

Spiritual Authority

By David Sheats

Published by NTChurchSource.com

Since the very beginning of time, the question of authority has been central wherever more than one will is involved. The earliest recorded incident of a conflict of authority is found in Isaiah 14:13, where we read that Lucifer aspired to raise his throne above God and be like the Most High. From that time until now, the question of authority continues to be crucial where men come into contact with God and with other men. If we are going to be found in accord with the purpose of God, we must come to grips with the question of authority and let God direct us. Our purpose in this discussion is to focus our attention back to God and the scriptures, so that the Holy Spirit may make God's way plain to each one of us.

Spiritual Authority vs. Natural Authority

After Christ had risen, and just before He charged the disciples with their responsibility, He made a very profound statement. He said, *"All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth"* (Matthew 28:18). That is a very plain and absolute statement of truth, and it has never been altered in any way. If the truth of that one statement could sink into our souls and we could grasp the significance of it, it would resolve every question on authority that we have. All authority is in Christ! It has never been delegated by Him to any man, group of men, or organization. He received authority from the Father, and He retains that authority today. The only one who has authority in Himself is Christ.

To have authority vested in a person means that the authority is independent and may be used in an independent way apart from consultation or approval of higher or coexistent authority. If we consider natural authority for a moment, it will help us to see the difference between natural and spiritual authority. Natural authority is received from a man or group of men, and then quite often is delegated within certain limits. For example, a military commander receives a commission from his country, and with that commission comes certain responsibilities and the authority to carry them out. Within the limits given, he makes certain decisions and exercises authority to carry out his responsibilities. He need not consult higher authority in carrying out these duties as long as he stays within the limits and is able to fulfill the tasks given him. In carrying out his responsibilities, he may further delegate authority to others who will act in a similar manner within further limits. Each one answers to his superior, but exercises authority in himself within certain limits.

Spiritual authority, on the other hand, works entirely opposite to natural authority. (It is mixing the two that causes so much trouble.) When Christ said "All authority has been given to Me," He did not follow that with "and now I give you authority." Instead, the command was given to go and do certain things. The authority speaking, however, was Christ. He was in charge, so to speak. We see the same principle in other scriptures. For example, Christ said, "I will build My church," He retained the responsibility and authority, and this is what provides the assurance that He will not fail. If He had given the task to some man or group of men and they failed, the church would fail. But He has assured that it will not fail, because He is the one doing the building.

The thing people noticed about the teaching of Christ when He began His public ministry was that *"He was teaching them as one having authority"* (Matthew 7:29). When He healed the paralytic, He said *"...that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..."* In Ephesians 4:8 we read that He ascended and gave gifts to men. Notice that Christ was the one who gave the gifts, not a

man, nor a group of men, nor an organization, nor the church. He is the giver of gifts. He is also the one who heals. If spiritual authority was delegated to men, there would be some who had received authority to heal, able to heal whomever they wish and clean out the hospitals. But Christ retains that authority in all circumstances.

There are many other areas that demonstrate that all authority is in Christ, but perhaps these are sufficient to encourage each one of us to search the scriptures and settle the issue once and for all. All authority has been given to Christ, and He has not delegated any of that authority in any situation to anybody. He retains it all, and this is the central dividing line between natural and spiritual authority. Spiritual authority is centered in Christ, and it pertains to things of the spiritual realm, that is of the new man. Spiritual authority is seen in the church, for that is where Christ is Head. It encompasses every aspect of the life of God, and affects every area of the life of the spiritual man. It is not just in heaven, but on earth also, and works out in very real areas as we shall see. But in every application that we consider, let us continually bear in mind that spiritual authority is always centered in Christ.

Spiritual Authority in the Life of the Individual Believer

The first place that we come into contact with spiritual authority is in the relationship of the individual believer and God. In Hebrews 5:9 we read, *"He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation."* Salvation is by grace through faith, and not of works, lest any man should boast. But true faith always produces obedience, since faith without works is dead (in other words, is not Biblical faith). Obedience implies authority by its very meaning, for there can be no obedience unless there is someone to obey. The vehicle through which the direction comes to obey is words, for words communicate the will of the one to be obeyed. There is no separation of the one to be obeyed from the word spoken. Thus Christ is spoken of as the Living Word. He is the communication of the total message of the Father. Christ and the Word of God are one. Every aspect of salvation comes to us through the living Word of God, that is, Christ.

