

TUTORIAL
7.8

The authority of God's Word

This tutorial discusses the third question in the area of *Word*: 'Are they learning to give God's Word its proper place and authority?'

Last time

In considering the whole range of situations in which Truth is being shared, we touched on the important aspect of language again. We also briefly talked about the inherent power of God's Word, and how that isn't brought into question in any way by us asking how we can best share and explain it in ways that unleash its power. Our mandate and authority to do this comes from Jesus Himself. But we do need to consider the attitudes, qualifications, gifting and equipping of those (ourselves included) who are sharing truth.

We also considered the hugely significant part that *worldview* plays and how those sharing Truth need to be committed to understanding their listeners' deeply held commitments and heart orientations...their *stories*. At some point the effective sharing of Truth challenges these things and leads people to stand before God empty handed and to turn to Jesus Christ as the only answer to their true needs.

The third question under "W" for *Word*

- Are they able to access the Bible in a form that clearly and faithfully communicates God's revelation to them?
- Are they having God's Word presented to them in a way that allows it to enter and engage their hearts at a worldview level?
- Are they learning to give God's Word its proper place and authority?
- Are they growing in their ability to correctly understand God's Word as His complete Narrative, with Jesus Christ as the heart of the story and its interpretive key?
- Are they increasingly able to make use of God's Word as He intends for His children and His Church?

For our immediate purposes we're defining the four areas of *Word, Identity, Life* and *Discipleship* separately, but in the reality of a situation they blend together in one "organic", seamless process. That's why the image of a Body is so apt when we're talking about the Church. Even though medical manuals might show separate schematics of the human nervous, digestive and circulatory systems, in a healthy human body all of those things function in unison. In the same way, even though we might define a particular area or ask a specific question about the life, growth and fruit of an individual, group or local church, to really understand these things we also have to see the connections between them.

We highlight that here because when we come to consider whether God's Word is being given its proper place and authority, it's not really an issue that can be considered in isolation. The questions we've already asked about the *form* and how well someone is actually understanding God's Word, and also about whether or not it is engaging them at a worldview level, are all very important factors that relate to the *authority* it is given. Likewise, the questions we'll be asking next under the area of *Word* impact, and are impacted by, this issue of authority.

God's authority not in question

But you might be wondering, "Why are we even asking about the authority of God's Word? Of course it has authority!" And yes, that's absolutely correct. But this is very similar to the issue we've already touched on about the *power* of His Word. Actually, as you'll no doubt already have noted, authority and power are very closely related. We said that the inherent power of God's Word is not in question, only whether we, as His co-workers, are allowing it the freedom to do what He intends. But, power and authority are also different: power can be impersonal, whereas authority is not. Authority implies that *someone has authority*, and also that *someone is under that authority* (whether they recognise it or not). So we know the truth of the first part of this equation; God's absolute, a-z, alpha to omega, beginning to end, authority - and that His authority, naturally, also applies to His Word.

So what we want to evaluate is whether people understand or acknowledge that they are under God's authority. In a situation where a person or group of people are hearing Truth shared, is it resulting in them putting themselves under the authority of that Truth, and the One who spoke it, the One who IS Truth? OR, are they maybe recognising it as having *some* authority - "Yes, it's important. Yes, it's right to listen to the Bible. Yes, I can see that I benefit from hearing what's shared. I want what this teaching offers...but on the whole it is only one of the "voices" I listen to. I might say, and even believe at some level, that it is the final authority, but does it actually shape my life? Is it changing the things I value...those worldview commitments and orientations of the heart?"

Okay, what can we further identify about the kind of conversations, explanations, sharing, passing on, teaching or preaching of Truth that will see God's Word not be just *one* voice, but *the* Voice in the life of an individual or a group?

