

Authority and Faith

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[0 : 00] 21 verses 23 through 27. And the question is, why do you believe the things you do?

Why do you believe the things you do and why do you act in the way you do? Upon what authority do we base the decisions we make in life?

Why do we think Jesus is who he says he is? Many years ago when I was a student in Aberdeen University, one of my non-Christian friends came round to my flat for a cup of coffee one day.

And during our time together she asked me, why are you a Christian? I proceeded to tell her how I had become a Christian. She was studying to be a lawyer, she was an analytical thinker, and so she pressed me, not how did you become a Christian, but why are you a Christian?

Upon what evidence do you believe? I described to her the idea of a leap of faith, that even though I couldn't prove the existence of God or the cross of Jesus, yet I had faith it was all true.

[1 : 13] The great evangelist D.L. Moody once said to one of his peers who was casting doubt on his evangelistic methods, I rather the way I do evangelism badly than the way you don't do evangelism at all.

He's right, of course. The truth is that if I could go back to that coffee with my friend, I'd approach her question from a far different perspective than the leap of faith argument.

She asked me, why are you a Christian? I would now answer by pointing not to a leap of faith, but to the authority of the Bible, the rationality of logic, and the evidence of history.

But perhaps rather than straight answering her question, I'd want to probe her upon what evidence she discounts God. and the truth of the Christian gospel.

But at that time, early in my Christian life, I didn't really understand that faith in Christ, whilst deeply supernatural, is a rational response to the evidence of Scripture, to God's revelation, and to reality.

[2 : 26] I did evangelism badly that day, but at least it was better than doing no evangelism at all. But that's the question, is it not? Upon what evidence can we base our faith in Jesus Christ?

Upon what authority do we have faith in Christ? Last week, from Matthew 21, verses 18 through 22, the enacted parable of the cursing of the fig tree and the prophecy of the destruction of this mountain, this mountain being the temple, Jesus has been stressing the vital importance and crucial centrality of the fruit of faith.

The reason the temple and religion of Jerusalem will be judged and cursed by God is because despite all appearances to the contrary, there is no genuine faith in God and in his Messiah.

The temple has become a den of robbers, according to verse 13, and not a house of prayer. The fruit Jesus is looking for, the absence of which calls for divine judgment, is the fruit of faith in him.

We saw that last week. And now in verses 23 through 27, Matthew is still dealing with the concept of faith in Christ. Whilst in the previous passage, he has emphasized the crucial necessity of faith, in this passage, he is defending the rational authority of faith in Christ.

[3 : 53] But to believe and trust in Jesus as Messiah is reasonable. Remember, Matthew is writing to ethnic Jewish Christians who are being persecuted for their faith by their countrymen.

They are being accused of leaving behind them the traditions, the religion of Moses, and the history and heritage of their people Israel. Matthew is writing to assure them all the way through that by trusting in Jesus, far from abandoning the tradition and religion of Moses and the history and heritage of Israel, they are embracing it.

He is writing to demonstrate to them the reliability of the foundational authority of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. That to believe in him is not irrational and un-Jewish, but that to trust in him is to follow in the footsteps of Moses and David and John the Baptist.

I wonder whether there are some among us who say, upon what evidence do we believe in Christ? Why am I a Christian?

Are there those among us who are wrestling with the question of authority? Why we believe the things we do? Well, Matthew 21 verses 23 through 27 is for all of us, but especially perhaps for you as together, Jesus by his spirit probes the reasons behind our unbelief and the authority by which we trust.

[5 : 29] Let me suggest that this passage, especially the question Jesus is asked by the chief priests and the elders of the people, by what authority are you doing these things, deals with three themes.

The issue of authority, the sources of authority, and the question of authority. Now, just in case you're worried that I'm going to get all deep and philosophical, let me reassure you that I'm approaching these issues with one purpose, just one.

That all of us, when we sit down and have a cup of coffee with a friend and they say to us, why are you a Christian? We'll be convinced of the rational, reliable, and realistic authority of Jesus Christ, his grace, and his gospel.

First of all, the issue of authority, authority, authority, authority. It's all the way through our passage. It is remarkably important in our society, even if we don't realize it.

To use modern language, we want to know what gives someone the right to say what they do. So we have evangelical secularists proclaiming from the rooftops that there is no place in our tolerant society for anyone who doesn't agree with their agenda.

[6 : 48] And of course, we want to ask them, upon what authority do you say these things? Why is your version of tolerance so intolerant?

