

“By What Authority Do You Do These Things?”

The chief priests and elders of the Jews recognized the need for authority when they asked Jesus: *"By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?"* (Mt. 21:23). Jesus, recognizing their motive was to trick Him, asked: *"The baptism of John, where was it from? From heaven or from men?"* (Mt. 21:25). Their question shows two things: 1) a recognition of a need for authority in religion and 2) that such authority must come from one who has the rightful power to grant authority. Jesus' question shows that authority can be derived from two sources: 1) God in Heaven or 2) men on the earth.

Certainly, the questions asked by the Jewish leaders need to be asked today of all men and all churches everywhere. Suppose someone came into our assembly and asked, "By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?" How would we answer? What would be the proper answer? Must a Christian or church have authority for what they teach and practice? Absolutely, yes! The Bible demands that we be ready to give an answer from the Word of God (1 Pet. 3:15).

Does the church have authority to practice and teach certain things? If so, what is the source of this authority? In order to answer the first question, we have to understand what "authority of the church" means. According to Catholicism, authority is derived from the Catholic Church. The Pope and priests tell the people what the Bible means and Church traditions are as binding as the Scriptures.

Their authority comes from men, not from Heaven. According to Protestant denominations, they make laws at conventions, councils, etc. These laws are written into their creeds books. These creeds of men represent the authority for church action. Therefore, their source of authority is from men on earth, not God in Heaven.

What about the church of the first century? Did it have authority? If so, where did this authority originate? All phrases must be understood within the context in which they are used. For example, the phrase "love of God" could mean: the love God has from mankind or the love man has for God. You should look at Titus 3:3 and 1 John 5:3 as examples. By authority we mean the right to act or take action. The word "church" could be a denomination. However, in the first century, there were no denominations, only one church (Eph. 1:22,23; 4:5). The term "church" is used in two senses in the New Testament. First, "church" is used of the universal church. It is composed of all the Christians no matter where they live. Christ is the head of the universal church. It is a relationship. The universal church has no earthly organization. Christians do not join together to do church work at the universal level. The church universal does not have any collective responsibilities. Therefore, it has no actions to take. The term "church" is also used of a local church, such as, the church at Corinth or the church at Rome. Local churches are composed of Christians who live within a certain geographical area and agree to work and worship together. For the purpose of this study we are predominately focused on the idea of "the authority of the local church."

Keep in mind, the individual Christian and the local church derive authority for what

they do from the same source. The authority of a Christian is the New Testament. The authority of a local church is the New Testament.

Although the individual Christian and the church have the same source of authority, each has been authorized to do different things. Each Christian is given personal responsibilities by God to be done individually. Local churches have been given collective responsibilities to be done together with other Christians in the church.

We should look at a few things which the individual has the authority do that the church has no authority to practice. The individual Christian has social relationships in the community (1 Cor. 10:31-33; Col. 4:5; 1 Pet. 2:12). The local church is not a social club or societal institution. A Christian has economic relationships in his occupational pursuits (Col. 3:22-41; 1 Th. 4:11,12; 1 Tim. 5:8). The church is not a business. It cannot own a business. A Christian can get married and have physical children. The church is only married in a spiritual sense. The church does not have children it is instead composed of the children of God. A Christian has civil relationships in the nation where he lives (Rom. 13:1-8; 1 Pet. 2:13-17). I may vote, but the local congregation, as a collective, is not involved in politics. I must pay taxes, but the local congregation, as a collective, is not to pay the government taxes. The local church is not to make a living for my family, rear my children, engage in business pursuits, work as a political body or meet social relationships through community organizations. I may do those things, but the local church may not.

There are things the local church has authority to do that cannot be done on the individual level. The church can worship

(Acts 20:7) and partake of the Lord's Supper collectively (1 Cor. 11:17ff). A local congregation must practice discipline against an unruly member (1 Cor. 5 Matt. 18:15-18). It has been charged with supporting widows "indeed" (1 Tim. 5:16). All the members of a local church must work together (Eph. 4:11-16). The idea that I may be a Christian and refuse to become a member of a local congregation of faithful Christians near me, is false. The difference between what the local church can do and what the individual Christian can do is simply that some things are authorized to be done by all the Christians in a local church collectively and some things are to be done individually.

The most important question is: Who gave the church the right to take these actions listed above? The local church's authority is not inherent. It has no authority within itself. All authority the church has to do these things comes from the Word of God which was written by inspired apostles and prophets (Eph. 5:3-5) by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:20,21) sent from Christ (Jn. 14:26; 15:26:16:13) who received all authority from God the Father (Mt. 28:18). If a local congregation cannot come up with a "thus saith the Lord" or book, chapter and verse for teaching a particular doctrine or taking a certain action, it should not teach the doctrine or perform the action.

The local church must have authority for every thing it teaches and practices. Without authority it cannot act. It can do nothing without God's approval. If God never gave the church the authority to take up a collection on the first day of the week or to partake of the Lord's Supper, it could not do either of these things. However, from the Bible we learn that the church is to do those things.

We have book, chapter and verse to prove it. The local church is not its own source of authority, but must derive its authority from the divine chain of authority which originates with God.

- Daniel R. Vess

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 Worship Service.....5:00 pm

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**Where do churches and
Christians derive their authority
for their beliefs and actions?**

by Daniel R. Vess