

Jesus, the Unrivaled Ruler of the Universe

By Greg Ogden

Essential Guide to Becoming a Disciple

The late journalist Sydney J. Harris was asked a discerning question by a parent regarding the authority of teachers: “How is it that some teachers are able to control their classes with a very light rein, and have no disciplinary troubles, while others must shout and plead and threaten and still get nowhere with the troublemakers?”

Harris replied that the authority of a teacher has far less to do with teaching techniques or lesson plans, but with the “authenticity” of the teacher. Genuine authority is the result of the “realness, presence, aura, that can impress and influence even a six-year old...A person is either himself or not himself; is either rooted in his existence, or is a fabrication; has either found his humanhood or is still playing with masks and roles and status symbols. Only an authentic person can evoke a good response in the core of another person.”

The most authentic person who ever lived was Jesus Christ. From the outset Jesus impressed people with his innate authority. Early in his public ministry, Jesus entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and began to teach. “The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law” (Mark 1:22). Jesus then proceeded to deliver a man possessed by an evil spirit. Then they were really impressed. “The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, ‘What is this? A new teaching—and with authority!’” (Mark 1:27).

The authority of Jesus left people shocked and spellbound—amazed.

Who is This Man?

The Gospel writers contrast Jesus’ teaching with that of the Jewish scribes. “He taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law” (Mark 1:22). The scribes, or “teachers of the law,” were the scholars of the day. They had catalogued all the various oral interpretations and applications of the Old Testament law. It was their lifelong vocation to be walking databases reciting chapter and verse. The scribes would never render a teaching without a precedent from a well-attested source.

Along comes Jesus without any of the credentials we would associate with worldly authority. Under what rabbi had Jesus studied? From what school had Jesus obtained his credentials? What powerful office did Jesus occupy? Jesus made no reference to precedence. In his teaching he only quoted Scripture, not some famous and well-attested scribe. And when correcting distorted teaching, he claimed himself as the authority, “You have heard it said...but I tell you” (see Matthew 5:21-48, emphasis mine). Authority simply flowed from his being so his words struck the crowds as authentic and true.

Jesus grew up in a humble family in Nazareth and learned the trade of a carpenter. He seemed so normal, yet woven into the fabric of his ministry were self-acclamations and expressions of deity. Some have seriously argued that Jesus did not have a divine self-awareness. In the introduction to ***The Case for Faith***, Lee Strobel recounts an interview with Charles Templeton, an early protégé and

colleague of Billy Graham. Templeton parted company with the great evangelist in the late 1940s because doubts undermined his faith. Near the end of his life when Strobel asked him whether Jesus thought of himself as God, Templeton shook his head, “That would have been the last thought that would have entered his mind.”

On the contrary, the New Testament seems to raise this question on almost every page, “Who does Jesus think he is anyway, God or something?” Let’s do a quick survey of Jesus’ God-consciousness and authority.

Jesus functioned as a Creator and Redeemer. His words accomplish what he commands.

- *Jesus commanded and demons obeyed.* He silenced an unclean spirit in the synagogue, delivered the Gerasene demoniac from his crazed condition and called out a spirit that had been destroying a boy’s life (Mark 1:21-28; 5:1-17; 9:17-27).
- *Jesus healed simply by touch or command.* He rid a person of leprosy, restored a withered hand, stopped the flow of blood in a helpless woman and brought recovery of sight to the blind (Mark 1:40-45; 3:1-7; 5:25-34; John 9:1-25).
- *Jesus raised the dead.* Jairus’ daughter, a widow’s son and Lazarus were all brought back to life (Mark 5:21-24, 35-43; Luke 7:11-16; John 11:41-44).
- *Jesus ruled over nature.* Jesus walked on water, stilled a storm at the word of his command and orchestrated the greatest catch of fish Peter could have ever imagined (Matthew 14:22-33; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 5:1-11).

Jesus forgave sins. To the paralytic being lowered through the roof by his four friends, Jesus declared, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” The scribes present immediately recognized this as an act that usurps God’s authority for they thought to themselves, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:3-7).