But it's rather hypocritical of us to point our fingers at the secularists for their lack of authority if we Christians can only say, well, I don't need a reason to believe in Jesus.

But if we think the issue of authority is important to us, it was even more important to those who lived in Jesus' day. The religious leaders of Israel based everything they said and did, so they said, upon the authority of the Jewish Bible and the rabbinic traditions.

You will notice how in the Bible it was important for a Jewish person to prove their ancestry. It gave someone authority if they could prove they were descended from a high priest or a great prophet or a king.

If you were a religious leader, it was also important who you studied under. What great rabbis influenced your development? The authority a Jewish religious leader could boast gave what he said and what he did gravitas.

[8 : 03] People listened when a descendant of David who had studied under one of the great rabbis discussed theology and practice. They took what he said very seriously indeed.

And that's one of the reasons the chief priests and the elders of the people asked Jesus this question. By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?

Because to them, he's Jesus of Nazareth. He's the son of Joseph the carpenter from Galilee. He'd not studied under any of the great rabbis. Rather than claim rabbinic backing for his views, Jesus went straight to the scripture of the Old Testament.

You have heard it was said, now I say to you. They didn't necessarily know that he was a direct descendant of King David. And yet here he is in the temple teaching the people, overturning the tables of the money changers, healing the sick.

By what authority is he doing these things? What gives him the right to say what he says? Actually, there's nothing much wrong with the question itself.

[9 : 13] Of course, we know that their motive in asking Jesus this question was entirely wrong as Jesus went on to prove. But the issue of authority is very, very important.

If people are going to believe in Jesus as Messiah and Lord, they must have strong evidentiary reasons for so doing. It cannot just be a leap in the dark. After all, there were in the Israel of Jesus' day many strange men who gathered around themselves disciples and claimed to be Messiah.

What makes Jesus so very different from them? Which brings us back to this issue, that of authority, that of why we believe what we do and why we act the way we act.

The question my friend asked me 25 years ago and I didn't answer. Perhaps we as a society don't like deep questions. Maybe that's one of the problems with our society.

We just like to go along with the crowd. But can I respectfully raise the issue of authority with you? By what authority did Jesus say the things he said and do the things he did?

[10 : 24] And by extension, by what authority do we believe the things we do? What persuades us to think the way we think? Do we believe that our arguments carry sufficient weight to support a belief, words, practice?

Who knows? Perhaps through a sober, serious process of self-examination, we discover that the reasons we believe in things are little more than arguments made of straw.

And of course, what's at stake here is an issue more important than life and death. That being so, it is even more important than that we establish that the authority upon which we believe is sufficiently strong to bear the weight of our faith or non-faith.

In my pastoral duties as the minister of this congregation recently, I visited someone who was attending one of the Glasgow hospitals.

After 15 minutes of exchanging pleasantries, she dropped her head and she admitted to me that she doesn't go to church anymore. In fact, she doesn't believe in God anymore.

[11 : 36] I asked her why and I listened to her very carefully. One must always listen before one speaks. And she said, I was going through a really hard time in my life a few years ago.

And a Christian couple I knew and respected told me, this is God's will for you. Now I listened to her and I realized that though there had been a kernel of truth in what that couple had said to her, they had said it in an unfeeling, cliched, and glib manner.

They had not really listened to her, sympathized with her. Rather, they seemed to judge her and so she gave up church and faith.

You know, I can understand where she's coming from. As Christians, we can unthinkingly say the most stupid of things to one another, especially to those in pain. And I'm really sorry she was treated in this way.

And yet, do you suppose the authority upon which she based her decision to stop believing in God is sufficient to warrant her action?

[12 : 52] Someone said something really stupid to her. Is that a sufficient reason to give up one's faith in Jesus? For as much as I sympathize with her, and I really do, she was foolish to have taken such a drastic step.

Our faith is not a life and death matter. It is altogether more important than that. Such a momentary, insensitive blurtout, jeopardizing that?

Surely not. By what authority are you doing these things? That's the issue. Secondly, we have the sources of authority, the sources of authority.

Remembering that Jesus was a Jew, in classical rabbinic fashion, Jesus answers a question with another question. Verse 24, I will ask you one question, if you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

Now Jesus is not being evasive here, nor is he being disrespectful, rather he is answering their question in a fashion to which they are accustomed. If they answer his question, he will answer theirs.