The Living Word, Christ, is communicated to us as God speaks His living word to our hearts. That living word is given with only one goal in mind: that the purpose of God or the will of God be accomplished. The purpose of God is that all things be reconciled to God and find their meaning and fulfillment in Him. However, this is only realized as the word of God is obeyed. He speaks not just for hearing, but for doing. It is only as we recognize the authority of His word, submit our hearts to it, and obey the direction of God that the word will ever accomplish the purpose for which it is given.

Consider, for example, the first word that comes to each one of us. It is the word "repent." Apart from repentance there can be no forgiveness of sin, and without forgiveness of sin there is no salvation. God is faithful to work His divine work in our lives, but there must be a response to the word which He gives in order to make a place for further work to take place. Without a response to His word, God is prevented from accomplishing what He desires in our life. He has sovereignly chosen not to move past the will of man. Thus a response to the authority of the living word is essential to every aspect of our relationship with God, including initial repentance and cleansing from sin.

This takes us back one step further, for there will never be a recognition of the spiritual authority in the word Christ speaks to our hearts unless there is a recognition of the One from whom the word comes. In Acts 13:27, we read that the Jews condemned Christ because they did not recognize Him nor the scriptures which spoke of Him. If they had known God, they would have heard God through the scriptures. If they had heard God through the scriptures, they would have recognized Christ. Since they knew neither, they killed the very One sent to give them eternal life. The root problem was that they

had no revelation in their hearts of God; therefore they did not recognize God in the scriptures, nor the Living Word before their very eyes.

We can use a natural illustration to see this more clearly. Suppose a person receives several letters. He sorts through them quickly to see who they are from. Some are from organizations, some are from casual friends, but one is a personal letter from the president of the company for which he works. Which will he open first, and which will receive immediate attention? It will be the one from the person he recognizes as having authority in his life and having something to say with direct bearing on his livelihood. All others will be treated in a secondary manner. So it is with God. If we recognize Him, and Christ as God in our lives, then His word will carry strong authority, and we will give it the most earnest heed. However, if we do not have a revelation of Christ in our hearts, His word will carry no authority in our lives and will not profit us, nor the purpose of God.

The first working of spiritual authority in a person's life, therefore, always involves some measure of revelation of the person and work of Christ. It is also a continuing work, for this revelation must grow if we are to grow in God. In these last days, God has spoken to us through His Son (Hebrews 1:2). As God reveals His Son to us, we find that he is also the Living Word to our hearts. For the word to profit in any way, it must be united with faith (Hebrews 4:2), which includes obedience. To the one who obeys the word, God becomes the source of eternal salvation, and in that salvation, God is known in reality.

If we can see clearly the importance of the authority of the Lord and His word in the life of the believer, it will clear away all of our questions concerning salvation and the lordship of Christ. There can be no separation of these two. Christ desires that all men be saved, but He cannot save anyone who will not submit to Him as Lord. Submission to God brings us into salvation. A supposed salvation that has not brought a man under the authority of Christ and His word (they are not separated) is not salvation at all, but a delusion. The distinction between these two has been created by men wanting to give comfort to those who desire assurance that everything is all right, but who have not received an assurance from God. God by the Holy Spirit is the only one who can give assurance of a right relationship with God, and He only gives it to the one who is rightly related to Him: that is, to one who has Christ as his Head and Lord.

There is only one God, and He must occupy the place of God or He does not occupy at all. God is not a God of compromise, and His salvation is not cheap. It is full and rich, with eternal blessings, but is only known by those who have recognized the authority vested in Christ and have submitted to that authority with an obedient heart and life.

Spiritual Authority in the Church

Christ is the head of His body (Colossians 1:18). That is what makes the church His body. There is only one body (Ephesians 4:4), thus there can only be one head. A body with two heads is a monster, but a body with one head is beautiful. The physical body is for the purpose of containing and manifesting life, and it is no different in the Body of Christ. The body reveals life under the direction of the head. The arm obeys the head and assists in carrying out the purpose of the head. The arm, however, does not give direction to the rest of the body. *"Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually"* (I Corinthians 12:27). This we are in reality by the grace of God, but we are not the Head. We are called to give expression to the life of God as directed by the Head, but regardless of our function in the body, whether it be as an eye or a toe, we never take the place of the Head and give direction on our own. The revelation of Christ as the Head of His body, with the members being in subjection to the head and moving under the direction of the head, is the foundation for seeing how spiritual authority works out in reality in the church, the body of Christ.

