

Private.

## AUTHORITY.

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“There is no power but of God.” Rom. 13. 1. Absolute unlimited power belongs to, and is vested in, God alone; and the wielding of it is His prerogative. Power placed in the hands of man, always was, and still is, only *delegated*; and the recipient of it is but a representative, and directly responsible to Him from Whom he receives it.

Now in the Word of God there are at least four words relating to power, viz., *dunamis*, inherent power, as Acts 1. 8., “Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you.” Next, *exousia*, authority, or privilege, as Rom. 13. 1., “The authorities that be are ordained of God.” This is *delegated* power. Then we have *iskus*, strength as an endowment, as 1 Pet. 4. 11., “If any man minister, let him do it as of the strength which God supplies.” And lastly, *krattos*, strength as exerted, or force, as Acts 19. 20., “So mightily grew the Word of God, and prevailed.” But the word before me in this paper is *exousia*, or authority.

When we look at man, and what he has become since the fall, whether before law, or under law, and even under grace, the story has ever been the same,—*failure*. The question may well be asked, “Who is sufficient for these things?” Thank God! there is sufficiency; but it is only of Him. If we know what human nature has been, and still is, we must own that “we have all sinned, and come short of the glory of God,” not only as sinners, but (alas!) as saints. Whatever God has set up, man has invariably spoiled to his own shame. A few instances will suffice to show this.

What a lovely sight it must have been when Israel was under a Theocracy that was unlimited in its resources, and boundless in its care, both through the wilderness, and in the land to which God, in faithfulness, brought them; bearing them on eagles' wings, and bringing them unto Himself. Ex. 19. 4. But they must be like the surrounding nations, and so asked for a king. Thus they

rejected Theocracy, and preferred to have authority in their own hands. 1 Sam. 8. 7. God gave it them: and we know the sequel. From Saul to Zedekiah there was failure in some form: and God said, when speaking of the last king, "I will overturn, overturn, overturn it: and it shall be no more, until He come Whose right it is; and I will give it Him." Ezek. 21. 27. Yes, Jesus is the only Man in Whom God has full confidence in whatever He commits to Him: and He has committed to Him "all authority in heaven and in earth." Matt. 28. 18.

When God as Supreme, delegates authority to His servants, obedience thereto is both expected and commanded: and woe to those who resist such authority, without sanction from the Word of God. Whether in Church or State, in families or in service, obedience is the *only* course, unless the delegates violate the plain statements of Scripture. It is rare, I judge when, in obedience to God as Supreme, one has to reject or disobey delegates. But it does happen so at times. King Uzziah had regal authority to sit on the throne; but none to enter the temple as a priest. His evil nature got the better of him, moral leprosy was at work in the flesh; and the priests did quite right in expelling him from the house of God. He had sown the wind, he reaped the whirlwind; for he was a leper to the day of his death. When God in His sovereignty removed the power from disobedient Israel, and placed it in the hands of the Gentiles, delegating Nebuchadnezzar the first head; the story was the same,—*failure*. Instead of glorifying God, the new delegate glorified himself, and had to be humbled. When he ordered his subjects to bow to an image of his own making, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego did no sin by refusing to do so in faithful obedience to a higher Authority Who had said, "Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them." Ex. 20. 5. In later times, when the "Act of Uniformity" would have all men in the realm worship God as the State dictated, thus assuming authority over the conscience, and violating Jno. 4. 21, 23, 24, the "Pilgrim Fathers" were surely justified in fleeing to America in the "Mayflower". But to assume an atti-

tude of non-conformity to the Powers, when they do no violence to God's Word is, of course, the very principle of rebellion.

