

## Essentials for the New Millennium

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As we look at some of the events which have taken place in the political and religious arena over the last few years and even more recently, there are two essential questions that press upon us with eschatological urgency as we enter the new millennium. The first is the question Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do men say that I am?” And when they answered, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He then asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:13-15).<sup>1</sup>

This was the question in the great controversy that Lucifer stumbled over. It is the question that every angel in heaven had to individually answer: “Who do you say that I am?” Lucifer and his angels fell from heaven because they refused to acknowledge the rightful authority of the Son of God and accept Him as Lord. “Lucifer was envious of Christ, and gradually assumed command which devolved on Christ alone. . . . [He] rebelled against the authority of the Son. Angels that were loyal and true sought to reconcile this mighty, rebellious angel to the will of his Creator. . . . They clearly set forth that Christ was the Son of God, existing with Him before the angels were created; and that He had ever stood at the right hand of God, and His mild, loving authority had not heretofore been questioned.”<sup>2</sup> What was Lucifer’s response? “I will be like the Most High” (Isa. 14:12-14).

Every one of us is confronted with the question Christ asked His disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” It is a question that we cannot escape. When Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16), he essentially acknowledged Christ’s Lordship. Jesus blessed him and said, “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (v. 17). No one will be in the kingdom who does not accept Jesus Christ as King

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<sup>1</sup> All scriptural quotation are from the NKJV.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen White, *The Story of Redemption* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1947), 13-15.

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and Lord. For it is the Father's will that, "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:11). When Christ returns, He will return as King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:16).

Salvation is a two-step process within the heart. We are invited to accept Jesus Christ not only as Savior but also as Lord. As Savior He offers us forgiveness and as Lord and King He expects trustful obedience. If we accept Him as Savior but not as King, we miss the whole point of the great controversy and forfeit our entrance into God's kingdom. No one will be in heaven who does not accept Christ as King.

The very essence of any religion requires a willingness to recognize and submit to a higher authority. But in our modern democratic age with its emphasis on the importance of the individual this is becoming more difficult. Before the modern era, when submission to kings and masters was the political norm, acceptance of a higher authority in religion did not seem so difficult. But after democracy became the norm, an unwillingness to submit to any authority appears to be the order of the day. In a democratic society authority flows from the individual upward, not from some authority figure downward. This does not mean that Christianity is incompatible with individual freedom and democracy, but God's relationship to us is not democratic. His authority is not up for vote. He is not one among equals. This is what produces a crisis in the heart of democratic man, who has difficulty accepting and submitting to divine authority, for he sees it as being incompatible with individual rights and freedom.<sup>3</sup>

**The Authority of God.** While democracy places the locus of political authority in the individual, that does not mean we cannot also grant God ultimate authority in all things religious. But if these two foci are not sharply defined, individual political and social autonomy will be carried over to challenge all religious authority, except what each individual approves for himself. And if we make our personal agenda *a priori* to Scripture, that agenda will shape our theological answer. But in both the Old and New Testaments God is acknowledged as the sole and supreme authority in matters religious, not the individual. Only as God's authority is made *a priori* to the understanding of Scripture can our sinful actions and attitudes come under judgment. Without God as the locus of religious authority the legitimacy of the whole structure of Christianity is called into question.<sup>4</sup>

Scripture begins and ends with God, for in Him is all authority located. There is no authority outside of Him. As Paul says, "For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself" (Heb. 6:13). Biblical authority, then, is rooted in what God Himself is, and what He is is known by His self-disclosure. Therefore, the two, God's

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Sontag, *How Philosophy Shapes Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 219-221.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-224.

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authority and His revelation in Scripture, are two sides of the same reality. It is not possible to reject one without rejecting the other.<sup>5</sup>

Scripture is the truth from God about God. It is about a God of love, about an authority dipped in grace. There is no imperial force in grace. There is no forced obedience. God's authority as seen in Jesus Christ is full of grace and truth (John 1:17; 3:16, 17; 14:8, 9; 17:3). This is what sets Christianity apart from other religions. And it is through God's gracious authority that those who come to Him in faith are set free from all forms of destructive authoritarianism.<sup>6</sup>

We need to be careful not to substitute the authority of man for the authority of God, either through liberalism's subjectivism which massages the Scripture into an image of God acceptable to modern thinking, or through Catholicism's ecclesiastical authoritarianism in which the finite sits in the place of the Infinite. There must be no dilution of God's delegated authority as seen in Scripture. To disobey the utterance or writing of a prophet or an apostle is to disobey God and to deny Him His rightful authority to direct our lives. The Protestant principle "The Bible and the Bible only" recognizes God as the sole authority in matters of religion and that He has spoken to us through Scripture. Therefore, *sola scriptura*, the authority of scripture alone, continues to be our watchword.<sup>7</sup>

