

# AUTHORITY IS NOT A “DEAD” ISSUE

*Noah Hackworth*

One of the distinctive features of the Christian System, as Alexander Campbell called it, is the fact that Christianity is authoritative. I suppose no one will deny that Christ is the Author of New Testament Christianity. In Matthew’s biographical account of the life of Christ, he closes the great Sermon on the Mount with **“For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes”** (7:29). Authority still means “the right to command and enforce obedience; the right to act” (John 1:11-12). God has the undeniable right “to command” which he does through love (John 14:15). Whatever is done in homage paid to God through the ascended Christ must be authorized by God himself. According to the Holy Spirit whatsoever is done in word and deed is to be done in the name of the Lord Jesus. Van Mierld stated:

Modern theologians condemn “authoritarian religions” and will not permit any authority outside of man to be imposed on men. But they themselves end up with this kind of religion. For if all scripture is not inspired of God, if it is in large measure made up of documents of doubtful value, brought together by unknown authors, how is the believer not versed in criticism going to make up his mind? How will he understand where the Bible is simply giving the human opinions of certain August personages? So each man has to consult the theologians to find out what texts he can have confidence in and how he is supposed to regard them. But since these critics often differ among themselves, he will have to decide on one among them. Thus the selected one will become voice of authority. So it turns out that while the authority of God is rejected, that of man is accepted.

The problem with many is that they do not seem to understand the concept of authority. If one is walking down a hall and sees a sign over a doorway that says, “Authorized Personnel Only,” what does it mean? If one is driving down the street and sees a driveway with a posted sign that says, “Authorized Vehicles Only,” what does it mean? There will not be one reader of this article who does not know how one should react in these kinds of situations! Furthermore, it will be immediately admitted that one could not pass through the door or enter the driveway without specific authorization. Anyone who did would have “usurped” the right to do so. A perverted understanding of the “silence of the scriptures” is demonstrated in the attitude of Martin Luther (1484-1546). Luther wanted to “retain in the church all that was not expressly contradicted in the scriptures,” but he quickly saw where this would inevitably lead him. A contemporary of Luther’s, Ulrich Zwingli, wanted to “abolish all that could not be proved by scripture.” History says that he “reduced the church to ‘extreme simplicity; pictures and statutes were removed from the churches...organs were banished...’” Zwingli’s approach was echoed by Thomas Campbell. Subsequent to his arrival in America (ca. 1807), Campbell reportedly said, “That rule, my highly respected, hearers, is this, that where the scriptures speak, we speak; and where the scriptures are silent, we are silent.” In a

description of the attitudes that would characterize the great Restoration Movement, Robert Richardson, in memoirs of Alexander Campbell, said:

Thus the silence of the Bible was to be respected equally with its revelations, which were by Divine authority declared to be able to “make the man of God perfect and thoroughly furnished unto every good work.” Anything more, than “the whole counsel of God” would be a dangerous deficiency. Simply, reverentially, confidently, they would speak of Bible things in Bible words, adding nothing thereto and omitting nothing given by inspiration.

Human opinion is sometimes, valuable but it is never authoritative, and as soon as we learn this there will be fewer questions and less confusion; we are not free to do what the Bible does not authorize. We must remain in subjection to Christ who has all power in heaven and on earth (Mat. 28:18-20; Eph. 5:24). It is still appropriate to ask, “**By what authority doest thou these things**” (Mat. 21:23)?~