But further. In the days of the Judges, when the elders fetched the Ark of God out of Shiloh, that it might save them from their enemies, "the heart of Eli trembled" for it. In the time of Joshua there was authority for carrying the Ark round the walls of Jericho, but none whatever in the days of Eli for taking it into the camp in their war with the Philistines. In the midst of that camp there was the symbol of God's presence; *but God was not with them in the war.* Let us beware that we use not the name of the Lord Jesus in what is not of God; for if we do, can we expect Him to sanction it? It is plainly stated in 1 Sam. 4. 4, that "Jehovah of Hosts sitteth between the cherubim"; but Jehovah was not with them in the war; neither did He sanction an act of the natural will which used the token of His presence to accomplish its own ends. The priests were slain in the battle, as well as 30,000 footmen. The Ark of God was taken by the enemy, and for the present, "Ichabod" was stamped on the nation. Has this no voice for us in these closing days of church history? Rom. 15. 4. If we get into an unfaithful condition, and seek, like Israel, to identify the Lord with us, we shall not do so with impunity.

A step further. Who will deny that parents have authority from God over their children? "Children, obey your parents in all things." Col. 3. 20. Disobedience to parents acting in the fear of God, will not go unpunished. But did Jacob right in Gen. 27. 8, &c, when he both acted and told a lie in obedience to his Mother? Suppose a Father were to command his child not to attend brethren's meetings, but instead to go and bow before an image and at the idolatrous mass? What, in such a case, would be the path of true obedience for that child? Surely to obey Him Who has said, "Thou shalt not bow down to them."

Now let us come nearer home, and ask, What about authority in the church? I know a man who was professedly given authority at an ordination service "to preach,"

and to "remit, and to retain sins"; this authority being afterwards confirmed by a "license". The same "priest" was also authorised when visiting the sick to say, on the repentance of the sick man, "By His authority [Christ's] committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins". All this, I suppose, is based on Jno. 20. 21—23. And this authority is claimed to be vested in the church! In due time however, God, in mercy, delivered him from such a system. When his resignation was sent in, the "license" was withdrawn; but the man continued to preach, without any credentials but the Bible.

Now when the Lord Jesus rose from among the dead, and used those weighty words in Jno. 20. 21—23, they were beyond question said to some besides the apostles, for the two disciples who were going to Emmaus, went afterwards also to Jerusalem that same Sunday evening (Luke 24. 33.), "and found the eleven gathered together, and them that were with them." Then in Jno. 20. 19, &c., "the same day at evening," Jesus spoke the words referred to. It is obvious therefore, they were addressed to the apostles *and to those with them*. So then, the authority thus communicated is for all who faithfully preach the gospel through the finished work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But let us come nearer home still. There has been of late much said and written on Matt. 18. 15—20. Now, whatever those Divine Words mean, let it be observed, they were not said to saints as individual members of Christ, nor to saints collectively as the body, the bride, of Christ, but (I judge,) to brethren, and then to the assembly as such. Obviously it is not the body of Christ that is addressed, for it was not yet formed; but it is the household of God: and in that household order and discipline must be maintained. I do not see in the Word that authority is committed to the saints to use in the character of the body and the bride. The church is not yet reigning. It becomes her to be in subjection, as Eph. 5. teaches. Is it not out of place to speak of "Christ's authority vested in the two or three"? It is *vested* in Christ the Head alone. Therefore, to pass judgment as the body, and to

bring up matters requiring discipline, when the assembly is gathered by the Spirit as the body of Christ, around Himself at His table, to remember Him in His agonies on the cross, (the only ground of gathering,) is entirely out of place. It is practically transforming the close of that most blessed of all ordinances into a court of justice. It is very sad. If a matter require discipline, it should be done as a last resource, and at an assembly meeting held for that purpose, and then in the character of the household,—Christ's house, where there is delegated authority for keeping order according to God's Word. But is this authority unlimited? This, as appears to me, is a thing of great moment at the present critical time; if it be not the real question at issue. There are no Plenipotentiaries in the church of God, as that term is usually applied. The decisions therefore of assemblies are not to be placed on a par with Scripture; especially when different assemblies arrive at *opposite conclusions*. If their decisions coincide with the infallible Word, without doubt they have Divine sanction, being recognized in heaven; and woe to those who refuse to bow to such. But if one must necessarily, and without question bow to assembly judgments, then there is no limit to the word "Whatsoever"; and a meeting can do extraordinary, and even wicked things, professedly in the Lord's name. A case in point is what has transpired in Barbadoes. If we must own unlimited authority in one assembly in fellowship, why not in another? The blessed Lord was in the midst of the seven churches of Asia: should we have owned unlimited authority where Jezebel was allowed "to teach," &c? The Lord's presence did not *necessarily* sanction what those churches did. "Prove all things." Moreover, what was said to the church collectively, was equally given to Peter as an individual,—"Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven:" &c. Matt. 16. 19. Solemn words! Momentous words! But Peter, like all of us, failed in his responsibility, and had to be "withstood to the face" by another apostle. Why did not Paul own the action of Peter, when the latter was compelling the Gentiles to Judaize? He