[14 : 08] That's the way it worked in the Israel of Jesus' day. And so we ask them, John's baptism, where did it come from? Was it from heaven or from men? Jesus refers them back to John the Baptist, not just to the baptisms John performed, but to John's entire life and work, to the corpus of John's teaching and actions.

Was it from God, in which case it must be believed, or was it from men, in which case it can be treated with the same disrespect as anyone else's view?

The chief priests and the elders, you see this from verse 25, they retreat into their holy huddle to hold a symposium on the subject of authority. And the discussions run along these lines.

If we say from heaven, he will ask, why didn't you believe him? But if we say from men, what afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet. According to Jesus, and acknowledged even by the chief priests and elders, there are only two possible sources of authority, from heaven or from men?

Why do we believe what we do and why do we act the way we do? Do my beliefs have their foundation in the ideas of the world around me, in which case they're from men? Or are they founded upon the authority of God himself, in which case they're from heaven?

[15 : 36] Do they come from men or from God? There are really only two possible sources of authority, from heaven or from human origin. And so of any belief or religious system, even our own, we must ask, does this come from heaven by revelation from God or from men by their own imaginations?

There are no other options than these two, from God or from us. Of course in our so-called tolerant society, we're not allowed to ask this kind of question, the kind of question Jesus did, because you see, Jesus is not just answering their questions, he is questioning their answers.

He is exposing them to the all-searching eye of truth, and he's saying to them, tell me, why do you believe the things you do?

Upon what evidence do you base your code of belief and practice? One of the fundamental tasks of the Christian apologist is to question people's answers.

Listen very carefully to them and question their answers to get to the bottom of why someone believes what they do. Only then can they be exposed to the truth of Jesus Christ.

[16 : 49] So a couple of weeks ago, thousands of Scottish pagans celebrated the fire festival of Beltane on Calton Hill in Edinburgh. Beltane marks the transformation of the seasons and the beginning of summer.

According to pagans, and I quote from their website, the May Queen transforms the green man from his wintry guise so they can rule together over the warmer months. As exciting as the festival is and without wishing to spoil their party, we want to respectfully ask our pagan friends, the green man, the May Queen, why do you believe the things you do?

Upon what evidence do you base your code of belief in the May Queen or the green man? Does our authority come from heaven by revelation from God or does it come from the imaginations of men?

John's baptism, where did it come from? Was it from heaven or from human origin? There are only two possible sources of authority in this world, human imagination or divine revelation.

So why then would any rational person dream up a scheme of salvation like this? that God himself would send his son to make himself nothing and allow him to be mocked and jeered by men like the chief priests and the elders of the people?

[18 : 22] Who in their right mind would dream up a doctrine of grace, such as the grace of the Christ who was nailed to the cross to pay the penalty of our sin? Upon what evidence are we basing our faith?

Yes, by all means take the first step, question the answers you already have, but then make sure you move to the second and answer the questions that presents. Because the more we investigate the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the more we understand the gospel of his grace, the more we shall realize that our faith as Christians is based upon rational evidence, upon the self-evident authority of God himself.

That is the sources of authority. The issue of authority, the sources of authority, and then thirdly, the question of authority. The question of authority.

You can see the chief priests and the elders of the people, they're afraid of the people, they're unwilling to admit the truth, and so in true political fashion, nothing ever changes.

They sit on the fence and they say, we do not know. Really? Really? Do they not know? Or are they just unwilling to admit that the ministry of John the Baptist was from God?

[19 : 46] You see, their fear of the crowds dominated their thinking process. They cannot lose authority and reputation. They are desperate to maintain their positions of power within the temple and society and culture of Israel.

So even if they should have believed anything to the contrary, they'll say, I don't know. There's no faith here, there's fudge, as we would say. And you know, that is a powerful anti-faith motive.

Not so much intellectual disbelief, but the fear of the reaction of our society around us, and in particular of our family and friends, if we should confess that we believe Jesus Christ is Lord and begin to live as one of his disciples.

It's a fear which prevented Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent Pharisee who trusted secretly in Jesus from confessing his faith publicly.

It's a fear of what others might say, which keeps us from genuine saving faith. Fear which keeps us from producing the fruit of faith, which Jesus is looking for from all of us.

[20 : 56] But then, neither does Jesus answer them. He says, well, neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

I've always wondered about this, shall we say, quizzical response from Jesus our Lord. Why didn't he just say to them, you blind guides of blind people, of course my authority comes from God?

