

# Don't Tell Me What To Do!

*Matthew 21:23-32*

*Philippians 2:1-12*

Hang out with families long enough and one day, at a family reunion, you will hear a wife say to her husband, "You are not the boss of me." Visit the playground and listen long enough and you will hear a little girl say to an older sister, "Don't tell me what to do." We get it, don't we? Hasn't authority – institutional, biblical, and individual – been undone by the forces of a secular culture? We are in a mess because, by and large, we all, all of us, live one way, and Jesus calls us to live in an entirely different way. What a mess.

**B**ut so much of the church craves authority, but it is false authority. "Will there be any stars in our crown?" is an odd song for the people of a crucified God, who wore a crown of thorns. Like James and John we want dubs on the seats next to Jesus in glory. So the church waves the Bible and claims authority to audiences that don't read, believe, or care about the Bible. Remember the story of Adam and Eve in the garden? The snake suggested to Eve that she could 'know like God.' Notice the temptation: 'To know like God.' Our lust for an absolutely certain 'Word of God' is original sin re-enacted. And we want this knowledge to show us that we are right on all the issues.

Almost no one ever asks me, "Do you believe in the Trinity, but what about taxes?" No one ever asks me if I believe in the resurrection but do you have the right beliefs about Scripture? No one asks me about the virgin birth, but the questions never cease about abortion. No one ever asks me about sexuality among heterosexuals, but everyone is obsessed with homosexuality. About 8% of the population is gay, but 92% of the questions are about gays. No one asks me if the Bible condemns war, but "Are you a true patriot?" No one asks me if God is the creator of the universe, but "Do you believe in creationism and intelligent design?" "Do you agree that global warming is a hoax?" We don't want the truth; we can't handle the truth. We want back up for what we already have decided about the truth. It is idolatry and false authority.

I am reading *From the Bible Belt to the Sunbelt* – the story of the migration of southerners to California and how they brought their faith with them. The author, Darren Dochuk, describes their philosophy as "Texas theology." "Certain of the absolute rightness of their doctrine [and] unwilling to compromise this doctrine, they displayed the gritty determination" to win what they considered a battle with the forces of evil. They considered faith and politics a package deal, and they believed they were expected to govern with a Christian conscience." This "package of Christian, plain-folk Americanism, gave white southerners a sense of guardianship over their society. They were and are determined to protect their communities and country from those they believe would undermine them."

These Christians have so equated their religion with their politics that they have blurred the differences between the Bible and the Constitution. The same rigid philosophy that dominates their faith also dominates their politics: they are absolutely right about everything, anyone who disagrees must be condemned, any compromise is a pact with the Devil, and they are intent on ruling this land, but they must hear and hear plainly: They are not the boss of us.

They consider themselves, like the early Puritans, on a "divine errand," to create the New Jerusalem, the true church (which, for the Puritans, was a state church), and a righteous nation. They are champions of a cause and missionaries determined to carry out their task of baptizing everyone with their particular brand of American Christianity. This is of small comfort to those citizens who find nothing in the Democratic camp that they can stomach. Some of you are like the big fish that swallowed Jonah; every time you hear a Democratic idea, you get indigestion, and spit it out on dry ground.

**T**here is another model, a totally different kind of authority. It is the authority of Jesus who refused to get sucked into arguments about authority and instead spoke the truth, healed the sick, and raised the dead. It is the authority of the one who wouldn't brag about or bully others with his authority. Jesus said that he, like John the Baptist, told the truth. The religious authorities refused to believe John or Jesus, but the tax collectors and prostitutes believed him.

Here's the irony of our story. Jesus has shut down the Wall Street of Jerusalem by chasing the money grubbers from the Temple, curing the blind and lame, providing for the poor, and starting a children's choir (Look it up – Matthew 21:15 – the children singing in the Temple: "Hosanna to the Son of David." Now all the assembled authority asks Jesus, "Where do you get your authority? This is not really a question. It is an announcement: "We are the authority around here." Today this power would be represented by corporate CEO's, who have the money to get their candidate for president elected; the leading scientific minds of our universities, used to being the authorities on undisputed facts; the media moguls, used to shaping public opinion by claiming simply to reflect it. Jesus refuses to play their game. In fact, he, in effect, says, "You are not the boss of me." Let that sink in. We are not the boss of Jesus. The collection of our theological, social, and moral prejudices are a pile of filthy rags before the throne of grace. We are not the boss of Jesus.

Our attempts to wrap authority in something more determinative than Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, even if we use red, white, and blue wrapping paper, and tie it with a flag, are forms of Christian heresy. We don't need a uniform standard of truth. "To know that Jesus is the Son of God requires that we take up his cross and follow him. Having taken up the cross, Christians discover they have no fear of the truth, no matter from where it might come." Is that part of our problem? We hide behind walls of humanly constructed authority because we are afraid of new truth, uncomfortable in the presence of the God who makes all things new, unwilling to change our filthy rags of human doctrines for robes of righteousness.

