

## Consider the Source

Today's Gospel is the beginning of a series of challenges to Jesus' ministry from some of the leaders of the religious establishment.

In our reading, the Pharisees go for the knockout punch right away by attacking Jesus' authority as a teacher and leader. If they can destroy his claim to authority, people will no longer follow him and the religious leaders won't have to deal with him anymore. So they ask:

*By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?*

It is a key question for all who claim to be Christian. Why should anyone, including us, pay any attention to Jesus? Why should anyone listen to the church, or to any of us when we speak or advocate for our faith?

To get at this issue, we need to ask where does authority come from? What is it that makes us willing to listen to and follow those who offer leadership?

In a practical sense, it seems obvious that power gives authority. If I have the power to make you do what I say, then that's all the authority I need to get you to obey. You have no choice.

Is that where Jesus gets his authority—from his power? No, in his confrontations with his opponents, he does not command an army and can't buy people off with his fortune. Jesus nowhere near the power structure, because he has no interest in it.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter tried to use force to defend Jesus. Jesus told him, "Put away your sword; do you think I cannot appeal to my Father and he will send more than 12 legions of angels?"

A key feature of his mission on earth was his rejection of the power that he had at his disposal as a basis for his authority. Power is the sole source of authority for dictators, tyrants and bullies. If this were true authority, then the doctrine of might makes right rules the world. That is not how God operates.

Nowhere is that spelled out more clearly than in that beautiful hymn of praise we read in Philippians: Jesus *"who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of*

*a slave and being born in human likeness. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*

In God's world, authority gained through power is not legitimate authority. No, power is not where Jesus gets his authority.

A second source of authority is in social structures. We bring order to the world by creating structures and positions of authority. We as a society agree to acknowledge and abide by that authority.

Over the years, these positions of authority have included king, general, bishop, police, teacher, Internal Revenue service, lawmaker, licenser, and many others.

The Pharisees believed this to be the strength of their case. Compared to them, Jesus does not have a position of authority. He deserves some respect as a teacher, but the temple leaders definitely outrank him. In the religious power structure, they have far more authority to speak for God than he does.

So they ask the question in such a way as to force Jesus to publicly admit that. When he does, they've proven their case and Jesus is finished.

Jesus easily sidesteps this trap by bringing up John the Baptist, a man who had no official authority at all in religious matters. How did it happen that this man who was rejected by the religious leaders came to be considered a great prophet? Where did he get his authority?

The religious leaders do not want to get into that. They do not want to publicly admit that positions of authority, whether you think they come from God or from humans, do not automatically command allegiance.

If those in leadership positions wield their authority incompetently or cruelly or unfairly or corruptly, they lose their authority despite their high positions.

This truth is seen clearly in events such as the American Revolution, when colonists who had previously acknowledged the authority of King George to rule them. They rejected that authority because of how it had been abused.

This principle has been incorporated in our system of government, where those who abuse their authority can be voted out or impeached.

This happens in religious circles as well. Early in his career, Martin Luther recognized the authority of the pope in all religious matters. After discovering the greed and corruption and misuse of Scripture in the highest church offices, he no longer recognized the pope's authority.

Bad leaders abuse their authority. Like the public figure pulled over for a traffic violation, who snarls at the officer, "Do you know who I am?" they hide behind the social structure and demand that they be obeyed in all things, just because of who they are.

Jesus did not have a position of public authority. Nor did he ever demand that people obey him just because of who he is.

So if Jesus' authority does not depend on power or on the existence of social structures, where does it come from?

We can answer that question to a degree from our own life experiences. What is it that causes us to follow someone's lead, to trust their judgment, and their intentions? To put our lives in their hands? We can come up with many possible factors, among them *charisma*, *expertise*, and *character*.

We have seen time again in world history how important charisma is in establishing authority. To some extent, that was what raised John the Baptist to his high position of respect. With his camel hair clothes, honey-and-locust diet, and fiery rhetoric, he was a captivating, larger-than-life presence. He had the *it* factor. When he spoke, people could not help but listen to him.

So was that where Jesus got his authority, from his charisma? There is no doubt Jesus had an appealing public presence. He could draw huge crowds. People were, enthralled by him, ready to follow him.

But charisma has a lot to do with style and little to do with substance. History has shown that charisma offers little guidance in whether a person deserves authority. As John Lennon noted in the 1960s, the Beatles' charisma made them far more popular than Jesus. Hitler rose to power on charisma.

