

Thinking Biblically About Authority: An Interview with David Wells

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Editor's note: Jonathan Leeman sent the following three questions on the subject of authority to David Wells. Below are his answers.

1) If someone sat down and read through some of your major books like *No Place for Truth*, *God in the Wasteland*, *Losing Our Virtue*, *Above All Earthly Power's*, *The Courage to be Protestant*, and *God in the Whirlwind*, what are a few lessons they would learn about how people in the West view the idea of authority?



What is striking about our situation today is that for so many people there is nothing out there that can legitimately validate any action or belief. There is simply nothing there that makes anything *right*. Or, to put it differently, we are building a brilliant and complex civilization but it all rests on a vacuum. This does not mean, of course, that it is now impossible for the state to make laws, rules, and regulations. To the contrary! We are now drowning in them! But what this vacuum means is that nothing in life ever has any ultimate authorization.

It has not always been like this. Beneath other civilizations, and even in our own past, it was believed that there was an authority in life. And this, of course, is at the heart of Christian faith. It is God who supremely validates beliefs and the use of power—or he does not do so. This is where the line between Good and Evil lies. But Good and Evil are now abstractions in our contemporary world. They have become irrelevant to the living of life.

As we have come into our postmodern moment, then, we find that there is no longer a narrative to life; there are only our personal stories. There is no overarching meaning to it; there are just our private moments when something becomes real. There is no Truth; there are only truths. There are no ultimate rights and wrongs; there are just things with which we are comfortable or uncomfortable. We now live in a psychological world, not a moral world, and certainly not one where moral reality is defined by the holiness of God. We are alone now in the dark night of relativism where one opinion cannot be said to be true while another is not. If one view is privately meaningful it cannot be negated by a contrary view. The *Oxford Dictionaries* designated the word “post-truth” as the word of the year for 2016. Post-truth accepts the fact that a private disposition can legitimately trump an objective fact.

In this cultural environment, then, all authority withers. First, any appeal to any kind of authority is unacceptable because there is nothing there to validate that appeal. Second, it therefore follows that those who appeal to an authority must be doing so out of self-serving motives. Their appeal is simply a way to manipulate others and serve their own private agendas.

2) What are some positive lessons you hope church leaders would take away from your work about the good use of authority?

In our culture, authority is resisted because it is seen as limiting personal options. It is seen to curtail individual autonomy. When autonomy to think, do, and say what we want is threatened, then our very self is endangered. This is what many think in our upside-down world.

The biblical view is just the opposite. The freedom that lives by defying authority—especially God’s authority—is actually revealing its own inner captivity. That “freedom” is really the captive to self-interest, and that is a cruel captivity.

By contrast, captivity to the authority of God through our obedience to the truth of Scripture, with its center in Christ, is the gateway to real freedom. This is the paradox of which Christ spoke. We have to die in order to live, but if we refuse to die we can never live.

What we have so often lost in our churches is the understanding that God stands outside of the sinner, outside of our culture, and summons us to come out of ourselves and know him through Christ. Christian faith is not a patch-up operation from within. And our self-help culture is of no use to us. None. The truth of Christian faith comes from another place. It comes from the God of eternity whose summons to us is also a summons to place ourselves, by grace, under his authority. The evidence that we are learning to do this is a growing desire to think our thoughts after him, to be God-centered in our lives, God-fearing in our hearts, and God-honoring in all that we do. This is the kind of life he authorizes, and this is the only kind that will have eternal validation.

3) What warnings might you offer church leaders and Christians generally about God’s good and dangerous gift of authority?

Let me begin with a simple truth. It is that all authority, in church and society, is *delegated*. It is God’s will, Peter says, that we be subject to human institutions of government because their place is to punish those who do wrong and reward those who do right (1 Pet. 2:13–5). Yet, while these authorities are there by divine design, “there is no authority,” Paul says, “except from God” (Rom. 13:1). All such authority in the state, then, is delegated. It is therefore only used well and wisely when it is used in accordance with the moral nature of God. God never delegates the authority of Scripture to the church but he has designated those in the church to serve its truth. In this latter connection, let me make two observations.

First, some pastors and Christian leaders, sensing the current chaos in society, and the vacuum that underlies it, have been tempted to step in and fill that vacuum. They do so by becoming *authoritarian* in their ways of relating to people. They develop a domineering style. Some have even become like cult leaders. This style does appeal to some people, especially to those who are filled with uncertainty and who are glad for someone else to make their decisions. But because this is a false use of authority it is always destructive.

Second, what we all need are not more authoritarian preachers but more *authoritative* sermons.

We sometimes speak of those who have developed an unusual expertise in their fields of study as being “authorities” in their field. Or we speak of unusually fine conductors as being maestros. So what I have in view here are preachers who are “authorities” in the godly life, maestros in how to live. Sermons are much more than just exercises in biblical exegesis, though that’s where they must all begin. The sermons that are most compelling are those that have also incubated in the godly life of the preacher. These preachers speak out of Scripture, before God, and into life. These are the sermons that nourish our souls because they are truthful and wise. These are the ones that I am speaking of here as being authoritative.

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