Wouldn't that have cleared things up? Wouldn't that have straightened things out? Well, perhaps in our culture it would, but not in the culture of Jesus.

What a person's testimony about himself was not taken into account half as much as another person's testimony about them.

It is one thing for Jesus to claim authority from God. It is an altogether more forceful argument if someone else who is respected by everyone, someone who is considered by everyone to be a prophet of God, claims that Jesus' authority comes from God.

[22 : 11] So who then can speak on Jesus' behalf? Who can testify to the chief priests and the elders of the people of Israel that Jesus has been given authority from God and that his authority comes from heaven and is not of human origin?

Who has the profile of a prophet of God and who fits the bill of being a reliable witness? Who but John the Baptist Jesus has already asked the chief priests and elders about?

that John the Baptist, the people of Israel, consider to be a genuine prophet of God. In other words, he's the reliable witness, someone whose word can be trusted.

If he says that Jesus' authority comes from heaven, then it must be true. And what did John the Baptist say about Jesus and his authority?

Well, we could go back to Matthew 3 and we could read the account of John's remarkable ministry. He himself claimed that he was the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord.

[23 : 23] And then in a withering speech, he addresses the Pharisees, I baptize you with water for repentance, but after me will come one more powerful than I, whose sandals I'm not fit to carry.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Immediately after, a John who knew from the first moment he saw Jesus that Jesus was the Messiah unwillingly baptized him.

And when Jesus rose from the water, John saw and heard amazing words from heaven, this is my son whom I love, with him I am well pleased. So, where did John the Baptist think Jesus' authority came from?

From heaven or from men? Answer, he knew it came from God. John the Baptist, the last and the greatest of all Israel's prophets, carrying with him all the authority and the tradition and the heritage of the Old Testament, believes that Jesus' authority comes from God.

So, you can see now, how firmly the chief priests and the elders of the people are caught in the horns of a dilemma. Because if they say, yes, Jesus was from, John the Baptist was from God rather, they'd be forced to admit that John the Baptist pointed to Jesus as the Messiah of God whose authority came from heaven.

[24 : 54] Jesus had answered their question with a question of his own. He has questioned their answers with the question he asked them, John's baptism, where did it come from?

It seems to me that the chief priests and the elders of the people knew very well where it came from. And therefore, where Jesus' authority came from.

But out of fear, they were unwilling to admit it. Ah, but these first century Christian Jews, so persecuted by their countrymen on account of their faith in Christ, they're facing life and death every day.

They need to know that divine authority is vested in the Jesus in whom they trust, that they had not taken a leap in the dark, but that Jesus was the Messiah promised by God in the Old Testament, and that by following him, they're standing in the heritage and tradition of their fathers.

And we need to know that also, that the leap in the darkness argument, well, better than no argument at all, falls so far short of what Jesus is doing here.

[26 : 07] He is telling us not that faith is a leap in the dark, he is telling us that faith in him is a reasonable response to all he is, to all others have said about him, and to all he has done.

We believe not on the basis of an idea, we believe on the basis of the authority of Jesus Christ in history and scripture.

As we close today, I want to challenge us all because I reckon there isn't one person in this building who is not intellectually convinced that Jesus is who he says he is, that he is God among us, the savior of his people who gave himself on the cross to take away our sins.

What I reckon is that though we may all be intellectually convinced of the authority of Christ, what keeps us from living faith in him is fear of other things.

Fear that I might be wrong. the same kind of fear which affected the chief priests and elders of the people. The fear of what other people might say to us, do with us.

[27 : 28] The fear of what we might say to and about ourselves. Let me ask you a question. Are what others say and do more important than life and death?

Tell me, why do you believe the things you do? Fear or faith? Which is it?

Let us pray. O Lord, our loving heavenly Father, we thank you for another invitation from your word to place our faith and trust in Jesus Christ, the Jesus who was God among us, the Jesus who gave himself on the cross to take away our sins, the Jesus who was Lord both today and always.

We pray, Lord, that you would help us to overcome our fear of what others may say or what we might say to ourselves, rather to see that our salvation, our faith in Christ is more important than life and death.

And we also pray for that person to whom I spoke. and we've all spoken to people like that, who was turned away from genuine faith in Christ because what others said to her.

[28 : 45] We pray they may return and experience for themselves the gracious, loving, listening heart of Jesus in whose name we pray. Amen.