

WHO SAYS SO?

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Peter's great confession that "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" as recorded in Matthew 16:16 is the cornerstone confession upon which Christian faith and practice is built. During the second half of the twentieth century, this confession was summarized in the mind of popular Christianity with the simple sentence, "Jesus is Lord". Bracelets, placards, bumper stickers, and even tattoos proclaimed this truth in the public forum. But even as the proclamation was spread abroad, it seemed that professing Christians had less and less interest in following Christ in life practices. A serious gap between "talk and walk" continued to grow. Why is this the case?

Perhaps the answer to this question lies in what Jesus said following Peter's confession. After affirming that Peter's understanding was inspired from heaven itself, Jesus said this:

Mt 16:18 And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

19 And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Endless debates have surrounded the exact meaning of verse 19 specifically, but all acknowledge that Jesus is conferring real authority to the church that he promised he would build. The purpose of this essay is to consider what has been done with the question of authentic church authority in our generation.

For some time now, I have been telling my students that the four great questions we must answer are: 1) Who is Jesus Christ? 2) What is the Church? 3) Who are its members? 4) Who says so? I believe the fourth

question defines the crisis of our generation. If we fail to answer this question reasonably well, any real authority exercised by the church may collapse in time. It will not do merely to criticize the "old authoritarianism" while we descend into the abyss of "everybody does that which is right in his own eyes." We need some answers.

I think that a quote from Judges may be restated a bit for our generation to say: "Everybody does that which is right according to his/her favorite, self-serving, interpretation of the Bible." I say this because it seems to me that many profess to be Bible believing but keep things on their own terms by retaining the right to "private interpretation." Simply stated, this undermines the potency of the Scriptures and subsequently Church authority in the life of the believer. This will be fatal if left uncorrected. Why is this the case and what are the implications if this thesis is correct?

First, there is no doubt that the post-modern mindset continues to grow among us. By post-modern mindset, I mean "certainty that there is nothing certain." In brief it is the old plague of "everything is relative, therefore nothing is categorically wrong and nobody can tell me what to do." The Christian version of post-modernism does not deny truth but weakens it. The not so obvious difference between denial and weakening has masked the real danger of "Christian" post-modernism and adorns it with deceptive clothing. Truth exists, but since we cannot know truth exhaustively, nobody has the right to hold others accountable to the truth since there are always gaps and certain inconsistencies in our perception of what is true and right. This attitude is strike one against any real authority in this present world and in the body of Christ.

Second, love is now defined as tolerance. Tolerance is the holy grail of this present age. The 20th century fight against racism

FOUR GREAT QUESTIONS

1. WHO IS JESUS CHRIST?
2. WHAT IS THE CHURCH?
3. WHO ARE ITS MEMBERS?
4. WHO SAYS SO?

and intolerance was needed; and beyond a doubt our own Mennonite congregations continue to need to learn the value of tolerance rooted in the love of God. But when the spirit of tolerance is extended to arm-twisting leaders into accepting and even promoting sin, it is a lethal over-extension. This is the most clearly seen in the current western attitude toward the LGBT community. It is one thing to understand that all men are born in the image of God and to respect and to love them accordingly; it is quite another to develop public policy that goes far beyond love and acceptance to openly tolerating, promoting, protecting, and rewarding sinful behavior. We recoil at such thinking, but how far have we gone down the road of almost exclusively equating love with tolerance. Older definitions of love recognized that “love is tough”; children need corrected; an old fashioned spanking from a parent who cared was clearly seen as love; to refuse correction to the erring was not love but a serious abrogation of responsible love. But the day of tough love wanes while unlimited tolerance at every level rules the day with few exceptions. This over the top spirit of tolerance is strike two against the exercise of any real authority in the family or the congregation.

Third, and perhaps the most important, is a change in attitude toward the Bible itself. The major theme that the Bible is the final authority set forth by the Reformers, created an unanticipated surprise even as it became popular in the 16th century. The Reformers were certain that the unchecked authority residing in the church officials of that hour was a malignant cancer that needed to be excised. They were equally certain that if only the Bible could be established as the final word on any argument of orthodoxy or orthopraxy, the future of the Church would be secured. Nobody, with the possible exception of Erasmus, foresaw the problem that private interpretations of the Bible would propagate. I speak of the multiple divisions and heresies that emerged from this era based on multiple interpretations of the Bible. The massive disintegration of the solidarity of Christianity into what we know today as denominationalism was and is a disaster of epic proportions. In the end, the Reformation demolished a Church authority that in the early Church passed judgment on “private interpretations” and protected the Body of Christ from the worst of heresies. We are still staggering about in this rubble. One’s own interpretation of the Bible, the autonomy of the individual, the assumed sanctity of the individual conscience, and the pre-eminence and worship of academia are the trump cards in most debates these days. The resulting confusion has steadily eroded confidence in the Bible as the measuring stick of truth and its capacity to instruct our daily lives. Unless we repent and accept the Bible’s final authority as understood by the life and teaching of Jesus, applied and refined in the Epistles, and confirmed by those who have been called out

to lead the congregation, we have committed strike three against any real authority in the Body of Christ.

Please note the bold-faced words in the previous paragraph. In years gone by the answer to multiple interpretations of the Bible was to call out and ordain local leaders who were mature in Christ and living uprightly in the congregation. These called-out leaders took the responsibility to lead the congregation in rooting out wrong interpretations of Scripture and even heresy. Of course there were abuses and sometimes incredible irresponsibility on the part of those called to such an office. But that is not a reason to discard the instructions to call out and ordain qualified leaders that Paul gave us in the Epistles. I believe it remains true that a front-line component of our defense against wrong interpretations and heresy is duly ordained, Spirit-filled leadership, given appropriate authority to lead the congregation in discerning truth from error. This is precisely where we need to correct our course. We need a restoration of a real authority based on the Scriptures in the body of Christ, administered by duly ordained leaders who have been empowered to lead the congregation toward right understanding of the Bible and right applications in life. The details of how this might become a reality is beyond the scope of this short essay. But to pursue this goal is a “must do” for our generation.

In summary, I believe that while many speak of Jesus as Lord we have witnessed in our generation the collapse of the structure and definitions that give substance to the authority of Christ over the individual members in the body. To rebuild, it will be important to restore the value of local church membership under local leaders who have been empowered to lead and discipline the congregation in following the “rule of Christ” in every respect. And we need the courage to pursue these things with full confidence in Jesus who said, “I will build my church”!