If we are to see clearly that the only authority that is to be manifested in the Body of Christ is spiritual authority, we must first see clearly that the body is a container or vessel of the life of God. *"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?"* (I Corinthians 6:20). *"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me..."* (Galatians 2:20). It is *"Christ in you, the hope of glory"* (Colossians 1:27). The purpose of God is that He may be all in all and fill all, and that begins with those who have come for cleansing to Calvary. Salvation is not just to be cleansed from sin, but to be filled with God. *"And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me"* (John 17:22,23). The purpose of God is union--God indwelling man. Thus each member that is alive unto God is a vessel of His life. Every manifestation is to be the life of God--His nature, His holiness, His character, His very person. The life is revealed through distinct individuals, but it is a common life being manifested, coming from one source.

As we keep in mind the truth that it is His life being manifested through every member, it will give us understanding as we consider some of the different functions in the body, for we will be able to see that it is only the authority of His life flowing through each member that is spiritual authority.

One area which we may think of quickly when we think of authority is eldership. Elders are appointed by God (Acts 20:28) with grace (or ability) to carry out the task of overseeing, or giving guidance to the flock as the Holy Spirit would direct. But notice that they only have authority as they manifest the life of God. Should they fail the qualifications (I Timothy 3), or not speak the mind of God (I Peter 4:11), there is no authority. Paul could say, "Follow me as I follow Christ," but should he turn aside, all authority flowing through him up to that point would cease, because authority is in the life of God under the direction of the Head.

Authority, as we have already seen, is not vested in the man, but in Christ, and only seen as we are in union with Christ. God speaks His mind through men in leadership, but those men never take the place of the Head. They never occupy an office which carries authority until the end of its term. Even though God may have called a man and given him grace to function as an elder, that man's only authority whether he has functioned for one day or 40 years is that he is a vessel through whom the life of God is flowing. When that life ceases to flow for any reason, all authority ceases at that point, and he is not recognized by God. He functions as an ambassador, never as the Head.

What is true of elders is also true of every other member of the body. Those who give public leadership are perhaps more noticed due to the nature of their function in the body. But what is true for public leadership is also true for each member: *"submitting to one another in the fear of God..."* (Ephesians 5:21) *"Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord"* (Ephesians 5:22). It is always as unto the Lord. We submit to and obey the direction coming from the Head. It comes through the members, but it comes from the Head. It is because the direction is from the Head that we submit and obey. The burden is always twofold. The command to one giving the direction is "you who are spiritual" and "speak as an oracle of God." The command to the one receiving is "recognize and obey those who have the rule over you" and realize that the hand of God is flowing through the other members to feed us. We are all always giving and receiving. If we have this attitude of mind and heart, it leaves us open to receive and give, building up one another in the fear of God.

Some Practical Results of Seeing Spiritual Authority

When we consider spiritual authority, we might at first relegate it to the area of theory and mystical realms and not realize that it has a bearing on our daily lives. Nothing could be further from the truth. Let us consider a few applications of the principles that we have just mentioned and see how they work out in our daily living.

Consider a situation where an issue has come before the church and there is not an immediate unity or seeing together. Leadership meets to consider the issue, there is discussion, prayer, and then a final meeting of the minds on the issue. One of the elders stands before the church and says, "We have decided that such and such is what we will do, so everybody is directed to obey." That is an example of natural authority. No person or group of people is vested with the authority to decide any issue pertaining to the things of God. Such exercise of natural authority can only lead to division, setting one opinion against another opinion, and exalting a man or men to the position of the head.

How should it be handled? The issue comes before the church, and leadership meets to consider the matter. They search the scriptures and wait on the Lord to give them His mind on the subject. When one or more of the leaders has the mind of God, and the others can bear witness of this, the matter is brought back before the church. One or more of the leaders give direction to the whole assembly, ministering the word as may be needed to bring each member to a place of understanding so they can move in faith. The responsibility of leadership is to get each member in connection with the Head, not with leadership.

