

TUTORIAL
9.5

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?'

2 Corinthians 10:4-5: We use God's mighty weapons, not worldly weapons, to knock down the strongholds of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments. We destroy every proud obstacle that keeps people from knowing God. We capture their rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ.

Those verse are a reminder that the enemy uses tactics to give false arguments. He raised himself up in pride and was rebellious. In a lot of the contexts that we find ourselves serving where God is wanting us to bring His truth, we find that people are actually prepared against the Gospel. Yet God says here that He's able to tear down these barriers and it's through the authority of God's Word.

Last time

We looked at the second question from the WILD outline. We focused on the way that God's Word is presented to people and how that effects whether it truly engages them at a worldview level. In this tutorial we will discuss the third question in the WILD outline which is also in the area of Word.

Are they learning to give God's Word its proper place and authority?

We asked Clark, "What are the primary voices in the community? And therefore what were the primary voices for those who are now the believers in that area?" He replied:

The authority that the people would have had when we moved in would've been primarily their family unit. Elders and uncles would've been the ones that would have spoken into their lives the most. Another big voice would've been peers. Friends are extremely important, so they'd have been looking for their peers' approval. They would have been a huge voice in their life. Secondary to that would've been the national Thai culture, school teachers, that type

of thing. Those were the voices that they would have been listening to.

Phil talks about how they positioned themselves as religious teachers in the community and how that played out in terms of the authority of God's Word there:

As we were coming into this community, first we're put in the category of rich foreigners because we've got cars and generators. What we're working towards is becoming known as people who, first of all, walk uprightly in terms of the local way of understanding walking uprightly; that we're people who are qualified to talk about religion. We have conversations about it constantly with people, and so there's a sense of authority. We know what we're talking about, and we can actually enter into these conversations.

Even in the Islamic side, for me personally, having read lots and lots of the history, you're driving down the road and you're turning to your Muslim guys and you're like, "Do you know who Hamsa was in relation to the prophet and how he worked with the prophet to protect him, and also to give him authority and to give him prestige? Because Hamsa, there was a supporter behind him." And they're like, "How do you know this stuff about Hamsa if you're not Muslim?" And if there's a question about Catholicism, we're answering why things happen the way they do. So, by lots and lots of different conversations in the realm of religion, we're building the sense that we understand quite a bit of what God's Word says and what the history is, and how all these different religions tie together. So we're building this identity along the way of, I guess you'd call it, authority, in religious topics, while trying to maintain a sense of independence about it without committing to one side or the other. If we're going to commit to anything, we're going to commit to who God is and what He says, and that's what we're trying to follow.

Are those sharing Truth with them 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?

Clark explains some of the obstacles they encountered and the answers they have found in seeing the authority of God's Word established there:

I would say of God's Word becoming authority...and I'll be brutally honest here; when we moved in, we didn't really understand the voices, or even the authority that we were trying to give God's Word. So it wasn't a huge part of our initial presentation of the Gospel, and we didn't recognise what was happening as far as us as foreigners going in there. The people are very much looking for an advantage over their peers, and having a foreigner come in and live on their

land was a huge step up in their minds. So there was a lot of stuff going on in that area, where they were looking at anything that the foreigner was presenting as a way of getting ahead economically, which we didn't recognise initially.

I believe when we did teach them the first few times, they came to faith in Christ. But they made decisions very early on that they were going to become whatever it was that we laid out. It wasn't an understanding of truth with God's Word being the authority. And that left some very weak foundations in the church. I would say in the last couple years we've had more translated material to give to them and actually are teaching from God's Word. It's radically changed how we teach. Rather than having to spend most of our time in the teaching saying, "This is what God's Word says," we can actually read it, and then I would illustrate it by shining a light on what is actually being said in the Scriptures. I think they're finally starting to see that the authority is God's Word, not the missionary, not the teacher that's out there speaking. Probably where we've started to really see a growth taking place, in light of that, was when we taught through First Corinthians, and they say that this is what God's Word says. It actually challenged them and they made some radical changes in how they behaved and thought about it.

Is Truth being shared with them so that it's answering the big questions of life while also being relevant to their everyday concerns; and are their felt needs being addressed in light of people's real needs before God?

We asked Greg how the authority of God's Word was established in an area that was formerly part of the Soviet system:

One of the biggest challenges we found early on was this failure in the idea that there was any kind of truth that existed at all, and we actually began to go back to the very basics of helping them just to decide, "Is there such a thing as truth?" Is there something that they can believe in? Is there something that's knowable out there that they didn't understand?

Dave reflects on how the authority of God's Word grew and challenged animistic beliefs:

From the very start when we began teaching them God's Word, we told them, "We're not going to tell you our ideas. We're not going to tell you anyone else's ideas. We are going to tell you what God says. Everything that we say is going to be based on what is in the Scriptures, what is in this book, The Bible." They clearly understood that before we even got into the early narratives of the Old Testament, and we saw the authority of God's Word at work in their

lives, even in areas that we had not specifically targeted and explicitly told them about.

