

“I have not spoken in secret, in some dark land; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, ‘Seek Me in a waste place’; I, the LORD, speak righteousness, declaring things that are upright.” —Isaiah 45:19 (NASB)

Truth is that which *corresponds* to *reality*. When a witness is sworn in to provide testimony in a criminal trial, he is charged by the court to speak *the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth*. In other words, the answers he gives in response to the court’s questions must correspond to reality—to the state of things as they really are. Otherwise, no justice could ever be possible, no innocence could ever be vindicated, and no victim could ever receive restitution.

Christians and non-Christians will sometimes agree with this basic description of truth—that truth is that which corresponds to reality. However, the point of disagreement comes in how that reality is determined. It is here where the issue of *authority* arises. Exactly who or what has the authority to determine reality and validate or invalidate any claim about it? Indeed, authority is the critical issue distinguishing the biblical worldview from all other ways of thinking. Authority is as foundational to thinking as gravity is to life on planet Earth.

What is “authority”? Simply stated, authority refers to **“the right to command belief and/or action”** (Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 212). Or in the words of Bernard Ramm, “Authority itself means that right or power to command action or compliance, or to determine belief or custom, expecting obedience from those under authority, and in turn giving responsible account for the claim to right or power” (*The Pattern of Religious Authority*, 10). If *truth* is that which corresponds to *reality*, then it is an *authority* that determines what that reality is and how it is to be understood and appropriated. Consequently, in the making of any truth claim (an assertion about reality), **the thing to which a person appeals for the basis of his claim is considered by him to be the *authority***. Stated plainly, when we stand at a fork in the road where we must decide between *truth and falsehood*, or between *right and wrong*, or between *beauty or ugliness*, that to which we appeal to make our decision is our *authority*.

Authority is that to which we appeal in order to justify or validate our beliefs and actions.

This reveals the crux of the disagreement between biblical and non-biblical thinking. The difference between a truly biblical way of understanding reality and all other ways of understanding reality comes down to the identity of the authority appealed to in the formulation of thoughts, convictions, attitudes, behaviors, and worldviews. As the Apostle Paul asserts in Romans 1, the natural man has suppressed the truth in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18). To do this, he has “exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever” (v. 25). The unregenerate man refuses to acknowledge God as his authority. He instead looks to something in creation for his standard.

Authority as Determined by the World

The world is at war with authority. It is a war that began at the beginning of time, when the Serpent tempted Eve to rebel against the commandment of God (Gen 3:1–5). It is a war that has continued from that moment to our day, and it will continue to the very last day before God ends it once and for all (Rev 20:7–15).

- **Psalms 10:4** – “The wicked, in the haughtiness of his countenance, does not seek *Him*. All his thoughts are, ‘There is no God’” (see Ps 14:1–3; 53:1; Rom 3:10–12).
- **Proverbs 12:15** – “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel” (see Prov 14:12; 16:2; 21:2).
- **2 Timothy 3:1–4** – “But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.”

But the war against authority is not an attack against the *concept* of authority itself. Rather, the war against authority is a war over the *location* of that authority. It is a battle against *external* or *transcendent* authority (when authority is located outside of man's control and his responsibility is to submit) and in defense of *internal* or *subjective* authority (when authority is located in man himself and he can rule). In fact, even in the context of radical autonomy authority has not been destroyed. Authority is very much alive in anarchy; it has just been seized completely by the individual. In anarchy, every man is his own tyrant.

In the war against external authority, men attempt to relocate it in one of three areas, or within a combination:

- 1) **Intuition.** Intuitionists attribute ultimate authority—the right to determine what reality is and means—to man's *impulses*. Intuition is appealed to as the judge for determining reality according to that which is *felt* or *sensed*. If something is to be regarded by an intuitionist as true, it must be approved as such by his gut.

Putting authority in intuition may appear benign at times—such as when men appeal to “common sense” when they make observations or decisions about insignificant matters. But when pressed into full service, intuition leads to *mysticism*, the belief that truth itself resides *internally*—existing as a “divine spark,” apart from any external point of reference. To understand reality and to determine right from wrong, truth from error, beauty from ugliness, man is challenged to look *within*. Man considers himself to be such a source of truth that he finds less and less difference between God and himself. The radical German mystic, Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) stated, “The eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me; my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, one love.”