A cosmic battle

The outstanding, consistent characteristic of those who are sharing Truth effectively, is that they recognise the seriousness of the cosmic battle that is going on between Truth and lies. In the second of his letters to the Corinthians that we have recorded in the New Testament, Paul writes specifically about the preaching of the Good News which can be hidden, veiled, obscured by lies... and that's the reason, he says, people are perishing (2 Corinthians 4:3-4). A little later he says that when he and his co-workers are faithfully preaching Truth they are operating in God's power. They are using "weapons of righteousness" for both attack and defense (2 Corinthians 6:7). And further on, still in the language of warfare, he describes them using those mighty weapons of God "to knock down the strongholds of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments"...to "destroy every proud obstacle that keeps people from knowing God," and to "capture their rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

Writing to the Ephesian believers, Paul says they had better be well armed and well protected because they are in a fight that is light years beyond a physical, human level. It is against "...evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). It's a life or death battle for the souls of human beings. And people are not just hanging around eager to submit to the authority of whatever we tell them, no matter how well intentioned or passionate we might be. There is another authority, Satan, who has usurped God's rule in this world, who has blinded their minds. He has effectively created a web of lies and an entire system of allegiances that are in direct opposition to God's authority.

When we share Truth with an individual or group still under Satan's control we are joining in the battle that is going on for control of their hearts and minds. We are contributing to God calling them "out of the darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). This is a dramatic rescue effort in which God uses His Truth to break down the formidable defenses of the kingdom of darkness so He can rescue people and bring them under the loving reign of the Lord Jesus (Colossians 1:13). But even after that paradigm shift takes place and people are saved, it's not like the habits of those past allegiances disappear overnight; allegiances to self and to sinful desires, to a world system at odds with God's authority. It is the careful, intentional sharing of Truth that gradually washes away those lingering loyalties and allows God's people to live out of their true identity as His Temple, His Body, and His Bride (Ephesians 5:26,27).

In light of the sobering reality that every Truth-sharing opportunity represents a skirmish in this war being fought between Light and Darkness, we can ask these questions about those who are involved (including ourselves): Do they understand the life and death significance of what they are doing? Are they very consciously dependent on God for wisdom, grace and protection for themselves in the battle? Are they humbly putting themselves under the authority of God's Word and His Spirit and other authorities within the Body that God has provided for their guidance and encouragement? And are they taking every opportunity to equip themselves well for the battle?

There are no formulas

So that's about the people who are sharing Truth, but what about the way they share it? Of course there are no formulas. How people respond to Truth - whether or not they submit to God's rule as a result of what they hear - is part of the freedom that only a truly Sovereign God can give without compromising His absolute authority for a moment. He says that when He sends out His Word it always produces fruit and accomplishes what He intends (Isaiah 55:11). At the same time He talks about using us to appeal and plead with people to listen (2 Corinthians 5:20). But just because we have no control over how God chooses ultimately to use His Word on the one hand, or over our human audience's choices on the other, that doesn't mean we shouldn't have a plan. It shouldn't stop us from asking God to help us understand how to communicate in ways that reflect and establish the inherent authority of His Word.

There are many factors we could discuss at this point, and as we've said, the rest of the W.I.L.D. categories and questions will be relevant to this issue. But for now we'll touch very briefly on just two related characteristics of Truth-sharing that are vital if we're going to see people acknowledge God's rightful claims over them.

Addressing questions, meeting real needs

First, the Truth of God's Word should be communicated in such a way that it is seen to answer the big *existential* or *metaphysical* questions (e.g. How can we know anything to be true? Why do things exist? What is our purpose for being? Why is there evil and suffering? What happens after death? etc.). But the truth of God's Word should also be communicated so it is relevant to the normal experiences and struggles of life (e.g. How am I seen by others? What does it mean to be successful? Where do I turn to for comfort when I'm worried? How can I find security for myself and those I love? etc. In a non-Western, rural community the questions are likely to be about things like fertility and child birth, health, harvests, harmony in the community and protection from the spirits). One way these two areas have been contrasted is as *High Religion* and *Low or Folk Religion*. God's Word must be seen not only as authoritative in the

areas people often equate with religion and “faith” but also in the reality of their everyday lives.