was too well taught in divine things to own the action of his fellow-apostle at that time; yet the Lord had said to Peter, "Whatsoever" &c. Evidently therefore, his action was not ratified in heaven; for he had "dissembled," and failed to "walk straightforwardly, according to the truth of the gospel." (Gal. 2. 11—14.) And how can our assembly actions be owned in heaven, if not agreeing with the Inspired Word? Again, the Lord said, "Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in My name, He will give it you." (Jno. 16. 23.) The same Spirit Who was in Christ, also said through the apostle John, "If we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us." As with other truths, so with this, we must take the concurrent testimony of Scripture, "rightly dividing the word of truth," in order to arrive at a correct knowledge of the mind of God. It is concluded therefore, that "Whatsoever" in Matt. 18. 18., and in chap. 16. 19., should be viewed in juxtaposition with Jno. 16. 23., and 1 Jno. 5. 14. We need often to pray for ourselves, and for each other, as did the apostle for the Colossians, (chap. 1. 9, &c.) and for the Philippians, (Chap. 1. 9, 10.)

Another word, please. Both from printed matter, and also from private letters received, one cannot but be impressed with the thought that, there has been at work among us a latent principle, which has only recently become patent. And if the belief which some dear saints have as to authority in the church be maintained, in the face of what is written in the Word of Truth, it is not too much to say, that the very essence of the systems of religion which we have left, in order to be gathered on the ground of the Cross (which alone can unite us) to Jesus Himself outside the camp, in the unity of His body, -the essence of those systems, if unchecked, will yet work among, and leaven us. It is the very principle which produced popery. Let my Brethren mark this well, weighing all in the balances of the sanctuary; and see if that is not the weight of it. The church, though occupying, and yet to occupy a place which no other created beings enjoy: as being united to Christ; and loved of God with a

love measured only by that which He has for His Son; yet, (*remember we,*) the church is not the Head. Let us beware, lest we put her in the place which He alone can fill. God is a jealous God; and His character never changes. He will have us give His Son the first place. Let us not forget that the church is not Christ, nor His "Vicar", (as that word is usually applied,) but His representative, and entrusted with delegated powers in responsibility to Him her Head and Lord. Her actions are, I judge, only ratified in heaven, when she binds or looses consistently with the Inspired Word. "I speak as to wise men: judge ye what I say."

What, then, briefly put, is the ecclesiastical position of a local assembly regarding authority? 1 Cor. 5 gives us the answer. Now let us look at the very words of Scripture. Verses 3—5 say, "For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." The apostle, as inspired by the Holy Ghost, had judged already *what was to be done*; but the responsibility of doing it lay with Corinth. The church is gathered together. Paul is there in spirit, and that in a special manner, even *along with* the power of our Lord Jesus Christ: for we see here the assembly in its normal state. That word "power" is not *exousia*—authority, but *dunamis*—inherent power. It is the same as in Luke 5. 17.—"The power of the Lord was present to heal." And it was exercised by Paul alone on certain blasphemers. (1 Tim. 1. 20.) It may be said however, We have no apostolic power now. But we have the Lord in the midst; and the positive duty of the assembly is stated at the end of the chapter; while much practically depends upon the spiritual capacity of the saints. Now suppose the meeting, instead of doing as directed by the apostle, had become divided; some for, others against the discipline.

