

“Questioning Authority”
Matthew 21:23–32
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
September 27, 2026

In his book *Maybe (Maybe Not)* Robert Fulghum lists a series of contradictory notions he holds (pp. 21-22).

Look before you leap. He who hesitates is lost.
Two heads are better than one. If you want something done right,
do it yourself.
Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Better safe than sorry.
Out of sight, out of mind. Absence makes the heart grow fonder.
You can't tell a book by its cover. Clothes make the man.
Many hands make light work. Too many cooks spoil the broth.
You can't teach an old dog new tricks. It's never too late to learn.
Never sweat the small stuff. God is in the details.

Finally, Fulghum notes that when he worked as an art teacher, he wore two buttons on his smock. One said, “Trust me, I’m a teacher.” The other replied, “Question authority.”

All these contradictions raise interesting questions, in addition to a bit of laughter, but the final one seems particularly significant. We need trusted leaders in every part of life, authority in some form, but to give blind allegiance to any authority figure is dangerous. It is the stuff of fascism and cults. It is demanded by people like Hitler and Putin, Jim Jones and David Koresh. There was a time when questioning authority was viewed to be the work of wide-eyed liberals who would destroy the very fabric of society, but such questioning is healthy and needed.

Baptists understand this. From the very beginning in the 1600s our forebears didn't like the idea of hierarchy, unquestioned authority for priests and bishops, and thus little room for the average person to relate to God. They saw scripture as authoritative, but no human being or institution was to be given blind allegiance. All believers were priests.

This is why many of us detested resolution number 5 at the SBC in San Antonio in 1988 which elevated the authority of the pastor. Many people thought resolutions had no impact on churches, but two years after that meeting I received a call from a member of another church in the association where I served. The man said their new pastor, a part of the new breed of students at the seminary at that time, had just fired the deacons and appointed new ones. “Can he do that?” the man asked in utter exasperation. “Only if you let him,” I replied. We then talked a bit further about Baptist heritage, his church’s bylaws, and ways to proceed.

This new-breed pastor took the authority he believed the San Antonio resolution gave him very seriously. He was in charge. He was the divinely appointed ruler of that church. Former BJC Director James Dunn once said that in Baptist life the term “ruling pastor” is an oxymoron, and anyone who doesn’t understand that is just an ordinary moron. James’ subtlety and tact aside, he was right. Baptists have always been willing to question authority.

In our culture we have begun to question authority too, for good reason, given the misconduct of public leaders, but we still have a need for authority. So how do we balance these two contradictory claims?

In the story we have read from Matthew, Jesus’ authority is challenged. As he enters the temple, the chief priests and elders check his credentials. They ask, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” This may seem abrasive since we believe Jesus is the Messiah, but these religious leaders do not believe this. Even Jesus’ closest followers don’t really know who he is yet. And just before this confrontation Jesus entered town to a hero’s welcome and then cleansed the temple of the moneychangers, turning over tables and saying God’s house has been made into a robber’s den.

So, to reset the scene, Jesus walks into someone else’s church and starts tearing things apart, saying those in charge don’t know what they are doing. *Jesus* does this, a young man with no formal theological education or ordination certificate. Thus, not surprisingly, those in charge, those with education, training, and the blessing of the institution, ask, “Who are you, buddy, and what gives you the right?!”

Unlike many modern leaders, religious and political, when confronted with this question, Jesus does not give a direct answer. We know the pattern. When a leader today is challenged, he/she quickly plays the God card. “I am taking this position because it is God’s position.” “I am making this proposal for the church because God told me to in a dream or in my prayer life or through some event.” “You may have a different *opinion*, but I am saying this on *God’s* authority!”

Who can argue with that? Well, in our day, most people. Seeking God’s will is a good thing, but this kind of cheap parlor trick to shut down debate may have worked often in the past but not much anymore, partly because of the abuses of leadership in this time and partly because leaders on all sides of any issue claim to be speaking for God.

Jesus doesn’t play the God card quite so directly. If anyone has a right to do so, it would be him, but he doesn’t because he knows the zealous defenders of orthodoxy won’t buy it. They are not about to agree that Jesus’ authority comes from God because their authority comes from God and Jesus is confronting their way of doing things.