Jesus asked for total allegiance from his followers. When Jesus claimed the new vocation for Peter, James and John—fishing for people—they left everything and followed him (Luke 5:10-11).

Jesus said that he had been given the right to grant eternal life (Matthew 11:27; John 1:12; 5:26-30; 17:2-3). When the disciples heard Jesus claim this authority they weren’t shocked nor surprised. The Greek word for authority that Jesus uses is *exousia*. *Ex* means “out of” and *ousia* means “being or substance.” Put together, we learn that Jesus’ authority flowed out of his being or substance. So when Jesus claimed “all authority in heaven and on earth” as he commissioned the disciples (Matthew 28:18), he was making explicit what they had observed throughout his ministry.

None other than Bono, U2’s lead singer, pulls it together for us. An interviewer questioned his assertion about Christ, “Christ has his ranking among the world’s great thinkers, but Son of God, isn’t that far-fetched?” Bono replied: “No. It’s not far-fetched to me. Look, the secular response to the Christ story always goes like this: he was a great prophet, obviously an interesting guy, he had a lot to say along the line of other great prophets, be they Elijah, Mohammed, Buddha, or Confucius. Christ says, ‘No, I’m not saying I’m a teacher, don’t call me a teacher. I’m not saying I am a prophet. I’m saying I am God incarnate.’....At this point, everyone starts staring at their shoes and says: ‘Oh my God, he’s gonna keep saying this. So what you’re left with is either Christ was who He said He was—the Messiah—or a

complete nutcase....The idea that the entire course of civilization for over half of the globe could have its fate changed and turned upside-down by a nutcase, for me, that's far-fetched. Jesus' authority is convincing because the prerogatives he claims, the powers he displays and the love he evidences are all integrated into the healthiest personality who ever lived."

As we have noted, Jesus' claim to ultimate authority is the intended backdrop against which the Great Commission is to be carried out. Jesus connects his authority to our marching orders with the word *therefore*. "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). It is as if Jesus is saying, "With all the authority vested in me, I now authorize you to go." Jesus didn't just tell us who he is so that we can include it in a doctrinal statement that we recite in worship only to go and live our lives as we wish. No he has a job for us to do and we have his full backing to do it.

The Impact of Jesus' Authority

Let's explore two implications of Jesus' authority in relationship to the Great Commission:

Jesus expects obedience. The first reason Jesus declares his all-encompassing authority is because he is to be obeyed. Jesus held up the example of a Roman centurion, a commander of one hundred foot soldiers, to teach us the implications of authority. This highly respected commander sent word to Jesus through intermediaries that his beloved servant was ill unto death. Before Jesus could arrive at the centurion's home he sent messengers to intercept Jesus, saying he was not worthy to have this healer come under his roof. The centurion understood how authority works:

"But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, 'I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.' Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well." (Luke 7:7-10)

The centurion was a man under authority; he took orders and gave them. But Jesus' authority exceeded anything he had ever seen in the Roman Empire.

Yet, could there be anything more contrary to the spirit of Western culture than the Centurion's understanding of authority? The Western culture is proudly rooted in radical individualism. The prevailing attitude is, "No one tells me what to do or believe." We each keep our own counsel. This spirit is undergirded by relativism, the philosophy that all truth is relative to the person: "You have your truth about life and faith, and I have mine." Relativism says there is no single truth to which we are all accountable. There is only individual, personal truth.

But along comes Jesus who says that he is a fixed point of truth about God. To paraphrase T. S. Eliot, Jesus is "the still point of the turning world." And we are not. Relativism turns everyone into his or her own god, but Jesus will have none of that. Jesus claims to be the singular truth about God to whom we are all accountable. He is our ultimate source of authority.

What does this mean practically? Where do you seek the answers to life's basic questions? How do you define success? What is your life purpose? To whom do you look for ethical guidance? A disciple of Jesus submits their life to the authority, wisdom and guidance of Jesus. This is particularly true with

regard to our core mission. We are to “go and make disciples of all nations” simply because Jesus has the authority to tell us what to do.