Does any one say, Impossible? But local assemblies do naughty things sometimes, and even arrive at opposite conclusions. Facts are stubborn things. Were it impossible, then the saints would be inspired. Does any one claim that for a local assembly, and say that its voice is the voice of God? Thus its decisions would be equal to Scripture. Such teaching belongs to Babylon; and that it was which finally led to the dogma of papal infallibility. It is blessedly true that Jesus is in the midst of His gathered saints, and His presence gives authority to act; but it does not *necessarily sanction* what is done now, any more than it did when John wrote the seven churches of Asia. An assembly act needs the signature of the Head of the house ere being presented to the whole household for its acceptance. I mean, it must agree with the Word of Truth, and then it is binding on the whole church of God, and is doubtless bound in heaven. Moreover we are individually responsible to judge by the Word what the church judges judicially. Some one says, We must not thus judge, but "Hear the church." Well then, if we brethren thus interpret the Divine Word, and are holding such teaching, we are helping to build Babylon: and Babylon comes from Babel. "Hearken, O people, every one of you!"

And now Brethren, suffer a word of exhortation. We are probably near the moment when the Lord Himself will descend from heaven to claim His own. Are we, in our respective assemblies listening, not so much to what the church says, as to "what the Spirit says to the churches"? Are we "diligent that we may be found of Him in peace"? This last and most lamentable division among us, causing anything but peace, and carrying in its wake unnecessary and unhappy feelings into families, too plainly shows that were Jesus to come to-day, He would not find us at peace among ourselves. If the Master were to ask us to give an account of our stewardship to-day, do we not deserve to have it taken away from us? He does indeed, in marvellous grace and patience, bear with His failing people; and has not removed our candlestick. But might He not do this? Instead of buying the truth and selling it not,



have we not somewhat resembled Heb. 2, 1?—(margin, “run out as leaking vessels”). I do not allude to different views, nor to church principles, but to worldliness, and a gradual conformity to the times. Is the salt losing its savor? Alas! we have allowed the fashions and customs and principles of the age to affect us in our families and business. In this restless, *rushing*, and money-making age, there seems but little time found for quiet reading of the Word, and for prayer. And what has happened to us in our reading and prayer-meetings, that so little interest is taken in them? God has a controversy with us. Some seem to think, it is because church principles are being given up. Is it not rather because we have allowed the world and the flesh to come in? The Spirit is grieved with our manner of life, and with our lack of love to one another. It is true, extreme discipline must be exercised when actually needed; but only as a last resource, and always with a view to restoration. I know of no company of Christians where quarrels are so rife as among us. It is so to our shame. “My Brethren, these things ought not so to be.” They destroy our mutual peace, ruin our corporate testimony, and above all, dishonor our Blessed Lord and Master. What has happened of late, and is still making sad havoc, seems to be all over a question of discipline. There is no just cause for this division. Difference of judgment as to such matters should be tolerated among, and not separate those whom God has joined together. Were it a matter of open wickedness, or of evil doctrine affecting the Person of Christ, there would be a righteous reason for separating from such. But in this case it is not so; and it should never have gone further than where it originated. True, the discipline exercised in 1903 should have been respected by other assemblies, and the offending brother have kept to *his own meeting*, judging himself. And this, I think, he would have done, had he been at the time in a state of soul pleasing to God. No assembly should have harbored him, as they are said to have done; though without doubt they could not formally reject him, inasmuch as he had not been put away,

nor had he in fact left the Lord's table. Much of the trouble has come about through an oversight as to the discipline of 1903. Let no one shut his eyes as to this. But it is too late to make 1903 the reason for acting now. What we have to deal with now is what took place in 1909. If the assembly immediately concerned had sought their brother's restoration as Jesus sought that of Peter with a look of love which melted him to tears, perhaps the offender would have been restored years ago. Peter denied the Lord, and even swore about it; but the Perfect One did not make that a ground for refusing him. Love is a wonderful thing. No wonder the word itself is not found in the ancient heathen writings. Love does not sacrifice truth, but it sacrifices *itself*, surrendering its rights for the present; and if mis-judged, does not seek to vindicate itself, but commits all to Him Who judgeth righteously. It awaits *His* time. "Love seeks not its own". Love does not seek to get rid of an unruly member of the family, nor to separate from those disagreeing with it, so long as such disagreement does not militate against the plain statements of the Word of God.

