?

Though Jesus and the apostles are no longer on the earth in physical form, their teachings have been preserved in writing. Recall that from John 14:25–26 and John 16:12–14 we noticed two things the Holy Spirit would do for the apostles after Jesus ascended to heaven: (1) the Spirit would remind the apostles of all the words of Jesus (as a result, Jesus’ teachings have been preserved in the Gospels); (2) the Spirit would

provide any additional truth the apostles needed to know (these truths are preserved in the other New Testament writings, Acts through Revelation).

In addition to providing needed instruction, the Holy Spirit provided another service for the inspired teachers of the first century. When the Spirit revealed God's message, there had to be some way to convince the audience that the message truly had come from God. In order to meet this need, the Holy Spirit confirmed the message as genuine and true by miraculous signs.

Nicodemus recognized the purpose of miracles when he said to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him" (John 3:2). Concerning the miraculous events that John recorded in his Gospel, he said:

And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name (John 20:30–31).

In both the Old and New Testaments, God used miraculous signs to verify the authenticity of new divine truth. Miracles occur in Scripture in the lives of Moses, the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles; all of whom were responsible for delivering new divine truths to the people.

Students should note that the miracles worked by Moses to confirm the Old Covenant were only worked once. Miracles were not worked in successive generations for the purpose of confirming the divine origin of the Old Covenant. The covenant, along with a record of the miracles that confirmed it, were put into writing for future generations.

The same is true of the New Covenant. Its teachings were verified once by miracles (Hebrews 2:3-4, et al.) and were then put into writing, along with a record of the miracles that confirmed it, for future generations (John 20:30-31).

When Jesus ascended back to heaven and the Spirit began guiding the apostles, they worked miracles for the same reason that Jesus did: to prove that their teaching was, in fact, from God. The author of Hebrews wrote:

This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will (Hebrews 2:3–4, NIV).

The teachings Jesus presented while on earth and those the apostles presented by the guidance of the Spirit were confirmed to be true by miracles. These same teachings were put into written form by the apostles for the benefit of future generations. We call these writings the New Testament. Even though Jesus and the apostles no longer live on the earth in the flesh, their authoritative words are still with us today.

Therefore, the Bible is our guide today in matters of religion. It gives us all the guidance and instruction we need in order to please God. It contains the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of Jesus' apostles as they were guided by the Spirit, confirmed by miracles. The New Testament contains "all truth." It is for this reason that Paul said:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17, NIV).

The Word of God provides the ultimate authority in matters of religion today. It is inspired. It is complete. It is authoritative. Because the Word of God is our authority, Jesus says that we will be judged by it.

And if anyone hears my words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. He who rejects

me, and does not receive my words, has that which judges him—the word I have spoken will judge him in the last day (John 12:47–48).

Therefore, we will not be judged by: our own ideas and opinions, the ideas of others, the words of preachers, or the policies and doctrines of churches. We will be judged by the authoritative teachings of the Bible. So authoritative is the Word of God that we cannot deviate from it, even if an angel from heaven instructs us to do so! Paul said:

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:8–9).

➤ **Conclusion**

Today, our responsibility is to listen to and obey the Word of God. In matters of religion, it does not matter what I think or what you think. It does not matter what some preacher or church council may think. The Bible, containing God’s inspired message, is the only reliable standard of right and wrong. Our motto should be, “If the Bible says it, that settles it.”

In our studies thus far, we have noted the organization of the Bible and established that it is God’s authoritative message for mankind. In the remainder of our studies, we will focus on what the Bible says about God’s plan to save humanity from sin and its consequences.

Question and Answers

1. What is authority? _____

2. Why does God have authority over us? _____

3. What terms do we apply to God that indicate his authority over us? _____

4. Who has authority over the church? _____
5. What figure does Paul use to describe Jesus' authority over the church?

6. To whom did Jesus delegate religious authority before ascending back to heaven?

7. Who "taught" the apostles after Jesus had ascended back to heaven?

8. How were the teachings of the apostles confirmed to be true? _____

9. Since Jesus and His apostles are no longer with us in the flesh, how do we determine right and wrong today in matters of religion? _____
10. What are we to do if a preacher, church, or even an angel teaches a gospel other than the one contained in the New Testament? _____

Thought Questions

1. Explain the difference between natural and delegated authority.
2. Explain how the truthfulness of the New Testament was protected when the apostles were providing spiritual guidance for the church.

Additional Study Goals

1. Reread the sections on the authority of the apostles and the authority of the Bible.
2. Memorize 2 Timothy 3:16–17 and Galatians 1:8–9.

Your Questions

In the space below, write down any personal notes or questions that you had while reading through this lesson.

CHARTING THE COURSE...

Do you know why God gave the Ten Commandments to the Israelites? Have you ever wondered what part of the Bible applies to you today?

These important questions deserve the attention of every Bible student. In our next lesson, we will study the Old Covenant, including its purpose and relevance.