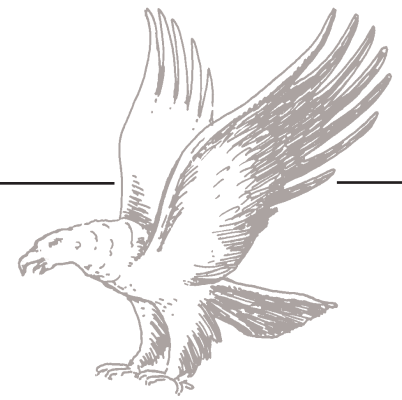


Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



June 1, 2014

By What Authority?

Respecting the authority of God’s word is essential. But even more essential is an underlying attitude of humility that views God’s word as more important than personal victory.

“Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, ‘By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?’” (Matt. 21:23).

“And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, ‘By what power or by what name have you done this?’” (Ac. 4:7).



To every Bible student, the idea of respecting divine authority is a given. How often do we read in the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, of the importance of following God’s instructions (Deut. 6:1-3; 1 Jn. 2:3-5), neither adding to nor taking away from what He has revealed (Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18-19)? Those who presume to act outside of God’s authority will incur His wrath (1 Sam. 15:22-23; Heb. 2:2-4). This basic principle is beyond dispute.

However, the two confrontations documented here present a disturbing variation on that theme. In both cases, the Jewish leaders—men who ostensibly

represented the ultimate in respect for God—posed a test: “by what authority are you doing these things?” But their challenge was a craven covering up of their own rebellion against God. For all their tough talk about authority, they had no intent to listen to any answer Jesus or the apostles gave them. (In fact, Jesus turned the question back on them, using the ministry of John as an alternate test. They declined to commit to a position, thus exposing their duplicity.)

I can’t help but think of these two incidents every time I hear a preacher badger his opponent with strikingly similar wording (“where’s your authority?”, etc.). Some suggest the lesson here is that if even the enemies of Christ recognized the need for authority, how much more so should we. That’s true, but I suspect the real lesson lies deeper—and much closer to home.

Jesus warned His apostles of persecutors who “think that [they] offer God service” (Jn. 16:2). Saul of Tarsus was one of those persecutors, who savagely attacked the early Christians because “I myself thought I must do many things

contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth” (Ac. 26:9). After his conversion, he bore his unbelieving brethren witness “that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge” (Rom. 9:2). In each of these cases, intense devotion to God’s word had turned into a stubborn refusal to consider any new evidence that might have challenged pre-existing beliefs—and required making changes.

It is important that we respect God’s authority. But it is more important that we maintain humble hearts that are willing to listen and consider other points of view. God looks upon the one who is “of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word” (Isa. 66:2). But that attitude of humble submission is lost when we reach a point where we think we have all the answers, and our job now is to straighten out everyone else. That person is beyond God’s help, even as he champions God’s cause.

“By what authority” is a legitimate question to ask in religious discussions. But the *first* question should be, “is this for God or for me?”

— David King