When the foundation has been laid in each heart in truth and in life by the living word, then the whole body can move in unison, directed by the Head. Attention is not drawn to leadership, but focused on Christ. The authority is coming from the Head, not from men. The unity is not because the "elders have decided" but because the Lord is speaking and each member is alive unto God and able to discern and bear witness to His voice in a particular matter. This is spiritual authority in action.

Note carefully that every member is responsible before God to be able to discern and bear witness in the Spirit. There is only one mediator between God and man, and that is Christ Jesus. Each member is responsible to hear God, and that includes hearing God through other members. God may speak to one member, and as that member voices what God has spoken, each member must recognize God in what is spoken and act upon it. It is God who chooses how He speaks, but in the end, the only way we know it is God is by the anointing. *"But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things"* (I John 2:20). *"But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is*

not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him" (I John 2:27).

Consider another situation where a man sees certain needs and desires to serve the Lord to see those needs met. He may find a mission board that is working where he desires to serve, apply to that mission board by stating his burden to serve the Lord in a certain capacity, and present his religious training and qualifications to be considered. The board meets, approves the application, and assigns the person to serve in a given area, with accountability back to the mission board. All of this is natural authority, and ignores completely that Christ is the Head of the church and is quite capable of choosing whom He desires to serve in a certain place. How should it be handled in light of spiritual authority?

First of all, when we see spiritual authority, we will see that the qualification to serve the Lord is not found in any organized training, or approval of mission boards, or any other man-made criteria, no matter how high the standard may be. The qualification is in the character of God being manifested in a person's life (in reality), and the grace or ability to fulfill the particular calling (in this case, that of apostleship). Secondly, it is the Lord who separates by the Holy Spirit men whom He has chosen to take the message to distance places. This works out as a brother's life is first tested and proven in the local assembly, where his life is an open book for all to see the life of God flowing through him in every circumstance. As the Lord moves in his heart, spiritual brethren bear witness to the grace of God working in him to fulfill the calling he senses from the Lord.

As the Holy Spirit indicates the time for separation, the brother in question would be set aside unto the Lord for the work He is calling him for (See Acts 13:1-4). As he goes out, he is under the direction of the Holy Spirit. God directs him and God pays him. While the church prays for him, and members give as directed by the Lord, the church as a body does not exercise authority over him. Christ is his Head. He does not write back for direction to a mission board, the church, or another man. The Lord is in charge. This is spiritual authority in practical working.

Suppose in the above example, the man comes into an area, and he goes to the church that is established there. "I have been sent of God," he says, "and I am directing you to do this and that." This is also natural authority, whether spoken in so many words or just coming across in such a spirit. It is seeing authority vested in a man. The only way that any person sent of God can speak, whether local or extra-local, is as an oracle of God. He must speak the word of God, and if he does not, he has no authority. His authority is the Living Word being manifested through him in any particular situation. As He speaks the truth of God and manifests the grace of God in a life that is consistent with the nature of God, those to whom he has been sent have the responsibility of recognizing the hand of God being extended to them. But if they do not, the messenger can go no further than Christ did when men did not recognize Him. *"A servant is not greater than his master."* A man can never move past spiritual authority to try to accomplish God's purpose. It will always end in disaster.

Consider one final example of two people in the local gathering. A brother goes to another brother and says, "The Lord has shown me that this is the direction of God. I am sharing this with you, and you also should obey." This is also natural authority. God may show us truth, and we must obey the truth that He shows us, but we can never come away from the basis of leaving Christ as the Head of every man (I Corinthians 11:3). If we see that our only authority with each other is spiritual authority, we will see that we can only minister the word to one another as God opens the way for us to do it in love and humility, and the final obedience must be unto God and not unto man. Our brother or sister must obey God, not us.

If we will move in this manner, it will leave every man free in the hands of God, yet we will be open to receive the word of God through each other. We must recognize the spiritual authority flowing through

the member, and to do so is to hear God. If we do not recognize the spiritual authority, we will only hear the brother or sister, and we will disagree, argue, or disregard, and not obey. But if we hear God, we will either obey or rebel completely, and to rebel is to cut ourselves off from God.