- 2) **Reason.** Rationalists attribute ultimate authority—the right to determine what reality is and means—to man's *reason*. Reason is considered the starting point and final test of all truth. In fact, reason is itself truth. For the rationalist to regard something as true, he must approve it by his mind.

J. I. Packer describes rationalism as follows: “The humanist asserts that all authority belongs to human reason; and if there be a god, his status is merely that of patron for the truths which reason determines” (*Honoring the Written Word of God*, 51). Carl Henry has also stated, “The underlying assumption of philosophical rationalism is that the mind of man—simply in view of its latent potentialities, or veiled divinity, or the human mind's explicit and direct continuity with the mind of God—possesses an inherent potentiality for solving all intellectual problems” (*God, Revelation and Authority*, 1.86). One of rationalism's most notable proponents, John Lock (1632–1704), described it most succinctly: “Nothing that is contrary to, and inconsistent with the clear and self-evident Dictates of Reason, has a right to be urged, or assented to, as a matter of Faith.” Thus, walking by faith means walking by a faith that has been approved by reason.

- 3) **Senses.** Empiricists are those who attribute ultimate authority to role of man's senses and sensory experience. Sensory perception (sight, sound, taste, smell, touch) provides the direct line to truth itself. Anything that these senses cannot analyze lies beyond the scope of reality, and therefore outside of the scope of truth. This approach is the approach of *scientism*—the belief that science is the only true authority in life. If something is to be regarded as true, it must be approved as such by the senses.

Carl Henry describes empiricism as follows: “The empiricist rejects the mystic's call for intuitive illumination of transcendent reality, and the philosophical rationalist's call for human reasoning, and considers sense observation the source of all truth and knowledge. Empiricists do not wholly reject reason, since reason must relate sense perceptions in an orderly way, but all truth is held to be derived from experience” (*God, Revelation and Authority*, 1.78). This appeal to the senses as the ultimate authority is clearly articulated by William James (1842–1920), the father of American psychology: “To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced.”

“Modernity and postmodernity seem to be connected thus: modernity essentially locates authority in the human self, and postmodernity radicalizes it.” —Stephen Williams, “Towards Trust,” 219

Authority as Recognized by the Christian

In contrast to the *subjectivism* of the unbeliever who determines that something *within himself* must exercise ultimate authority, the true Christian appeals to a transcendent, external authority—an authority outside of himself—to determine, validate, and justify belief. Specifically, the Christian appeals to the one true God. If something is to be regarded as true, if something is to be believed and appropriated in life, it must conform to the standard that this God—Yahweh—has revealed in his word. Why?

1) **God's authority is *inescapable***; it cannot be denied.

This testimony is self-evident. God is the ultimate authority by virtue of the fact that he is God. He is the *author* of creation—and therefore the *authority*. The very names he uses to identify himself (*Elohim, El Shaddai, Adonai, Yahweh*, etc.), and the very qualities he uses to describe himself (omnipotence; omniscience, omnipresence, immutability, eternality, majesty, aseity (self-existence), inscrutability, wrath, jealousy, righteousness; etc.) indicate there that there is simply no other way to relate to him.

See Romans 11:33–36.

2) **God's authority is *exclusive***; it cannot be equaled.

There is no one else like him. No other person or law contributes to his authority. No one accredits or certifies or delegates or ascribes this authority. To the contrary, all other forms of authority that exist are always derived from him. His authority is primary; all others are derivative. His authority is original; all others must conform to his intentions for them.

See Jude 25; 2 Chronicles 20:6; John 19:9–10; Romans 13:1.

3) **God's authority is *absolute***; it cannot be scrutinized.

There are no means or methods or principles which could even be applied in a process of appraising or judging God's authority. In fact, it is the very height of devilish pride to think that one could analyze God's authority—to put him in the dock for questioning.

See Isaiah 40:28; 45:9–10; Psalm 137:5.