Jesus gives us his full backing. The second reason that Jesus declares his all-encompassing authority is that we go with his full backing. We have been given authorization by the God of the universe to carry out his mission. The image that comes to my mind is a scene from the old western movies: the duly elected sheriff is in need of an impromptu posse to go after the bad guys so he rounds up all available men and slaps shiny badges on their chests as a symbol of their new authority. Jesus deputizes us to go make disciples, representing the unrivaled Ruler of the universe. As we go we have an inner security and continuing confidence that we have “the right man on our side.” As Paul affirms, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31).

How Do We Represent Jesus?

Yet we have noted, we live in a relativist culture that can be an intimidating place for those of us who believe that Jesus is the universal Truth. Over the last few generations America has become increasingly secular (removal of the sacred from public life) and more religiously diverse (pluralistic). The public’s view of Christians in some circles is that we are narrow-minded, judgmental and intolerant. The modern university can be an unfriendly environment to Christian students where the prevailing view toward religion is that it is at best outmoded and at worst part of the problem.

How might we respond to the culture of intimidation?

- Victimization: Portray ourselves as unfairly persecuted
- Arrogance: Act as if we have cornered the market on truth
- Humility: Grateful that God has found us

On the one hand we can come to see ourselves as victims. Victims feel sorry for themselves.

“Woe is us. Look how badly we are being treated. Every other faith gets a pass, but it’s the Christians who are being picked on. Feel sorry for us.” Yet to do so is disempowering. We allow others to define us. Instead of coming across as a persecuted minority currying sympathy, we need simply to reclaim a deep assurance that we serve the One who has the last word about everything. How can we be victims when we have “the right man on our side”?

The opposite reaction to our culture of intimidation is to adopt an attitude of arrogance: we insulate ourselves as the ones who have cornered the market on truth. This can lead to a barricade mentality; not wanting to be tainted by the evils of this world, we isolate ourselves in our own Christian subculture by only associating with those with whom we feel safe. From inside the barricade of our own making we shout a message of smug moral judgment at a world gone astray. The result is that others are repelled, not attracted.

The way to navigate between the extremes of victimhood and arrogance is through the path of humility. Humility is born from a quiet and deeply rooted confidence that Jesus is who he claimed to be. D. T. Niles captures this spirit of humility when he described Christianity as “one beggar telling another beggar where to get food.” When we have a settled confidence in Jesus, we come across with the security that Michael Ramsay, the archbishop of Canterbury, displayed on *The Tonight Show*. Ramsay took his place on the couch next to the person Carson had just interviewed. No sooner had Ramsay sat

down he was accosted by the other guest. “You know what I don’t like about your religion?” Looking a bit stunned, Ramsay asked, “What?” “I don’t like your exclusiveness. You say Christ is the only way to God.” The archbishop, without any defensiveness in his body language or voice, simply said, “Well, really, I never said that. Jesus was the one who made that claim. As a Christian I work with the documents of faith handed down in the church. I’m not really free to disagree or reinterpret Jesus. I am committed as a follower to teach what he taught.”

Jesus declares himself to be the unrivaled Ruler of the universe with the expectation that all who claim to be his followers would submit to him as the Lord of their lives. Then with his full backing he sends us to carry out his enterprise. There is never a need to be intimidated by rival human authorities nor to shield ourselves invulnerably by claiming a corner on the market of truth. When we represent Jesus we are pointing to the truth: he is the One whose authority flows out of his being.

Questions for Reflection

1. Think of someone in your life who occupied a place of elevated authority (coach, teacher, parent military figure, pastor, etc.). What qualities did that person possess that gave him or her authority in your life?
2. What was it about Jesus that left the crowds “amazed”?
3. Does the overview of Jesus’ divine prerogatives convince you that he was God? Why or why not?
4. What was it that convinced Bono that Jesus was God incarnate? Is this convincing to you? Why or why not?
5. How does the cultural spirit of relativism challenge Jesus’ claim to ultimate authority? How do you experience the impact of cultural relativism in your life?
6. How can we convey a confidence in the truth about Jesus without coming across as either a victim of persecution or with an attitude of superiority? What can we learn from Archbishop Ramsay’s model?
7. What would be the implications if you submitted your life to Jesus as the ultimate authority? Name one or two aspects that would be immediately affected.