The authority of God through Scripture becomes still more critical as we enter the new millennium. Over the years, modernism and the Enlightenment with its emphasis on reason tried to liberate man from a God-ordered universe and promised a new freedom and progress for humanity. While modernism is not dead, a new way of thinking called post-modernism has made its debut, in which no objective truth exists and all religion simply reflects a historically conditioned bias. Consequently, culture is not critiqued and interpreted by Scripture, but Scripture is critiqued and interpreted by culture, especially by each reader's own culture. This allows for as many interpretations of Scripture as there are cultures and the authority of God is set aside for the authority of the individual who essentially says, "I will be like the Most High." While reason and intellectual freedom became the god of modernism, spiritual freedom and the right to interpret Scripture as one sees fit has become the god of post-modern thinking.<sup>8</sup>

**Democratic Man.** Democratic man continues to speak loudly of political and religious freedom. But unguided and undisciplined religious freedom is not a blessing. To obey is to become free. Without obedience freedom is a curse. Our passion for liberty and individual freedom is not *a priori* to the Kingdom

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<sup>5</sup> H. D. McDonald, "Bible, Authority of," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 138-140.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Authority* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 18-21.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-29.

<sup>8</sup> David S. Dockery (editor), *The Challenge of Postmodernism* (Wheaton, IL: Bridge-Point/Victor, 1995), 35-36, 40-41, 219-224.

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of God, but the first thing is the enthusiasm for obeying the King in His self-revelation. If we push God's revelation aside, we have no protection against plunging into theological error. No church or minister or believer has a right to claim freedom from God's word, but only to be free to uphold the word. But if we speak of spirituality without Scripture and place culture or religious experience above God's word, we have denied God His rightful authority. While God's authority is within experience, it is not identical with the authority of religious experience. Rather, it is His authority experienced.<sup>9</sup>

This was the case with Abraham. He experienced in his life the authority of God by believing what God promised and then modifying his life in harmony with a promise not yet realized (Heb. 11: 8-16; Gal. 3:6). Therefore only those who have the kind of faith that will obey are the sons of Abraham (Gal. 3:6).

Ironically, when God's authority is set aside in favor of freedom, claims to authority increase rather than decrease. A cacophony of voices begin vying for attention. And when everything counts as theology, scarcely anything counts. If we accept Biblical authority only to the extent that it fits our definitions or our limited experience with God and deny the accurate account of Biblical events, our churches will gradually be full of people who are brought up on substitutes, and soon there will be no Christian church but only a social institution.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, it is incumbent on the church never to lose contact with the source from which it derived its authority. The church has no authority within itself. It receives its teaching authority from the word of God. And having received it, the church is held responsible for not losing contact with its source of authority or losing sight of the fact that Scripture repeatedly traces God's rightful authority back to creation. This is why the fourth commandment is so essential. If the church fails to capture and maintain its primitive spirit of submission to the will of God and embraces only contemporary religious references, it will soon lose all vitality in its religious life and its worship and witness will degenerate into form without substance.<sup>11</sup>

**Choosing a King.** A frightful example of rejecting God's rightful authority is seen in Israel's demand for a king of their own choosing. "Israel had become tired of pious rulers who kept God's purposes and God's will and God's honor ever before them according to God's instructions. They wanted a reformed religion that they might by external, flattering prosperity be esteemed great in the eyes of the surrounding nations."<sup>12</sup>

As we enter the new millennium, the question of God's authority in the light of the great controversy presses upon us with even greater urgency. "Who do you say that I am?" Not only do we need to respond as Peter did, "You are

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 42-45.

<sup>10</sup> Jerry L. Walls, *The Problem of Pluralism: Recovering United Methodist Identity* (Wilmore, KY: Good News, 1986), 77-101.

<sup>11</sup> Sontag, 223-236.

<sup>12</sup> Ellen White, Manuscript 40, 1890.

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the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16), but more appropriately, as the centurion did when he came to ask Jesus to heal his servant,

“Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” When Jesus heard it, He marveled at the centurion’s recognition and acceptance of His authority, and said to those who followed, “Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!” (Matt. 8:8-10)

We also are people under authority, Christ’s authority. He is our Lord and King. He is the Captain of the Lord’s host. When He says, “Go,” we go; when He says, “Come,” we come; and when He says, “Do this,” we do it, because we love Him. And it is this relationship that gives us identity, a sense of belonging, a sense of dignity. We are the sons and daughters of the King sent on a mission. Jesus said, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on the earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:18,19).

**The Spirit of Sacrifice.** The second essential question pressing upon us with eschatological urgency as we enter the new millennium is the next question Jesus asked his disciples: “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. . . . For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” (Matt. 16:24). The answer to this question, like the first one, also determines our destiny. No one will be in the kingdom of God who is not willing sacrifice for the God who sacrificed so much for him. While Christianity is not incompatible with an abundant life, if we ever lose the spirit of sacrifice, we have lost the spirit of the gospel, for the spirit of sacrifice is the heart of the gospel.

