

Whose We Are

Part Ten: Identity and Authority

I Thessalonians 4.8 and selected verses

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In case you haven't noticed, we Christians don't exactly blend into this world of ours.

More and more, there are stark dividing lines between those who believe there is a personal God who is involved in this world of ours, and those who don't. In the Western world, the secular/sacred divide is as stark as it has ever been.

There either is, or there isn't, a God who created me and has designs on my life. From that starting point, life unfolds in two radically different ways, with two completely different ways of understanding reality, and two completely different sets of priorities and moralities that are the result.

We see it and hear it and feel it every single day. TV ads that show two men holding hands. Animal rights activists who say people are no different than any other animal. AI developers who are excited about developing a new type of intelligence independent of humanity.

Couples who are living together and having sex before marriage, or without any thought of marriage. Individuals treating abortion as a convenient means of erasing an inconvenient mistake instead of as the taking of human life. Gender as something you choose rather than something that was chosen for you at conception. And so on.

Unfortunately, we aren't always very civil in the way we address our different views. There's no pulling punches on social media, where words are often harsh and accusing and attacks can be unpleasant from both sides from both sides.

You're wrong.
You're sinful.

You're judgmental.
You're hateful.

And sometimes the pushback on the church is fair.

Mahatma Gandhi's words should pierce us. He said: "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

But even when you peel off the layers of label throwing and motive impugning, even when you look past the finger pointing and finger flipping, there remains a fundamental and undeniable difference between those who are followers of Jesus and those who are not.

And believe it or not, the heart of the difference is not about *morality*. It's about *authority*.

A number of years ago I was at Von's bookstore and I overheard a conversation between two of the staff people who worked there.

I couldn't help but overhear it. It was getting near closing time. They were half a store apart from each other, one up front, one straightening up the bookshelves, talking as they worked.

I was the only person in the bookstore, way back in the back, but I could hear every word they said.

They were talking about a friend of theirs who was gay, and how her parents who were Christians were telling her she was wrong, and they complained about how Christians are so hateful and bigoted and controlling, always trying to impose their medieval moral views on everyone else, and who are they to tell us how we should live.

It was at about that point that I went up to the cash register to check out.

The person behind the counter was someone I'd interacted with just a bit in past visits, but not at a substantive level at all.

I quickly prayed about how God would have me interact, if at all. And I had absolutely no idea. But as I handed her my credit card this is what came out of my mouth:

Couldn't help but overhear your conversation.

She looked up and saw me smiling at her and she smiled back. I went on.

Man, there are so many different ways of seeing things, aren't there?

That's for sure.

I've been thinking a lot about that lately. It seems like so many of the divides in our culture are along moral lines, arguing over who's good and who's evil. That's where all the rock throwing is.

But it really comes down to the issue of *authority*, not morality, doesn't it? I mean, isn't that the primary issue of our day?

She stiffened and looked up, her smile gone, her expression guarded.

I know. It's kind of a loaded word. But authority is really just a way of asking where we turn to get our answers, right? Who gets the last word? And connected

to that, what gives us the confidence that that's a reliable place to turn to get answers?

I mean, we don't get anywhere if we just argue about morality. But talking about authority – isn't that something we could have really interesting conversations about?

By this point her expression had softened again.

Hm, she said, and nodded.

Then another customer came up from the other part of the store and we had to end the conversation. Never got to have that really interesting conversation with her. But I have had it with a lot of other people.

This fall we're in a series on the different themes that run through Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica, which was a port city in the northern part of ancient Greece. The letter is preserved for us in the New Testament.

We're at a turning point this morning in our series. In the first half we focused more inwardly, on what Paul said about nurturing the three cardinal graces of the Christian life: faith, hope, and love.

This morning we turn our focus more outward. For the rest of the series we'll be looking at the intersection between church and culture.

Specifically we're going to be looking at the question of *identity*, which you may remember is where we began this series, all the way back in August, when we looked at I Thessalonians 1.4. Identity is a key theme of this book.

Over the next several Sundays we'll explore the themes of identity and authority, identity and conformity or purity, identity and purpose, and identity and community.

In I Thessalonians 5.5-6 Paul says we shouldn't be surprised when we find a stark difference between us as followers of Jesus and the rest of the world. We should expect it, he says, because of our identity, because of who we are. To his fellow followers of Christ he says:

You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like [the] others.