In fact, history is filled with charismatic demagogues with a unique ability to incite passion in crowds who should never have been granted any authority. Jesus's claim to authority did not rest on his ability to attract and wow the crowds.

What about expertise? It is a factor in granting authority. I don't know much about the workings of a computer. When I run into problems, I'm looking for people with expertise to help me with that, and I'll grant them a great deal of authority in the decisions that come with that. I will even let them take over my computer.

I know something about tax strategies and investment but grant a lot of authority to those educated, experienced people at Portico to guide me through such things. I know something of dynamics of climate change but I'll lean on the authority of those experts who have done the research and reviewed the literature to shape my decisions on this issue.

Jesus of course had great expertise in human relations and in philosophy and theology, as he showed time and again, including this little battle with the authorities. His teachings are profound; they make sense, they inspire. That would be a valid reason to give him some authority over our lives.

Yet most of us have known people with impressive resumes, with all the education and experience in the world, who do amazingly well at interviewing, but cannot do the job, cannot handle authority. Jesus never claimed authority based on his expertise.

What about character? Again, Jesus could claim authority based on his moral integrity, which is clearly superior to that of his opponents.

Good character is certainly a factor we consider when deciding whether to follow someone. People frequently try to claim authority based on their character or moral integrity. Unfortunately, this commonly produces a "holier than thou attitude" that, ironically, is a demonstration of questionable character.

It also causes folks to engage in character assassination of those to whom they don't want to grant authority. The bottom line is there is not a lot of recent evidence that we grant authority to those who display great moral integrity.

Jesus may have led a pure and blameless life, but no, he never claimed authority based on his character.

So on what basis did he claim authority? This question was perfectly teed up for by the Pharisees and this would have been a perfect time for him to answer it. Instead,

he appears to dodge the question in a surprisingly unhelpful way, “If you are not going to answer the question on authority, then I won’t either.”

This answer has frustrated many a Biblical scholar, but I would submit that Jesus does answer the question. I find it helpful not to study Bible passages in isolation, but rather see how they connect with what goes before and after.

Immediately after sparring with the Pharisees about where authority comes from, Jesus tells this parable: a man had two sons who he asked to work in his vineyard. The first refused but then later changed with mind and did the work. The second agreed readily but then never showed up to work.

Jesus then asks, which of these did the will of his father. The answer is obvious: the first. It mirrors the truth of the old adage, “Watch what I do, not what I say.”

What makes a leader worth following? What lends authority? Jesus says the answer is simple: actions.

It is the same answer he gave John the Baptists’ disciples when they came and asked a similar question: are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another? How do we know if you have the authority?

Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

What he is saying is, don’t follow me because of what power or status I have or how good or wise I claim to be, or how popular I am. What have you seen me do?

Jesus’ authority comes from his track record. His reliability. His credibility. Look at the lives that have been changed. Look at the promises that have been fulfilled. Look at how what Jesus is doing that has changed the world for the better, and then decide if you think you think he is worth following.

Jesus said at the very end of his life, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Where did that authority come from? From what he accomplished through love.

For me, this battle of wits between Jesus and the Pharisees is one of the most important passages in Scripture because it sums up why I think Jesus is worth following, why he has the authority to lead my life:

**Not because he is all-powerful.** *Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave and being born in human likeness.*

In God's world, authority gained through power is not legitimate.

**Not because society has chosen him to be in a position of authority.** Jesus does not demand that I follow him just because of who he is, or because of who others say he is.

**Not because he is charismatic.** Jesus did not care much for style points, and to be honest, Elvis was a lot cooler than he was.

**Not because of his knowledge, experience, and expertise.** Although I appreciate his wisdom and insight, I cannot imagine worshipping someone for being a smart, competent manager.

**Not because of his great character and moral integrity.** Again, although I admire those qualities, Jesus did not tell John's disciples to accept him as the Messiah because he was such a good person.

I follow Jesus because I have looked where he told us to look. I have seen the difference he makes. I have seen the faithfulness of God. I have seen the truth of his command to love. I have seen that lives are changed. I have seen how light is brought to the dark places of the world. I have seen how creation is restored.

I have seen that the great promises of Scripture are true.

Where else would I possibly want authority to rest than in the one who has shown he can do all that?