Jesus wraps authority in a story. Two sons were told to go to work. The first said, "I'm not going" but changed his mind and went. The second said, "I go, sir," but he did not go. Authority thus belongs to those who change their minds, repent of their arrogance, and do as they are asked. **Our authority is rooted in our willingness to be obedient unto death, even death on a cross.**

Because we have the stories of the Bible, because we have the lives of the saints and the martyrs, we know what a true Christian looks like. **Authority in the church is exemplified in lives of holiness.** If your Religious Zeal needs something to do, then work out your salvation with fear and trembling, and "be perfect as your Father in heaven is

perfect.” If you have some free time, stop fretting over what others are doing and go spread the good news which is not about what we oppose, but about what God has done in Jesus. If you are bored, sore, or angry because the world of evil, seems to be winning, go do your part to encourage, console, share, offer compassion and sympathy to others.

**B**ut how in the world could the church and its holy book have authority in a world like ours. Sit quietly, raise our hands, and wait our turn, and when asked to speak, bear faithful witness to Jesus Christ. And we can gather to read Scripture, pray together, and discern together the direction of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In this model of authority, we would mutually submit to one another. We would submit to good manners toward those who hate us.

Try this analogy: The Greek New Testament has footnotes that include all the variant readings of texts. We have thousands of manuscripts of NT books and letters, some complete, some partial, and there are variant readings, and God has gifted scholars in the study of biblical languages to discern the most accurate text of the Greek New Testament. These scholars, meticulous as only scholars can be, lovers of footnotes and not leaving any possible idea un-researched, have footnoted all the variant readings – the ones that didn’t get into the authorized text. This is an amazing story in its own right, but I’m speaking analogically and ask that we allow our individual interpretations of Scripture to stand for variant readings. Then we gather to test our readings with the community. In the course of the discussion, our variant readings may end up as footnotes or in the delete basket, because the community of faith may reach a different consensus. This is not exactly the Office of the Magisterium, but it would certainly be a positive step in communities where the individual has too much false authority. Then, instead of getting mad at each other by disagreeing, we can discern together the truth.

For the better part of 15 centuries, the Bible was a collection of books read by and in communities, in the context of prayer and regular meditative interpretation. What went wrong in the later Middle Ages seems to have been that the Bible was split into tiny segments, texts that were used to prove points, rather than to open up the history of God’s work.

Well, look at how the Bible is being **used** today. The Bible is chopped up, like firewood in a winter storm, and bundled into groups of texts that can back up our truth claims. And what we can’t seem to get through our heads is that this Bible, chopped up like raw carrots in a food processor, with all these isolated verses and bits and pieces of the story of God is the only part of the Bible the un-churched world is hearing. As surely as Marcion, the Gnostic heretic, ripped out the Old Testament and most of the New Testament from his personal canon of Scripture, as surely as Thomas Jefferson scissored away the parts of the Bible he didn’t like, some churches are doing much the same with their bundling of texts for the sake of winning, not converts, but arguments. While the church struggles for false authority, our witness is tarnished in the world. Ask a few people that have no relationship with any church what they think about the church and Christians and be prepared for a barrage of profane and stinging criticism.

The Bible has always been meant to be a text to be struggled with in the context of prayer and shared reflection. The refusal to struggle with uncomfortable truth claims, to hide

behind, "I just want everyone to get along," is a denial of what it means to love one another. There is nothing sillier than the liberal notion that all of Christian faith can be boiled down to "loooooove," because any love that hides how we feel, any love that is not free to tell the truth to one another, any love that can't handle disagreement, is not Christian love. The Bible is to be read **in company, interpreted in company, argued over in company**. A little bit of the Bible, like a little bit of knowledge, is a very dangerous thing, and we need supervision.

This means that our church should be a school of rhetoric where we are subject to disciplines necessary for learning to speak Christian. I, for one, believe that seminary taught me to read and that in my reading I learned to speak Christian. In particular I am to be a teacher of the language of this book, the Bible. That's one reason why we use the lectionary in worship: regular, sustained reading of the whole of Scripture. You can do as you please, but this is what Jesus says about loving enemies and helping the poor. You can do as you please, but this is what Jesus says about forgiveness and reconciliation. You can do as you please, but Paul says, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." You can do as you please, but this is what James says about faith without works: it is null and void. You can do as you please, but this is what John says about Jesus: "He is the bread of life." You can do as you please, but Romans says that we are slaves of righteousness. You can do as you please, but Galatians says that salvation is Jesus plus nothing added. You can do as you please, but the Revelation of John says that goodness wins; evil loses. You can do as you please, but Genesis says we are made by God's love and freedom alone. You can do as you please, but Philippians tell us we are to have the mind of Christ. You can do as you please, but Daniel tells us how to live faithful lives in an ungodly empire. You can do as you please, but, by the way, the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. And there's more, so much more because we are storied people and all our stories are in the book. I can't imagine being bored by stories.

Without the stories of Scripture, the Church will not know if we have lost our integrity. We will not be aware when we are quenching the Holy Spirit or being conformed to the world. We will not know if we are drifting away, tilting at windmills, building houses on sand, ignoring our neighbors, or mistreating our enemies. We will not know if we are dead or alive.

This is why it is vital that you find the time to participate in adult Christian education. We want you to gather and bring your variant readings of Scripture. There is no conversation that we can't have. All we need is the courage to begin the process of reading in community.

So there are two kinds of authority: one is rooted in the politics of this world and it is invasive and coercive; the other is the authority of Jesus – hard to name but always mutual, shared, and truthful. What kind of authority do you have? Is it the quiet, understated, authority of integrity and faithful witness? If so, you have the authority of Jesus, the one he wouldn't name, but the one by which he lived and died, an authority unto death and resurrection. This, and this alone, is our authority.