So let's dig into this theme of identity and authority.

First, let me go back to our message from the start of this series, when we first opened up this theme of identity.

What are we talking about when we talk about *identity*? The answers to questions like these:

Identity

Who are you?

What is truest of all about you?

What defines you? What explains you? What makes you you?

Here's the way our surrounding culture answers questions of identity. People who don't live with God at the center of the picture, but with themselves at the center instead, answer these questions by saying:

I define me as the sum total of my personality, looks, abilities, interests, ambitions, dreams, political convictions, the cool clothes I wear, the cool car I drive, the cool friends I have, the cool school I attend (or attended).

Nothing outside of me defines me. I'm my own person. There's no one else in the picture to explain who I am or why I exist.

I am whoever I want to be – I'm whoever I decide to be, whoever I choose to be. No one else has the right or the power to define me

How differently a follower of Christ answers these questions of identity.

Who am I? Here's is the most important thing you can know about my identity.

I Thessalonians 1.4 NLT

We know, dear brothers and sisters, that God loves you and has chosen you to be his own people.

The most important thing about me is that I am loved by God and he chose me to be his own. I belong to him.

My identity isn't based on any aspect of me – my personality, my preferences, my ability, my appearance. Nope.

My identity isn't based on intrinsic to me. It's based on something – *someone* – external to me. If you want to know about me, you need to include him in the picture. I am a child of God. a follower of Christ, I am a citizen of the kingdom.

The surrounding world uses lots of preferred pronouns to establish identity.

For the Christian, there is just one pronoun that establishes our identity. We are *his*.

Chosen by God. Loved by God. We belong to him.

Now we shift to the question of authority. That's one of those vague sorts of words. What exactly are we talking about when we talk about *authority*?

Authority is the answer to these questions.

Authority

Whose are you?

Who is the author of your life: who is writing the story of your life, deciding the shape of your life?

Who or what has the last word in your life? Where do you turn to get final answers to your questions? Who are you subject to?

The way that people who are the product of our secular culture answer these questions won't be a surprise to us. It lines up with their sense of identity:

IDENTITY and *Authority*



Who has the last word in my life? What are you talking about? The person who has the last word in my life is . . . me. My thoughts, my feelings, my desires, my leanings, my preferences.

That's part of what maturity means. I grow from being dependent on others to being in charge of myself. No one else has the last word.

The world around me tries to tell me who I am and how to be, but that is wrong and offensive.

I answer to me. What has the last word in my life is my own desires, preferences, leanings

Now let's explore how Paul addresses the issue of authority in his letter to the Thessalonians, and how he suggests Christians will answer those same questions.

We start with a verse from the book called the Acts of the Apostles, which is the history of the early church and how it spread. It was preserved for us along with Paul's letter in the New Testament. In chapter 17 we're told the story of how Paul and Silas and Timothy first established this church in Thessalonica.

Almost immediately after they arrived, within weeks, they encountered resistance from the people around them whose beliefs were different and whose beliefs they challenged.

This is how those who rose up against Paul and his team described them.

Acts 17.6-7

These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also. . . .
They profess allegiance to another king, named Jesus.

If you've been at Covenant for longer than about fifteen minutes you've noticed the crown logo we use. It's all over the place around here. That's meant to remind us of the absolute centerpoint of our faith as Christians. Jesus is our King.

And when the Bible talks about believing in him, that doesn't just mean believing a few things are true about him. It means giving him your allegiance. It means coming to a place where recognize him as King and yourself as his subject.

That's consistent with what Jesus says about himself.

Matthew 28.18

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

The Jesus we worship as king has been given *all* authority by God the Father. In other words, what he says goes.

GK Chesterton says:

God is the author and authority of all things.

Does your life reflect that?

Turning to Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica, we don't get far into the letter before we come to a description of the church's response to that authority.

I Thessalonians 1.9

You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.

When we use that word “serve,” we are usually thinking about something concrete – some action or deed, something we choose to do, that has a beginning and an end to it.

I serve you by vacuuming out the car or watching the kids or making you a meal.

But in the Bible the expression “serving God” means something way deeper and wider and more all-encompassing than that.

This word actually comes from the word *slave*, not the word *servant*.