I remember one time, I went out to a garden with one of my local friends, and there was this large elephant ear-like plant that they were deathly afraid of. We learned that early on when we were making the airstrip. I remember one time, I was out there working with them, and I was about to cut some down, and it was at the time that my wife was expecting our first child, and they said, "No, no! Don't cut that down! Your wife is pregnant, and the child will die!"

I could've just said, "Well, I don't believe in that phoney belief," and I could've just cut it down. But what if my wife had had a miscarriage? That would've confirmed in their minds that their belief was true, or even if she hadn't, they would've just thought that perhaps I had some kind of strong magical power to be able to overcome the deadly effects of this plant. So I stepped aside and they sent an older woman over there. Her children were grown and it wasn't a danger for her.

Well, then several years later after we had taught them the Scriptures and there was a church established there in our village, I went out to a garden with one of the men, and he was clearing this area, and he came upon some of this plant, and he just cut it all down. And I knew that his wife had just had a baby that week, a tiny, tiny infant, and that's when the children are the most susceptible and when this plant would cause the pre-born or newly born child to die. And we had never specifically talked about this in our teaching, and so I said, "I thought you guys were afraid of that plant." And he said, "Oh, we used to be, but we don't have to be afraid of the spirit of that plant anymore. We know that God's Spirit is much more powerful than that." And it was encouraging to see that God was working in their hearts even beyond the specific things that we were telling them, that the authority of God's Word was making changes in areas of their lives that we had not even targeted.

An example from Mexico of a man who was processing the authority of religious figures in contrast to God's true authority:

Recently, the pope visited Mexico, and it was a big event. Everyone was talking about his visit, and the people group we worked among wrestle with whether or not they're Catholic. They don't really believe they're Catholic, but the government tells them they're Catholic, and the Catholic church tells them they're Catholic. So, in our teaching time, my friend Crus was asking me about the pope and who he was. I was trying to explain to him that the pope is the leader of this religion, and the people in that religion follow what he

says, and he speaks for God. He speaks on behalf of God to that religion. And Cruz, in his very demonstrative, playful way, was joking about how the pope, if he was a man, then he was a sinner just like Cruz. And being a sinner, there's no way that he could speak for God, because no sinner could speak for God.

We were just listening to him, and so I asked Cruz, "So, Cruz, who could speak for God?" And he said, "There's only One who lived perfectly and who could speak for God, and that's Jesus Christ. I'm going to listen to Him. I'm going to listen to what He has to say, because He's the only One that could speak for God." We were probably in the lesson of Abraham and Isaac at that point when he was processing that. So we continued to work through the stories using foundational Bible teaching with these guys, and allowed for their questions and their understanding to grow, but we continue to keep working from the storyline, and we're excited because we're seeing a growing understanding in this family's minds and hearts of who Jesus Christ is, and why He came.

Gebi relates an incident of an untimely death that initially unsettled the community of believers:

An example of God's work becoming the authority in our community life was when someone died. A woman died suddenly, and it was a huge shock to everyone. It caused tension in the community, as these kinds of sudden tragedies always did in our culture. But then we remembered that God is in control of all things, including death, and the believers were convinced that God is the One in charge, and so that settled things and dispelled the tensions in the community.

Kaikou explains more about the implications of that particular situation:

In the past, when there was a sudden death in our village, it would create enormous conflict. Houses would even be destroyed in the fighting. Then we understood the true origins of death, and that it was a direct result of sin. When we had that, we chose to believe God's Word and what it says about life and death. And now there are no longer huge tensions and conflict when someone dies. One part of this is that there is a real respect for the leaders that God has put into place, and people listen to them as well.

Are they aligning their lives to God's Word, not from fear, but as a result of understanding more of God's grace and a growing assurance of salvation?

John describes how God's Word brought about freedom in place of the fears people had lived with:

I think there's no doubt about the fact that the method of evangelism, teaching foundationally and starting in Genesis where God starts, it just made sense. It made the picture so much clearer for the people. I said to them, "It's like telling a story. We don't tell a story and begin halfway through. So we're going to start this story right back in the beginning." And as we did that, the amazing thing was, after we taught the story of the fall and God's promise in Genesis 3:15, that we said to the people, "Okay, we're going to cease teaching here, because we know that it's the time of year when you all go off and do your spirit festival. We're just going to wait for you to do that, come back, and then we'll recommence, because we don't want you to miss any part of the story. We know a lot of you will go away to do that, so we'll wait till you return."

One of the guys said to me, "Well, we're not going away this year. In fact, we're probably never going to go away again. In fact, we've taken our spirit rocks that we travel with and depend upon for safety, and we've crushed them up, and we've thrown them in the river. We've taken our other fetishes that we believe protect us, and we've thrown them in the river, and they're all washed out to sea now, so we'll never get them back." And I said, "Why did you do that?"—Because we had never condemned any of that. We were very careful not to change their lifestyle. We wanted God's Word to bring about that change, and not conformity to what we wanted to see, or what we thought was right.

