By Whose Authority

The religious leaders in the first century left much to be desired in their lives, but shortly after the church was established, they asked a question which I wish the world today would ask. Christianity was new, and the apostles called upon men to forsake their religious heritage and become part of the amazing kingdom Jesus was establishing. The Jewish council arrested the apostles and put them on trial.

The question they asked was, “By what power or what name have you done this” (Acts 4:7)? The heart of the matter was authority. There was a major division between the two major “denominations” over the resurrection. The Pharisees believed there was to be a resurrection of the dead, but the Sadducees adamantly opposed that teaching (Acts 23:8). When they questioned Jesus about this, he pointed them to the authority they both honored—the Old Testament. That was the way religious divisions were to be removed and believers in God were to become one. He said, “You are mistaken not knowing the Scriptures...Have you not read what was spoken to you by God...” (Matt. 22:29-31)?

When two individuals recognize a common authority, there will be unity, provided that language of the authority is clearly understandable. Watches around the world all have exactly the same time for they all recognize the time kept by the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, London. A common authority clearly stating truth in a way the world can understand it results in complete unity.

This is why the question, “By what authority have you done this,” is so vital. The council and the apostles knew how plainly God had spoken about not adding to or taking from the Old Testament. Moses had said, “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it” (Deut. 12:32). The council saw that the apostles were changing what God had given and simply asked what right did any man have to change it. The apostles gave two proofs. First, there was the lame man who had been cured in a way that only God could do it. The miracle was the proof of the authority for the changes they were making.
The second reason came when the apostle quoted from the common authority all recognized. It was the Old Testament in which God foretold a change was coming. They simply asked the Jews to listen to Psalm 122:18. That their usage of this passage was right was confirmed when Jesus used the same passage in the same way (Matt. 21:42). A common authority, clearly stated, brings religious unity.

What would happen if “Christendom” asked this question about authority today? We will look at this next week.

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