

AUTHORITY IN RELIGION by Chris B. Hartshorn

MUST MEN HAVE A DIRECT CALL FROM GOD TO REPRESENT HIM?

Churches have been brought into existence because men have had the desire to do good and to help their fellow men. If they have been men of integrity and ability, their efforts have resulted in a stable congregation, or even in a new denomination. With scarcely an exception these men have claimed no higher authority than the call of conscience. They have assured themselves by proclaiming, "It is always right to do right."

Historically, most ministers have been licensed or ordained by some Christian denomination, and received their calls through their respective official representatives. New denominations have developed largely because of divisions or the breaking away of factions. The new leaders usually assert that the parent body needs some reformation since it has departed from the truth as originally held by the body of believers. They carry with them the authority of their ordination or license by the parent body.

VIEWPOINTS ON AUTHORITY

There are two major concepts concerning ministerial authority. The older and majority view is that which traces its ordination through the Apostle Peter. These denominations emphasize their line of succession back to Christ. The other concept is that the ministry is a profession requiring only suitable talents, special training, and a desire to serve mankind. To them the only "call" that matters is a contract for service with a particular congregation.

There is a third concept of ministerial authority which the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints supports. This is often called "the Restoration" view. This concept presupposes an apostasy or a "falling away" from the original faith and doctrine as taught in the New Testament. It also denies that the Reformation Movement was a complete and satisfactory solution for the problem which apostasy presented to Christ's church.

We recognize the sincerity which motivates those who accept the first two concepts, and we hold in high esteem those who serve the people faithfully and devotedly in the name of Christ. However, Jesus rejected the claims of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes that they were the representatives of God. He said, "I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). Though the existing religions of Jesus' day claimed the Law of Moses and the Old Testament prophets as their authority,

Jesus built independently under the directive of God. Paul wrote, "Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (I Corinthians 3:11). Since he chose to ignore the claims of those established religions, we are challenged by the necessity of examining our own foundations.

THE LOSS OF AUTHORITY

All Christian denominations accept the idea that Christ is the center and foundation of their religion, yet in the main they deny that God has spoken to the church since the days of Christ and the apostles. The prophets who used to declare, "Thus saith the Lord," are long since dead according to them. Because of this and other departures from New Testament teachings and early Christian faith, we believe the early church lost the power that revealed God's will concerning the "call" of new ministers as his representatives.

Such a loss of contact with Divinity was often predicted in the Bible:

Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition. —II Thessalonians 2:1-3.

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils. — I Timothy 4:1.

Since this apostasy (literally, "a falling away") took place, there was need that the authority of God's ministry be again restored from heaven.

THE RESTORATION OF AUTHORITY

In the last book of the Bible, at the very close of the first century, John wrote saying:

After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter. — Revelation 4:1.

And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people, saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.— Revelation 14:6, 7.

We believe that the "everlasting gospel" was restored to earth in America in the year 1830. With it came the authority to represent God. These important events were solemnly proclaimed to have resulted by angelic ministration as predicted in the Scripture just quoted. (Those wishing to pursue this part of the subject further are urged to secure the tract, *The Apostasy and the Restoration.*)

As a result of the foregoing statements, perhaps you have some questions about calls to the ministry and divine authority to represent God. From our conversations with others and from discussions we have read, we shall try to anticipate those general questions which may have occurred to you and will discuss them briefly.

1. WHAT DO YOU MEAN WHEN YOU SAY A MINISTER HAS AUTHORITY TO REPRESENT GOD AND ADMINISTER THE ORDINANCES OF THE CHURCH?

We mean that he has received a divine commission for the performance of sacred acts which commit God to the results. Since he has the right to officiate, heaven will recognize as valid all acts performed in harmony with the terms of the commission.

All governments maintain ambassadors and ministers to represent them in the capitals of the world. Should someone arrogate to himself such authority as approving passports, licensing exports, and making trade agreements, such acts would be repudiated by the government. In the affairs of state, the true representative must receive his commission from the proper official of the government. In things sacred—having to do with eternal life—similar care would be expected. The Scriptures give evidence that such protection was given.

Jesus thought it necessary to remind his disciples while he was still on earth:

Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that

whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he quay give it you.—John 15:16.

Jesus told his disciples (the Twelve):

I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.—Matthew 16:19.

2. THE IDEA OF RECEIVING A COMMISSION TO PREACH AND TO PERFORM BINDING ACTS IS ALL RIGHT, BUT THIS COMMISSION SHOULD BELONG TO THE MINISTERS OF ALL CHRISTIAN CHURCHES, SHOULDN'T IT?

Limiting this commission to one denomination is not our idea. The question of authority cannot be answered with personal opinions. We must concern ourselves with what the Bible says about it.

Jesus wanted it clearly understood that he had authority from God to do all that he did. "For I came down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of him that sent me" (John 6:38). He made it even more emphatic by saying, "I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak" (John 12:49).

Since Jesus was so particular to trace his authority back to God, should not his ministerial disciples today feel under the same compulsion?

After Jesus had fulfilled his mission and was about to return to the Father, he triumphantly announced, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28: 18, 19).

3. ISN'T THE CALL OR COMMISSION OF CHRIST APPLICABLE TO ALL WHO WILL ENTER HIS SERVICE TODAY TO TEACH AND PREACH THE GOSPEL? WHAT MORE AUTHORITY DOES ANY ONE NEED?

Protestants have referred to this passage as "The Great Commission," but the entire passage shows that it had a limited application. It says, "Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them...And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore and teach...

No other group or man can rightfully claim authority from this assignment. A minister needs a personal testimony of the Christ so he can witness with conviction. Paul said, "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (I Corinthians 12:3).