So I said to him, "Why did you do that? What made you do that? And why aren't you going off to do your offerings of rice to the spirits?" And he said, "Well, you know you taught us about Lucifer, about Satan, and how he is God's enemy, and how he's a deceiver, and we saw how he deceived Adam and Eve. Well, we now know that he's deceived us, and now you guys have come and you've brought the truth, the true story about the true and living God, and that's who we're going to follow. So we're not going to put up with that other stuff anymore. We just want to get rid of it, and we want to follow the true God." And that was after three chapters of the Bible, and that was mind-blowing for us.

From there, it was just this commitment to want to hear, this hunger to hear more of God's story, and to understand more of what He was like. And as that happened, we eventually, after six months, got to the culmination of the story, the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, which made sense to them, because they'd seen it in the sacrificial system of the Old Testament. All that foundational teaching made the Gospel so clear, and I don't know, it's sort of hard to put a number on how many came to Christ, but the vast majority did. And many who didn't at that time did shortly after, as it became clearer to them. I can remember some of the young kids, actually, who caught on so quickly,

explaining to the old people the Gospel, so that they understood it correctly.

Kaikou talks about how God's Word has replaced their traditional beliefs as the guiding light in their lives:

As far as God's Word in the life of the church, the view is that it is the truth, and that it has final authority. So now, in the lives of the believers, we see a real change in things that were formerly huge problems in the community; things such as death, or if sickness happens or arguments in the community. Previously, all of those things created tensions, but now it is God's Word that guides us through those things, and we really see that God speaks to us through His Word. Our relationship with the Lord has come about through His Word. The things that directed our lives, and that we trusted in, we know that they are not worth trusting in at all. We realise that there is nothing else worth following or trusting in other than the Lord Himself, through His Word, and it is only through His Word that we have come to know God and what His Son has done for us. And it is also through His Word that we have come to understand the work of His Spirit in our lives.

Here's an example of the changes that God's Word can bring about in what was once a warlike people group:

Today, God's Word has gone into all areas of their lives, and has made many, many changes over time that at times, honestly, maybe we didn't have the faith to see these kinds of changes. The people traditionally were really quite an arrogant people. They prided themselves on being some of the most fierce and ferocious warriors throughout that whole region, throughout that whole district. Some of the older men especially had been involved in some warfare. I remember sitting down with them in recent years and seeing a true humility that can only come about through God changing their lives.

We asked Bill and Kelley to reflect on what has changed in terms of who people are looking to for their authority:

Their main authority was basically their spirits, their clan spirits. So when the Gospel came, those clan spirits completely went away, and basically what it left was a vacuum. Because at that point, when they first heard the Gospel, they didn't have elders. They had me (Bill) kind of as their pastor, but in the community, they didn't really have anything set up where they could go to for authority as far as even court decisions and life decisions that they needed answers to. The Lord was really faithful, though. He started bringing some of the teachers, giving them wisdom to be able to help with the different things that they were seeing in their lives, like, "Okay, how do we do this now that we're believers?" Things like that. So the Lord really

started giving insight to the teachers for them to be able to help work through some of those issues.

The neat thing about it was that the authority began to be the Word of God. As the teachers began to understand the Word of God and be able to explain it in their context, then the people started respecting them. We had this one guy who's one of the church elders right now. And the Lord was just really giving him a lot of wisdom in how to deal with problems that were coming up in the village, and he just has a supernatural ability, really, to be able to look at a situation and think about Scriptures that address that situation. And I've been sitting with him before and listening to him walk through things, and it's almost like his knowledge has expanded well beyond what I've taught him, and I can tell that the Holy Spirit really has taught him, and he can really bring that to bear on some of the issues that he's dealing with.

One of the things that we taught early on, and it's something really special to Kelley and I too, is the story there in Luke where Jesus heals the centurion and the centurion's son. It's interesting that Jesus, after he heals the centurion's son, said of him, "Man, I've not seen such great a faith in all Israel." What's so interesting about that is the reason that Jesus said it to him. It was because the man recognized authority and he realized that Jesus just had to say the word. And if He said the word, then the sickness would be gone. And in that same way, we watched the church grow into that ability to be able to not just believe, but also to have a deeper understanding of belief to where they can start obeying and being obedient to the authority of Christ Himself through the Scriptures.

The testimonies in this tutorial describe how the authority of the Holy Spirit using God's Word has radically changed people in communities and is taking them on to maturity as individuals and as groups and is changing them in profound ways. It's hard to imagine something more exciting and fulfilling than to be involved in God's work of church planting and sharing God's Word in these kinds of contexts.



DISCUSSION POINTS

The authority of God's word

1. Reflect on the statement, "We can be both learners and teachers at the same time." Think specifically about what that might look like in a cross-cultural setting.

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2. In your own words describe what you would say are some of the most important factors in the authority of God's Word being established in a new community.