Secondly, Truth needs to be communicated so that it relates to people’s felt needs in light of their real needs, i.e. as God defines them. As we get to know people and build relationships with them, it’s often their felt needs that we relate about with them first. Listening to the things that concern them, the cries of their heart, their struggles and perhaps their achievements...this process forges important links between us and is often the only way we gain the right to share Truth with them. But as much as we might empathise and acknowledge their experiences, what they want, or how they’d like things to be better, it is not actually those things that should rule their lives. Satan’s web of deceit places each person - temporarily and in his or her own mind - at the centre of the universe (“You will be like God...” Genesis 3:5).

We’re not saying that God’s Word doesn’t relate to people’s felt needs. As we’ve said above, it has to be seen to be relevant to every question and area of our human experience. But God, the Creator, Father and Judge of the human race is the only One who can rightfully define how we stand before Him and therefore what our real needs are. Any time that God’s Word is being discussed, taught or preached, the intention of His servants should be to help others hear Him clarify what it is they really need and how He alone has the right and ability to provide the answers. This puts felt needs in their correct perspective.

We’ve talked about the correct perspective those sharing Truth should have, and also a couple of things about how they can establish its authority; but what should we be looking for as evidence that, as our question puts it, an individual or group “are learning to give God’s Word its proper place and authority?”

Changed lives

One of the first and most obvious things that we look for is changed lives. When Paul writes to the Colossians, he begins - as he often does in his letters - by telling them of the things about them that he regularly thanks God for. The Good News that was so effective when shared with them is also bearing fruit around the world, Paul says, in the form of changed lives (Colossians 1:5,6). This makes sense to us, doesn’t it? We would expect that when a person or a group, perhaps a local church, is truly accepting the authority of God’s Word in their lives, then they are going to change. They are going to align their values and therefore their behaviour to God’s true perspective that He is communicating through His Word and which is being explained to them through the teaching they are hearing.

The problem, of course, is that not all changes in behaviour are the result of correct alignment with the Good News. There are endless examples of people who do certain things or stop doing others because they believe that will

change the way God views them. That means they are not functioning according to Truth...in other words, a lie. And that, in turn, means that it is not actually His Word that they are submitting to, even though they might be hearing or reading the words of the Bible.

But if we look further at what Paul wrote to the Colossians, he says that this change in their lives he was so grateful for is the result of the hope that they now have and the understanding they have of God's grace. Similarly, when he writes to the Thessalonians and reflects on the powerful impact of the Good News, which he and others taught, he says that it brought them "full assurance" (1 Thessalonians 1:5–6). Their acceptance of the apostles' teaching had resulted in them going through "severe suffering" but that didn't take away the joy that the Gospel had given to them.

A confident, life-changing assurance about the central message of the Gospel, that Jesus has borne the full payment for their sin, goes against every fibre of someone's being...every instinct of their hearts and minds, every natural allegiance of the self, every worldview commitment. So when we see that assurance growing in someone, we know that they truly are submitting themselves to the authority of God's Word and that genuine alignment in their lives will be the result.

Some extra questions

To go along with the third question in the area of *Word*, 'Are they learning to give God's Word its proper place and authority?', we can now add some extra ones:

- *Are those sharing Truth keenly aware of the battle, and is that causing them to humbly depend on God and to lean on others in the Body for encouragement, input and accountability?*
- *Is Truth being shared so that it's seen to answer the big questions of life, while also being relevant to everyday concerns; and are felt needs being addressed in light of people's real needs before God?*
- *Is the sharing of Truth resulting in a real understanding of God's grace, a joyful assurance of salvation, and changed lives?*



DISCUSSION POINTS

God is building His Church

1. Oswald Chambers (1884 - 1917) said, "*There have been prophets and students who handle the Bible like a child's box of bricks; they explain to us the design and structure and purpose; but as time goes on things do not work out in their way at all. They have mistaken the scaffolding for the structure, while all the time God is working out His purpose with a great and undeterred patience.*" What do you think he is saying about the area of "authority" here?