

TWO ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Today, there is an ever-increasing urgency to Jesus' confrontational dialogue with His disciples.

As we look at events that have taken place in the political and religious arena in recent years, two questions surface with eschatological urgency. The first is the question Jesus asked His disciples: "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" So they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'" (Matt. 16:13-15, NKJV).¹

This was the question that Lucifer originally stumbled over. It is the question that every angel in heaven had to 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. "Lucifer was envi-

ous of Christ, and gradually assumed command which devolved on Christ alone. . . . 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."²

What was Lucifer's response? "I will be like the Most High" (Isa. 14:14).

Every one of us is confronted

**Jack J. Blanco, Th.D., is the retired dean of the School of Religion at Southern Adventist University and author of The Clear Word, a Bible paraphrase.*

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 humanity.

with Christ's question: "Who do you say that I am?" We cannot escape it. 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" (vs. 17). No one will be in the kingdom who does not accept Jesus Christ as King 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 of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:10, 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.

The very essence of any religion requires a willingness to recognize and submit to a higher authority. In our modern democratic age, however, with its emphasis on the importance of the individual, this is becoming more difficult. Before the modern era, 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 became 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

humanity, who have difficulty submitting to divine authority, for they see it as being incompatible with individual rights and freedom.

The Authority of God

Though democracy places the locus of political authority in the individual, it does not mean we cannot also grant God ultimate authority in religious things. If these two foci are not sharply defined, however, individual political and social autonomy will be carried over to challenge all religious authority, except what each individual approves for himself or herself. And if we make our personal agenda *a priori* to Scripture, that agenda will shape our theological answer. In both the Old and New Testaments, God is asserted as the sole and supreme authority in matters religious. 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.

Scripture begins and ends with God, for in Him is located all authority. As Paul says, "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 can be known by His self-disclosure. Therefore God's authority and His revelation in Scripture are two sides of the same reality. It is not possible to reject one without rejecting the other.

Scripture is the truth from God about God. It is about a God of love, about an authority saturated in grace. There is no imperial force in grace, 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 sets Christianity apart from other religions. Through God's gracious authority, those who come to Him in faith are set free from all forms of destructive authoritarianism.

We need to be careful not to substitute human authority for God's authority, 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.

Over the years, modernism and the Enlightenment with their emphasis on reason tried to liberate humanity from a God-ordered universe and promised a new freedom and progress for humanity. Though modernism is not dead, postmodernism 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." 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 postmodernism.

Democratic Humanity

Democratic humanity continues to assert 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 of God, but the first thing must be the enthusiasm for obeying the King in His self-revelation. If we push God's revelation aside, we have no protection against 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. If we speak of spirituality without Scripture and place culture or religious experience above God's Word, we have denied God's rightful authority. Though God's authority is within experience, it is not identical with the authority of religious experience. Rather, it is His authority experienced.

This was the case with Abraham. He experienced 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 children of Abraham (Gal. 3:7).

Ironically, when God's authority is set aside in favor of freedom, claims to authority increase. A cacophony of voices vies 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 become full of people brought up on

It is incumbent on the church never to lose contact with the source from which it derived its authority. It has no authority within itself. It receives its teaching authority from the Word of God. And having received it, the church is responsible for not losing contact with its source of authority or losing sight of Scripture's repeated connection of God's rightful authority back to Creation.

substitutes. Soon there will be no Christian Church but only a social institution.

It is incumbent on the church never to lose contact with the source from which it derived its authority. It has no authority within itself. It receives its teaching authority from the Word of God. And having received it, the church is responsible for not losing contact with its source of authority or losing sight of Scripture's repeated connection of 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 God's will 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.

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."³

Today 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 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

The spirit of Christ is the spirit of the gospel.

Christ received all things from God, but He received to give.

Self-giving becomes a natural part of the Christian's life.

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, He will separate those who lived to serve from those who did not.

servant, "Do this," and he does it.' When Jesus heard it, He marveled, 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 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 question with eschatological urgency is Jesus' next question of 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? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matt. 16:24, 26). The answer to this question, like the first one, determines our destiny. No one will be in the kingdom of God who is not a willing sacrifice for the God who sacrificed so much for us. Though 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.

With eschatological urgency, this question presses upon democratic humanity, focused as we usually are on life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. 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."⁴

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 whoever 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, 11; 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. 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 humanity. 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). These words express the great principle which is the law of life. No one has a right to life without the spirit of self-giving.

Receiving the Spirit of Christ

The spirit of Christ is the spirit of the gospel. Christ received all things from God, but He received to give. Self-giving becomes a natural part of the Christian's 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, "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me. . . . Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you" (Matt. 25:40, 34).

"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."⁵ When God spoke to Abraham, he obeyed and left his home in Ur of the Chaldees, 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" (vs. 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. He is asking us to give Him and His service first place in our lives. Minister or physician,

business executive or farmer, professional or mechanic, each is responsible to do everything possible to advance God's kingdom. Everything should be a means to this end. Consecration of the life and all its interests for the glory of God is the call of heaven.⁶

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 remnant to both the fourth commandment and the 10th commandment. While the fourth commandment will test our loyalty externally, the 10th commandment will test the reason for our loyalty. This was the case with Paul, who at first kept God's commandments for his own glory and the glory of Israel, which he mistakenly thought was for the glory of God. On the road to Damascus, however, Jesus Christ appeared to him and exposed his motives. As Paul says, "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. 7:7-9, 12). After his conversion, Paul had an entirely different attitude. "I also count all things loss," he said, "for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things" (Phil. 3:8).

As we see 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? □

REFERENCES

¹ All scriptural references in this article are from the New King James Version.

² *Lift Him Up*, p. 18.

³ *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials* (1987), p. 922.

⁴ *The Desire of Ages*, p. 273.

⁵ *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 49.

⁶ Close paraphrase of *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 221, 222.