This question presses upon democratic man, focused as he too often is on life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, with an increasing eschatological urgency. As the Scripture says, “Our God shall come, and shall not keep silent; . . . He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth: ‘Gather My saints together to Me. Those who have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice’” (Ps. 50:3-5). “When men appreciate the great Salvation, the self-sacrifice seen in Christ’s life will be seen in theirs.”<sup>13</sup>

Just as the question of authority is rooted in the nature of God, so is the spirit of self-giving. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish (John 3:16). He gave Him as a sacrifice for sin to bring a rebellious world back to Him (Isa. 53:10; Rom. 5:8; 2 Cor. 5:18). It is the glory of God to give. This glory is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. In God’s universe everything has been created to serve.

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<sup>13</sup> Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 273.

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Nothing is to live for itself. From the angels whose joy it is to minister to a fallen race, to the sun that shines to gladden our world, to the oceans and springs and fountains, everything takes to give. Everything, except the sinful heart of man. But above all lesser representations we see in Jesus Christ the actions of a God who cares. As Jesus said, "I seek not Mine own glory, but the glory of Him who sent me" (John 8:50; 7:18). In these words we find the great principle which is the law of life for earth and heaven. No one has a right to life unless the spirit of self-giving is in his heart.<sup>14</sup>

**Receiving the Spirit of Christ.** The spirit of Christ is the spirit of the gospel. Christ received all things from God, but He took to give. To all who believe, Christ will give a new character which is a reproduction of His own spirit.<sup>15</sup> For them, self-giving becomes a natural part of their life. When the Son of Man comes in His glory He will separate those who lived to serve from those who did not. As the King blesses the righteous, they will wonder why the Lord is commending them so. Then the King will say, "In as much as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it unto me. Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you" (See Matt. 25:31-46).

"Christ gave all for us, and those who receive Christ will be ready to sacrifice all for the sake of their Redeemer. The thought of His honor and glory will come before anything else."<sup>16</sup> This was the case with Abraham. When God spoke to him, he obeyed and left his home in Ur of the Chaldeans, came to Canaan and was willing to sacrifice his only son at God's command (Gen. 22:10). God accepted Abraham's willingness to do so and called to him, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me" (Gen. 22:12). Abraham loved God more than his own life, more than his own son. Therefore, those who love Christ are "Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29).

**Sacrifice.** God also wants to see how much we love Him. Like Abraham, He is asking us to give Him and His service first place in our lives. Whether a person is a minister or a physician, a businessman or a farmer, a professional or a mechanic, it is each one's responsibility to do all he can to advance God's kingdom. Everything we do should be a means to this end. It is the consecration of the life and all its interests for the glory of God that is the call of heaven.<sup>17</sup>

The question Jesus asked His disciples: "What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" directs the attention of God's

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<sup>14</sup>Close paraphrase of *The Desire of Ages*, 19-21.

<sup>15</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, [1900] 1948), 6:449.

<sup>16</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1900), 49.

<sup>17</sup> Close paraphrase of Ellen White, *Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1900), 221-222.

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remnant not only to the fourth commandment but also to the tenth commandment. While the fourth commandment will test our loyalty externally, the tenth commandment will test the reason for our loyalty. This was the case with Paul who zealously kept God's commandments but did so for his own glory and the glory of Israel, which he mistakenly thought was for the glory of God also. It was on the road to Damascus that Jesus Christ appeared to him and opened to him his heart, exposing his motives. As Paul says, "For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good" (Rom. 7:7-12). After his conversion Paul had an entirely different attitude. "I count all things loss," he said, "for the excellence of the knowledge of Jesus Christ my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things" (Phil. 3:8).

**Eschatological Importance.** The eschatological importance of the tenth commandment as it confronts God's remnant is made frighteningly clear by the following observations: In vision Ellen White saw Satan tell his angels to lay snares for all Christians to take them away from Christ, but especially for those who were looking for Christ's second appearing and keeping all the commandments of God. They may profess what they please, but only make them care more for their own success than for the success of Christ's kingdom and the spread of the truth we hate. The grace of God and the light of truth may melt away their covetousness and selfish feelings for a little while, but if they continue to be wrapped up in themselves, salvation and grace will be pushed into the background and we will have them yet.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, as we enter the new millennium and we see the recent events in their eschatological setting, the question of accepting Christ as our Savior and Lord and being willing to give up life itself for Him as He did for us, takes on an urgency as never before. If we want to remain loyal to the King we need to practice loyalty. If we want to keep the spirit of the gospel alive in our hearts we need to be willing to sacrifice. Many have sacrificed for far less worthy causes. Should we do less for Christ?

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<sup>18</sup> Close paraphrase of Ellen White, *Early Writings* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1892), 266-269.

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