4. BUT HE WAS ON EARTH THEN AND COULD TALK TO MEN. WHY SHOULD WE EXPECT THE CHURCH TO CARRY ON TODAY BY A METHOD WHICH REQUIRED CHRIST'S PERSONAL DIRECTION?

The principle of divine selection and bestowal of authority has existed through the ages, and God has provided a way for the principle to function. In the epistle to the Hebrews, the writer calls attention to the custom by which a "high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God. And no man taketh this honor unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron" (Hebrews 5:1, 4). (See Numbers 3:10 and II Chronicles 26: 18.)

Jesus rebuked those of his day who would not accept his authority:

I receive not honor from men. But I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you. I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive. How can ye believe, which receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that cometh from God only? John 5:41-44.

Jesus knew he would not be long with his church on earth or be able to select personally the successors of the disciples who in time would be needed to carry on the work and provide others for the expansion of the work on his church. However, he had a plan for the orderly transition of their responsibilities and functions. He explained this and gave them assurance by saying:

I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another comforter, that he may abide with you for ever I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. — John 14: 16, 18.

It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. — John 16: 7.

It is the work of the Comforter (Holy Spirit) to reveal the call of men to priesthood authority, commonly referred to as "the ministry." Those who have already been placed by Christ as overseers of the flock should receive this light and guidance. Moses, the prophet and leader of ancient Israel,

received the call for Aaron. This set a precedent which is respected to this day.

Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets...As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.
—Acts 13:1-3.

When Saul ended his historic trip to imprison the saints of Damascus, God sent unto him a devout man named Ananias who said, "The God of our fathers hath chosen thee, that thou shouldest know his will...For thou shalt be his witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard" (Acts 22:14, 15).

5. DOESN'T YOUR CHURCH OVEREMPHASIZE THE ISSUE OF AUTHORITY? WHAT DOES A MINISTER DO WHICH NECESSITATES A PERSONAL CALL FROM HEAVEN?

He deals with the souls of men. This has to do with their lives here and hereafter. He opens the gates of eternal life to all those who choose to follow Christ. This is done by administering such ordinances of the gospel as baptism, confirmation, blessing of children, the Lord's Supper, and ordination. To be valid in the kingdom of heaven these acts must be done only by men called and recognized by Christ as his servants. Such men only can "bind on earth." And only for such ministers does Christ promise "to bind in heaven."

6. HAS THE MINISTER OF ONE CHURCH OR DENOMINATION MORE AUTHORITY TO PERFORM SACRED ORDINANCES THAN HAS THE MINISTER OF ANOTHER DENOMINATION?

Basing our answer on the Scriptures and on history, we give an unqualified, "yes."

Jesus was once challenged on this point by the high priests, scribes, and elders (Luke 20: 2-4): "Tell us, by what authority doest thou these things?"

He replied, "I will also ask you one thing; and answer me: The baptism of John, was it from heaven, or of men?" Unless there are two kinds of baptisms—divine and human—this question has no point. Jesus said that baptism from heaven is essential to salvation: "Except a man be born of the water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3: 5).

7. BUT DON'T ALL MINISTERS HAVE AUTHORITY TO BAPTIZE THOSE WHO REPENT AND WANT TO BE SAVED?

If by that you infer that the ministers of all Christian denominations have equal authority to perform ordinances for God, the answer is "no." Since ministers differ radically on the purpose for baptism and the mode of administering it, to say that all were equal in representing God would be making Him responsible for our conflicting interpretations of his gospel. "God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints" (I Corinthians 14: 33).

8. OUR MINISTER PREACHES THAT THERE ARE NO SUCH THINGS AS "SAVING ORDINANCES" IN CHRIST'S CHURCH. HE SAYS THAT IF WE ONLY ACCEPT JESUS AS OUR SAVIOR, WE WILL GO TO HEAVEN.

The Bible makes this so clear that no one should err.

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven: but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you [a better translation is "ye never knew me"]: depart from me, ye that work iniquity. — Matthew 7: 21-23.

Jesus told Nicodemus, "except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3: 3). He further defined this to mean the ordinances of water and Spirit baptism. Paul explained that the latter was accomplished through the laying on of hands (Acts 19: 1-6).

To "accept Jesus" is to do so with one's whole heart. There is no "only" proposition in it. "Then Jesus said unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16: 24). James adds this admonition, "What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?...Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone" (James 2 : 14, 17).

9. TELL US WHAT YOU MEAN WHEN YOU SAY THE REORGANIZED CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER DAY SAINTS CLAIMS ITS PRIESTHOOD AUTHORITY ON "RESTORATION" RATHER THAN ON SUCCESSION.

In an open vision in 1820 Joseph Smith was told he was not to join any of the then existing churches. Later while he was praying with Oliver Cowdery, a messenger from heaven descended and "...having laid his hands upon us, he ordained us, saying unto us, 'Upon you my fellow servants, in the name of the Messiah, I confer the priesthood of Aaron.' This messenger said his name was John, the same that is called John the Baptist in the New Testament." These men were given authority to ordain others as directed by the Holy Spirit. This was an unusual and marvelous experience, but exactly what one familiar with the Bible should expect. God is unchangeable, and we will find him proceeding always in harmony with scriptural precedents as we have pointed out. He will indicate by his Spirit those who are to be ordained to specific offices in the priesthood. Paul once wrote the Corinthian saints,

And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healing, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. —I Corinthians 12 : 28.

Again to the Ephesian saints he declared,

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors -and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, Unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.—Ephesians 4 : 11-

We believe that today ministers of the "restoration" church are being called of God to represent him in performing the saving ordinances of the gospel.

Doubtless you have other questions since this discussion has necessarily been limited. Please do not cast this matter aside lightly. Think carefully over each point and read each passage of Scripture in your own Bible.