

1. The Authority We Crave

All of us grow up and our interests change. As we get older, we tend to care about bigger questions—I'm sure you have experienced this. In 2022, Taylor Swift gave the commencement address at NYU. At one point in her speech she said, "I know it can be really overwhelming figuring out who to be ... I have some good news: It's totally up to you. I also have some terrifying news: It's totally up to you." She captured the paralysis of being a modern person. We are always being told we are our own authorities and in charge of our own identity. And that's scary. Behind her pronouncement there are so many monumental questions about our place and purpose: Who am I? What am I for? What should I do with my life? What is *my* place?

Have you asked these questions yet? Where do you get the answers? Are you supposed to look within—to your emotions and desires—

and dig deep to locate your identity and purpose? Maybe you feel exasperated by that question (how many people have asked you “what are you going to do with your life?!”) and you will avoid it for a time. But eventually it may force you to ask even cosmic questions: Why is there something rather than nothing? Where did all this come from? Maybe you start to dig so deep you think about your own mind: Can I really trust that what *I* see, smell, taste, hear, and experience is actually there in front of me? How do I know that other people have minds and thoughts and an imagination like me?

The point is that the questions that matter, from the obvious, “where did this world come from,” to those of identity, “who am I,” to the philosophical, “do our minds conform to reality,” to the practical, “who should I marry or should I get married at all,” all highlight this one thing: *we are craving authority*. Is there a place I can turn to get answers? Is there authority we can trust absolutely?

In a little book on Scripture, the first thing to see is that all people need an authority for their lives—some voice that is greater than their own hearts. 1 John 3:20 should be a relief to you: “God is greater than your heart.” God has

given us a Word that is better than the words of our thought lives. The simple fact is that everyone is looking for *the* authority even if they don't outwardly realize or admit it. If we don't look outside ourselves for authority, it is because we believe our hearts are greater than God. All world religions—like Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism—lean on an authoritative text, tradition, or person to find answers to the big questions. Even atheists turn to authorities. They look for the biggest names (like Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens, or maybe Alex O'Connor today) and so find their authorities within this material world. Every single society that has ever existed has looked for an authority to derive their meaning, purpose, origin story, and hope, amid a bent and broken world. The question is, which authority speaks truth?

The Christian claim that has proved decisively powerful for centuries is that *God has spoken*. If God has spoken, then His Word must be the authority. If God is God, then this is a logically necessary conclusion.

For twenty-first century modern people (and especially if you've grown up around the Bible), we are not tempted so often by the religious texts of the other major world religions. Instead,

the most consistently tempting message that may be pushing you away from the authority of God's Word (or may be preventing you from ever coming under God's Word) is the ever-present message of Western society: *authority is individual and personal and comes from within yourself*. In the words of 1 John, it is our natural disposition to think our hearts are greater than God. And so, our culture says, "you are your own authority." The heartbeat of our contemporary world is "be yourself," and that means "do what you want as long as you're not hurting anybody else."

We can't spend time in this little book critiquing the subjective value of modern culture. But it doesn't take much work to debunk. Consider looking at your own feelings and desires. Are you willing to say that your desires and feelings always serve you well? We want to suppress the truth about ourselves. But most people are willing to say, "there are things about me that are not good, vices and habits that I know are destructive, desires that I don't like, and patterns of thought and behavior that bring a sense of guilt and shame to my heart." As a pastor, I know that most people are aware that they aren't who they should be. It's silly

to think that our feelings are superb guides for navigating reality. Don't fall into that ditch. Our desires can be terrible guides (check out Genesis 6:6-8 and Jeremiah 17:9 if you want to see what the Bible says about our hearts).

The truth is more complex. We all lean on authorities in our lives: parents, teachers, professors, scientists, mathematicians, doctors, etc. We must listen. These people are gifts to us. At the same time, none of them have all the answers; none can fix the great problems of life, not ultimately. We know that every one of these authorities are relative themselves. They are born and they pass away. They get scared. They make mistakes. They are helpful but not ultimate. We step out into the world with faith, trusting that the claims of those who came before us are often true. But we must remember that every single human is fallible. And so, we should be weary of, and protest, the loudest voice of all: our hearts—as our hearts tell us, “You are all you will ever need.”

In the culture of our time, it is still true (no matter what Taylor tells you) that the *final* authority is not parents, doctors, teachers, coaches, and especially not ourselves. We may turn within, as if we're our own Scriptures, but

our regular failures and confusion tell a different story. We need a voice from outside ourselves. Instead, we must see that *God has spoken*. The authorities in our lives are at their best when they believe God's Word is their ultimate authority.

What we all need is the skill of listening to that which is greater than us. We need an authority to tell us why we are (the Bible says we exist to dwell in God's presence and find joy in Him forever), what we are (the image of God, not merely a collection of atoms and quarks; you are no accident), where we are (in creation, not in a world that is a product of mere chance), and what we should do (follow Jesus the redeemer and walk in the way of the Lord; not live by the guide of our scattered feelings).

MAIN POINT:

If God has spoken, and if the Bible is God's speech, His very Word, then it must be our authority. And that means that the Bible really is the end of our search for the authority we crave.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- Do you believe that God has spoken? If so, why? If not, why not? Where do you turn

to get answers to questions like “why is there something rather than nothing?”

- Consider how you relate to authorities in your life. If you have a big problem, where do you turn? If you have an unanswerable question, who do you talk to? Does the Bible come to mind when you are on the search for meaning?