“God will not be tested, as if there were any authority higher than himself. His word is not subject to evaluation by human standards. It is not doubtful or disputable.” —John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 86

4) **God's authority is *total***; it cannot be isolated.

Indeed, all truth is God's truth. Whatever is truly true belongs to him, not us. Therefore, we cannot put him in charge of “the sacred” while we oversee “the secular.” We cannot relegate God to Sundays while we take ownership of Monday to Saturday. His authority allows no compartmentalization. Even eating and drinking is to be done in view of his authority (1 Cor 10:31).

See 2 Corinthians 10:4–5.

“There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, ‘Mine!’” —Abraham Kuyper

5) **God's authority is *revealed***; it cannot be ignored.

Up until this final testimony many in the world could possibly agree. “Yes, that describes God's authority,” they would say, but then counter with a caveat: “Nonetheless, our reason, our experience, or our intuition is what mediates this authority.” But this is where the Christian counters, “No. *Sola Scriptura*. Scripture alone.”

Ultimately, God’s special revelation—his word—mediates his authority to us. God has revealed his truth in the form of objective words and propositions. He has described reality for us and has given us the truth claims we need to make sense of this world. For the Christian, what is true is that which is consistent with what God has revealed in the Bible.

See Isaiah 45:19; Psalm 19:7–9; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; Hebrews 1:1–2; 2 Peter 1:16–21.

How must we respond?

1. **Do you think according to God’s authority?** It is one thing to be conscious of your own thoughts. It is another thing to be aware of how you justify your claims to truth, goodness, and beauty. The Christian mind must go to that next level of thinking and ask the question, “To what am I appealing for the justification of each of my thoughts?” Establishing our thinking according to the standard of God as he has revealed himself in his word is not a *natural instinct*. It is a *spiritual discipline* that must be cultivated.
2. **Do you embrace the doctrine of God’s authority?** Do you really believe that God has the indisputable right to determine *for you* what is true and how you should think it? Do your thoughts reflect that reality? Have you humbled yourself like Job: “. . . Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? I lay my hand on my mouth. Once I have spoken, and I will not answer; even twice, and I will add nothing more” (Job 40:1-5).
3. **Do you openly appeal to God’s authority?** We have been told by the culture to “keep God out” of our discussions of everyday life (ethics, politics, etc.). Or, that to derive our convictions about God from the Bible is faulty reasoning, and that we need to appeal to some other, better authority to justify our theology. We must recover the courage to admit and assert a biblical worldview that claims no other justifying authority than God himself as he has spoken—and that this authority makes the claim over *all* of life. We must unashamedly operate on the basis of the Bible as our unquestioned authority (*sola Scriptura*).
4. **Do you take refuge in God’s authority?** Proverbs 14:26–27 states, “In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence, and his children will have refuge. The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, that one may avoid the snares of death.” It is tremendously liberating to recognize that the truth belongs to God and that it is his to avenge when that truth is rejected. Our role is to be faithful in application and proclamation, and then leave the rest to him (2 Tim 2:24–25).

For Further Study

1. Memorize Psalm 147:5.
2. Explain where the unregenerate man seeks to locate his authority for justifying decisions, beliefs, and actions. Now consider how this approach to authority still tempts you as a Christian. Discuss the ways in which you tend to give intuition, reason, and/or senses the final say in your decisions, beliefs, and actions.
3. Study the example of Abraham as described in Romans 4:16–25. Explain how Abraham would have responded to God’s promise if he operated according to *subjectivity* (intuition, reason, or the senses). Explain how he responded instead, and what that teaches us about the nature of saving faith.
4. Prayerfully consider each of the four questions listed above, under “How must we respond?” Write out a response to each one, indicating where change is still needed and how that change can be implemented in your life by God’s gracious empowerment.
5. Spend extra time this week praying that God would make you a man wholly submissive to his authority in your thoughts and attitudes. As you do, sing through the hymn, “Speak, O Lord” (*Hymns of Grace*, 368), which beautifully articulates a Christian’s humble submission to God as he has revealed himself in his word.



Submit a question
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Audio, video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: November 10, 7pm – “Why Do You Doubt?”