But there is another reason Jesus does not give a direct answer. He knows what is at stake, he knows how critical the matter of authority is, he knows how complicated discerning divine intent can be. Thus, as he often does, he answers the question with another question, pushing his interrogators to think more deeply about the issues they are raising. “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”

Brett Younger suggests that this like asking, “Have you stopped watching *Desperate Housewives*?” There is no good answer. If John’s authority came from God, they should not have opposed him, but if it came from people, there were many people who followed John, enough to cause trouble. They might have contended that John had no authority, but the way Jesus asks the question leaves no room for this answer. So, the chief priests and elders say they do not know, and Jesus, in kind, refuses to answer their question about the source of his authority.

So, where does this leave things? Does this confrontation end in a stalemate? Perhaps, but this doesn’t mean nothing has changed. The chief priests and elders have been pushed to think about authority a bit more deeply, as have we.

Some want it to be simple. “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it.” If only it were so! On many subjects of modern-day concern, the Bible says a variety of things, often conflicting things. On some subjects, the Bible says very little directly, and Jesus says nothing at all. So, we have to develop a point of view based upon the interpretation of various texts that have something to say, perhaps indirectly, about the subject, and we have to decide which texts. As a result, there is no clear-cut path to truth, no single authoritative answer, and anyone who suggests there is — like the pastor of FBC Dallas commenting on the Senate race in Texas — is being dishonest.

This means we are left with the responsibility of discernment, but this is not a bad thing. It’s a very Baptist thing. It’s why we give children a Bible in first grade and then another one when they graduate from High School. We encourage each person to read for himself, to think for herself, to discern matters of truth under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in the context of a community of fellow believers.

As we do that, perhaps Jesus’ question about John’s authority can help. Jesus asks whether John’s authority comes from heaven, that is, God, or from human origin. The priests and scribes refuse to answer the question, but there is an answer — yes. John’s work is grounded in divine intent. It has to be or else it would yield little fruit. But it is also affirmed by human experience. Even tax collectors and prostitutes, those living on the margins of society, are transformed by John’s ministry, Jesus says. John’s authority comes from God, but it is confirmed by the people who respond to his ministry.

So it goes with all genuine authority. It comes from God, and it is affirmed by people. Even scripture is authoritative because we have the sense that it has God breathing through it *and* because each generation has found it to be relevant.

And yet, even if we look to Jesus as our primary authority and scripture as our source of information about Jesus, take discernment seriously and question all other authorities, the most important work remains undone. The critical test of authority lies not just in choosing the right source of wisdom but in living in accordance with that wisdom.

Whether or not Jesus' teachings have authority over our lives is revealed not in whether we say he is Lord or even in how many of his teachings we can quote but by how faithfully we follow these teachings.

This is the point of the parable about a father who asks his two sons to work in the vineyard. One says, "I will not," but ends up working while the other says, "I go, sir," but does not. "Which son does the will of his father?" Jesus asks and everyone knows the answer – the first, the son who goes and works. It's not what we say that matters, it's what we do. It's not what we claim to believe but how we live out our faith.

We may say that Jesus is Lord, but if we fail to follow his most basic teachings about loving God and neighbor, praying for our enemies, forgiving those who hurt us, giving food to the hungry, and welcoming the stranger, who are we kidding? Someone or something will be Lord over our lives. As Bob Dylan has said, "you're gonna' have to serve somebody." Who or what we serve is revealed by how we live.

In his book *Love Wins* Rob Bell tells a story about an art show his church had which focused on peacemaking (pp. 1-2). One work included a quote from Gandhi that many people found compelling, but someone attached a note which read, "Reality check: He's in hell." Bell responded by saying, "Really? Gandhi's in hell? He is? We have confirmation of this? Somebody knows this? Without a doubt? And that somebody decided to take the responsibility of letting the rest of us know?"

Bell goes on to talk about the assumptions of the note writer about salvation being tied to making a confession of faith in Jesus and Gandhi never making one. But Gandhi followed Jesus' teachings as closely as anyone who ever lived. His problem was not with Jesus but with those who claimed to be his followers while ignoring his teachings.

So, who is the true follower of Jesus, the one who says, "I believe, I will go wherever you want me to go," but makes no effort to do so, or a person like Gandhi who is reticent to make a verbal confession but denies self, takes up a cross, and follows Jesus? Jesus says tax collectors and prostitutes will enter God's reign before the chief priests and elders. We don't need to worry about Gandhi, but we might want to reflect on the seriousness with which we take Jesus' teachings. That will tell us what we need to know about who or what has authority over our lives.