In these last and closing days one of our local assemblies has become disrupted by one portion of it separating from the other, and refusing fellowship with other assemblies which do not bow to its judgment. Woe to those who refuse to bow to authority when it is in consonance with Scripture. But is there any Scripture for one portion of an assembly separating from the other without charge and proof of unrepented evil? Tested by the Word of God, has this sad separation any sanction therein? And where is the Scripture for declaring any one out of fellowship? Should not that person be first *asked* if he has finally left the Lord's table? Reports say the assembly was in a bad state. Whether that is true or not, it seems to me that the whole assembly have incurred a grave responsibility; for the dear saints once in happy fellowship are now sadly divided, and the sheep terribly scattered. An esteemed brother wisely suggested that an assembly receiving a letter of commendation should make inquiry,

on the principle of Deut. 13. ~~It~~. Has this sound counsel been acted upon? From circulars received, I judge it has not; but assemblies have bowed to the decision without question, some even owning it as the Lord's act! Did His work ever bear such fruit? To be sanctioned by Him, it must bear His signature, *i. e.*, it must be sanctioned by the plain Word of God. Some brothers in another assembly did look into the matter, and the whole assembly afterwards endorsed their action; but the attempt was repudiated. Some Continental brothers sought an interview with a view to make inquiry; but they were alike refused. Private letters have been written with a view to exercise the conscience; but (it has been said,) no answer was received. Let all the facts be weighed in the balances of the Sanctuary, yet let no one *make haste* to say that God has rejected those who have separated from their brethren. "Peradventure it was an oversight". God is very gracious and patient, and we should "be imitators of Him as children beloved". They will yet see it, if there is a "*desire to do His will*". But if there is a determination at all costs to maintain the decision of July 1909, things will only become worse, to the shame of all who are responsible for this scattering of the flock of God. Let us rather be co-workers with Him Who gathers. There is Scripture for "endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit", but none for the contrary. How then can we best keep it as one body? Surely by maintaining in a practical way those moral qualities which are the fruits of the Spirit. If we make as much of the 2nd. verse of Eph. 4 as of the 3rd., there will be no difficulty. I judge it impossible to keep the unity of the Spirit without those moral qualities. Endeavouring to keep this unity, as another has said is, "to walk in that power of the Spirit which unites". Test the decision of 1909 by the 2nd. verse as well as the 3rd. If it will stand the test, let us bow to it; but if not, "we ought to obey God rather than men". If the decision referred to did not precipitate matters in breaking to pieces a once happy and united people, I know not the meaning of its terms. I do not question the authority of the assem-

bly to judge: the Lord's presence authorizes it so to do; but that judgment, to be ratified in heaven, must agree with God's character as revealed in His Word.

Finally. Is there no remedy? Thank God! there is, for subject minds. Let us consider our ways. Let us put away any strange gods from among us. Let us eat the sin offering in a holy place. Let us, like Daniel, set our hearts to understand, and to chasten ourselves before our God. Let us lay aside every weight, and sin which does so easily beset us. Let us present our bodies a living sacrifice, and give up this conformity to the world. Let us confess our faults one to another, and pray for one another, that we may be healed. Let us not seek self-vindication, but self-judgment. Let us love one another as Jesus has loved us. Could we not set apart a certain day, as soon as practicable, all over the world, for the assemblies to gather for humiliation and prayer? We shall soon hear the last bugle call summoning us to march on as to meet the Lord in the air. Let us see to it that we be not ashamed before Him at His coming, but that we be found of Him in peace.

Humbly submitted.

Mark 9. 50.

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