

Chapter 87: By What Authority?

Matthew 21:23–27

As Jesus continues to unveil the full glory of his ministry in Jerusalem, we cannot expect that he will continue unchallenged. His teaching is a direct threat to the authority of the religious leaders, and the power and popularity of his deeds only paint a brighter target on his back. So, as the chief priests and elders confront Jesus in Matthew 21:23–27, Jesus must answer an important question: By what authority does he do the things that he is doing? Even the Lord Jesus Christ does not claim that he is his own authority. Instead, by appealing to John the Baptist, Jesus explains the source of his authority that he has professed all along: *Jesus came to do the will of his Father in heaven.*

The Authority of Jesus (Matt. 21:23)

The chief priests and the scribes had confronted Jesus at his entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:14). Now, the chief priests and elders confront Jesus the wide range of his ministry in Jerusalem. As Jesus teaches in the temple, they interrupt his teaching to ask him, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” (v. 23). The chief priests and elders were both members of the Sanhedrin, which constituted the highest judicial body for Israel’s church. Although there is debate about what these religious leaders mean by “these things,” it is best to see it as inclusive of everything Jesus has done since his arrival: his royal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, his cleansing of the temple, his healing the blind and lame in the temple, his receiving praise from the people (especially the children), and his teaching in the temple. (The text of Matthew 21:18–22 took place outside of Jerusalem, on Jesus’ way back from staying overnight Bethany, so that the leaders likely did not know about it.)

By asking Jesus’ a question about his authority, they are asking him to give an account for his right—and the source of that right—to minister in these ways.¹ This was a subtle strategy on multiple fronts. First, it allowed them to sidestep whether Jesus’ words were true and whether his deeds were righteous by confronting him over his credentials.² Second, they were able to couch their question as an honest inquiry, when in fact they were setting up a full-scale assault against him: “Not infrequently the request of information can hide, as here, a lack of receptivity and commitment.”³

Third, because they knew that *they* had not authorized him to teach, they expected that their

¹ “The two questions are really only one question, for ‘what’ authority is made plain when the giver of this authority is named. The ἐξουσία [*exousia*; ‘authority’] is both the right and the power that goes with this right.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 826.)

² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:21–22.

³ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 610.

question would put him in a dilemma that would ultimately discredit him.⁴ This is an important point to understand because their question reflects a different cultural attitude toward authority than ours, where we question authority and are often defer much more to individuals than to credentials. Morris reminds us of the historical background, where the Romans exercised tyrannical authority in opposition to God, while the Jewish Sanhedrin was understood to be the bastion of the true religion. In other words, the authority of the Romans was unlimited, but illegitimate. The authority of the Sanhedrin was legitimate, but limited. Morris writes, “People like John the Baptist and Jesus presented problems because they did not fit into this picture. They were not like the Romans, who ruled unjustly but had the military backing that enforced their demands. And they were not like the high priests and other officials, who because of their official position were regarded as authoritative persons by official Judaism. What authority, then, did they have?”⁵

The Authority of John (Matt. 21:24–26)

In response, Jesus issues a question of his own (v. 24a). When he says, “if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things” (v. 24b), he is not evading their question, and he is not conditioning his response on their answer. As Carson points out, “If the religious authorities rightly answer it, they will already have the correct answer to their own question. If they respond, ‘From heaven,’ then they are morally bound to believe John—and John pointed to Jesus.”⁶ Or, as Lenski puts it, “Jesus merely returns the question of the Sanhedrists to them by substituting John for himself....The authority of John and that of the Jesus are identical....The right answer to the question about John was the right answer to the question about Jesus.”⁷ Indeed, “the form of his response implies clearly what his answer would be.”⁸ Thus, Jesus’ question is really not a refusal to answer the question; the answer to Jesus’ question *is* the answer to the question.

It is worth noting that Jesus asks specifically about what the understand of the authority of the “baptism of John,” rather than of his preaching. There are probably two reasons for this. First, by asking about John’s baptism, Jesus was asking about “the element in his ministry which was likely to have been found most offensive by the Jewish establishment.”⁹ Jesus was likely thinking about the questions that the priests and Levites from Jerusalem had posed to John himself: “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet” (John 1:25). Second, Nolland rightly notes that the baptism of John really “stands for his ministry as a whole.”¹⁰ This is still true for baptism today, where the sacrament of the washing with water stands for the full gospel ministry of Christ and the Holy Spirit (see Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38–39; Col. 2:11–12; Heb. 10:22; 1 Pet. 3:21). This is a figure of speech known as a synecdoche, where the part represents the whole (e.g., to speak of a “hired hand” is a reference to the whole employee).

⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 776.

⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 532–33.

⁶ Carson, “Matthew,” 505.

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 827.

⁸ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 797.

⁹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 798.

¹⁰ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 858.

This question turns the tables on the dilemma that the chief priests and the elders had put to Jesus: “The trap they have laid for Jesus has just sprung on them. However they answer, Jesus will have them.”¹¹ They cannot acknowledge that John’s authority came from heaven, for two reasons. First, they did not really believe that John was a prophet. Second, if they acknowledge that John was a prophet, John “had pointed out Christ with the finger, and had declared him to be the only Son of God.”¹² Therefore, if John’s authority came from heaven, then heaven likewise declared Jesus to be the Son of God, and the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world.

On the other hand, they feared the crowds, and the crowds believed that the authority of John came from heaven (v. 26). In this, they run up hard against the limits of their own authority. While the people trusted their authority as religious leaders, that trust was not a blank check. Their authority did not extend so far as to set aside the Word of God delivered through his prophets. To reject God’s Word would make their authority illegitimate, in addition to being strictly limited, so that their authority would disappear to the point of vanishing altogether. This is an important reminder that all authority exercised among God’s people is only ministerial and declarative. God’s appointed leaders in the Old and New Testaments are entrusted with real authority from heaven; however, that authority extends only so far as to minister God’s Word and to declare God’s Word to his people. Even Jesus declared that he had “come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38).

The Authority of Religious Leaders (Matt. 21:27)

Unable to overcome this dilemma, the religious leaders cop out, responding, “We do not know” (v. 27a). This answer may not fall into the traps represented by answering whether John’s authority came from heaven or from man; however, we should not fail to recognize how disastrous this answer was for them. As Lenski points out about these religious leaders from the Sanhedrin, “it was their supreme duty to know, and here they dare to say that they do not know....The reply of Jesus implies that these Sanhedrists have refused to answer his question, deliberately refused as arrant cowards.”¹³ They arrogantly overplayed their hand, and they were forced to abdicate their authority in the process. Sadly, this will not lead them to repentance toward the truth, but only to greater rage to drive them to murder the One whom they cannot effectively refute.

Jesus then says, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things” (v. 27b). By this, Jesus was exposing the blind spot of the religious leaders concerning him: “They raised the question of Jesus’ authority; he raised the question of their competence to judge such an issue.”¹⁴ By professing ignorance about heavenly authority, they forfeited their credibility. Furthermore, Jesus was reaffirming the connection between John’s ministry and his own: “No one who heard Jesus’ response could fail to understand the implied claim to continuity between his ministry and that of John, and therefore to a divine authority for it.”¹⁵ John had acted with all the authority of heaven as a

¹¹ Osborne, *Matthew*, 777.

¹² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:22.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 829.

¹⁴ Carson, “Matthew,” 505.

¹⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 799.

forerunner to the ministry of Jesus. John, however, acknowledged that Jesus possessed an authority so great that he did not even qualify to serve as Jesus' lowliest slave (Matt. 3:11). John was a servant to minister among God's people, while Jesus served in the household of God with all the authority of a Son.

Discussion Questions

1. What group did "the chief priests and the elders of the people" represent (v. 23a)? What kind of authority did that group exercise within Israel? What is included in "these things" about which the chief priests and elders confront Jesus (v. 24b)? Why do they ask Jesus about his authority? Why do they ask about the source of his authority? What were they hoping to accomplish by this line of questioning?
2. Is it intellectually honest for Jesus to respond to their question with his own question (v. 24)? If he was not evading their question, then why did he respond in this way? Why did Jesus ask the chief priests and elders about the authority of John the Baptist? What did John the Baptist confess about Jesus? How does the answer to the question that Jesus posed relate to the question that the chief priests and elders had posed to him?
3. Why did Jesus ask about the baptism of John the Baptist? Why would baptism have been offensive to the chief priests and elders (John 1:25)? How does baptism represent the whole course of John's ministry? How does baptism represent the whole course of gospel ministry today? Why do the religious leaders struggle to answer Jesus' question? What does this suggest about the limits and the legitimacy of their authority among God's people?
4. What degree of authority do you claim over your own life? What degree of authority do you exercise over your own life, even in ways that you might not express outwardly? What authority does the Bible say that you have over your own life? What kind of authority has God entrusted to the church, as exercised by the officers of the church? How does this authority relate to the Jesus, who possesses all authority in heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18)?