Spiritual Authority: God Flowing Through Men

It should be evident at this point that one of the key issues at stake in spiritual authority is being able to recognize the authority of God coming to us through men. This is not a small thing, but rather an essential area if we are to make progress in God. God has not chosen to use angels in our lives, but men who are called of God and set aside for this purpose. In our own wisdom, we perhaps would have chosen another way, but we are not at liberty to devise our own way. Our place is to recognize the way God has made and to give ourselves wholly to it.

How do we know when a man has been called of God and given grace? Can we recognize the difference between man working on his own authority and God working through him? Can we discern? We must be able to discern, or we end up either being misled by following man or missing God by not recognizing His direction coming through man. We cannot afford either.

The life of God's servant must first be an example. He must be able to say, "Follow me as I follow Christ." The life of Christ opened the way for the words that He spoke. We are commanded to know the "fruit" of those who say they are called of God (Matthew 7:15-20). The word must first be working in the vessel before it can have any power or authority in the life of another. The life of God's servant cannot be a contradiction to his spoken word; it cannot be unstable. The requirements for elders and deacons speak strongly to this (I Timothy 1-13, Titus 1:5-9).

Secondly, we can say that a person who is called of God knows what God is doing. He must have a revelation that does not come from the natural mind or from human wisdom. It must be revelation that has come from God. Paul said that he was not taught by man but by God. This same testimony must be in the life of every servant of God. He is not the "blind leading the blind," nor a novice. Do men send out men who are not trained and prepared? Of course not. Is God less than men? Too often in the name of love (which is not love) we overlook when we should not overlook. We will never discourage anybody who has a heart for God by requiring them to meet God's standards. In fact, we do them a disservice to overlook where God does not overlook. If a man tries to labor in the Lord's vineyard before he is prepared, it could be his downfall (See I Timothy 3:6).

Thirdly, even when a life gives the example and a man is prepared and sees what God is doing, there must be the divine presence of God which makes every word alive and feeds us from the hand of God. This is in the hands of God, and cannot be controlled by man. It is the anointing that gives the word of God life to our hearts. God's servants must begin in God's presence and stay in God's presence. This is demanding. There is no earthly calling that can compare. To serve the living God and care for and feed God's sheep is a high calling that demands all.

Finally, we can see that even if God's servants are prepared as we have outlined, it does not mean that we will automatically recognize that authority. Each one of us must have ears for God. We must desire God to speak to us. We must be ready to obey, or we will not recognize God coming to us (John 7:17). Most men did not recognize Jesus, yet He was God manifested in the flesh with not a single defect. Are we looking for God, desiring Him to feed us from His very hand?

These few words are by no means a complete study on the question of spiritual authority, but perhaps they are enough to point our attention back to God and the scriptures so that we can see more clearly

how God is directing men. Being able to recognize the voice of God coming through men is critical to being able to receive the grace of God coming through His chosen vessels. Being able to recognize the authority of God forms the basis of faith, and without faith it is impossible to please God (Matthew 8:5-13, Hebrews 11:6). God has chosen to work through man, and often the vessel He chooses is not what we think it should be (II Corinthians 10:7-11). We dare not veer to either side, rejecting God's working through man or just listening to man. Both are deadly.

We must walk the straight and narrow way of hearing God through man, recognizing the authority of God coming to us through man. It is God's chosen way, and His way is perfect. His way leaves God fully in control and man fully involved. It deals with every last ounce of pride, because no man has anything unless God gives it to him. God's way leaves everything connected to God by the Spirit, so that no man can move independently from God and bear fruit for the glory of God (John 15). It leaves each of us on our knees continually, utterly dependent on the Lord for the next step. It is an intimate relationship by the Spirit that knows no equal in any natural relationship. Apart from true fellowship with God, we will not recognize the word coming to us through others, and we will not be able to speak words of life to others. Head knowledge and natural authority are death, and will only produce death in others. The Holy Spirit flowing through vessels of clay is life, and will minister life in others (II Corinthians 3).

Brethren, may the Lord speak to our hearts and give us direction in these areas, that each one of us may be set aside as a fit vessel for His life, that God may be glorified in all things.