Think about the difference. If I am your slave, I belong to you. I’ve completely given up my rights and possessions. I’ve relinquished my life to you. It’s your prerogative as my master to direct my life in whatever way you wish, to tell me what to do. My time, my abilities, they are yours to do with as you please.

That’s what it means when Paul says they serve the living and true God. They have given their lives over to him as king, giving him full authority in every part of their lives.

God’s Authority

4.2 You know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

4.8 anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God

Authority is either recognized, in which case it is yielded to, submitted to, as was the case with the Thessalonians. In the verse just before this one, Paul says

I Thessalonians 4.1-2

We instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living.

Or authority is rejected, it is set aside, ignored, as it was by those who put themselves at the center of the picture instead of God. Paul describes them in

I Thessalonians 2.18

They fail to please God and they continue to pile up their sins

Practically speaking, then, how does God exercise his authority over his people, especially in light of the fact that he is invisible? We can’t see him or hear him. Jesus has ascended and no longer walks this earth.

Paul talks quite a bit about how God expresses his authority over his people.

First, God speaks with authority *through his word*.

As Paul tells us elsewhere in his writings, the Scriptures are God-breathed, and are useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. In other words, God's word is true and trustworthy, and God uses it to teach us what we should believe, to correct us when our beliefs are out of line, to train us how we should live, and to correct us when our lives don't line up with our beliefs.

God's Authority through Scripture

- 1.8: the Lord's message
- 2.2: his gospel
- 2.13 the word of the Lord

When we open the Bible, we can turn to it with confidence. It is from God, it is the Lord's – his good news, his word.

So it makes sense, if we want to live as ones under God's authority, we should immerse ourselves in Scripture, which is the primary way God speaks to us and leads us today, spending time in God's word every day, and planting those words in our mind and heart.

Then Paul touches on another way God exercises his authority in the church. That is through spiritual leaders.

God's Authority through Spiritual Leaders

- 2.4 we speak as those entrusted with the gospel
- 2.6 as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority
- 5.12-13 respect those who are over you in the Lord

In the first two verses he is speaking about himself and the other apostles, the disciples of Jesus to whom God gave unique authority as the early church got established.

But then in the third verse, the one from chapter five, he widens his words to include all pastors and elders. He says

I Thessalonians 5.12-13

We ask you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

I think this is interesting, because in the case of Scripture, we have a perfect earthly authority, but in the case of spiritual leaders, we obviously have an imperfect one. And yet God urges us to recognize the spiritual authority of our pastors and elders as people through him God expresses his authority in our lives.

When you become a member of this church, one of the questions you are asked is this:

Do you submit yourself to the government and discipline of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, and to the spiritual oversight of this Church Session (that is, your pastors and elders), and promise to further the unity, purity, and peace of the Church? (8-3.B.4.b)

What's the nature of your relationship with those that God has placed in spiritual authority over you – your pastors and your elders?

Just an observation. I'd be curious about your thoughts about this.

I think a trend of concern that began to emerge in the evangelical church in the eighties and nineties was *consumerism*, where church goers began to base their involvement on what they felt met their needs: sort of a pick and choose approach to church, worship here, sermon there, small group over here, youth group over there.

There's another trend I'm seeing in the church more recently, one that has become especially evident in the past five years or so. It's one that I think is even more concerning than consumerism. I guess you could call it a spirit of spiritual autonomy, or self-pastoring, where we become our own spiritual authority.

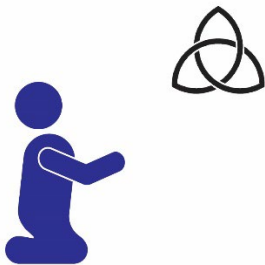
I create the spiritual program that I believe will bring about the growth I want. I pick the preacher I want to listen to, the sermons I want to hear, the books I want to study, the people I want to be in fellowship with, and I step out from under the leadership of an individual local church. I'm my own pastor, because when it comes to my spiritual growth I think I know best. So we each have our own church of one, and we are the pastor.

But sometimes the best thing for my spiritual growth, and for the growth of those God has placed around me, isn't the thing I might pick for myself. When I'm the one calling the shots in my own spiritual life, there's a lot I miss out on, and there's a lot the people God has put around me with the thought that I would be a blessing to them will miss out on as well.

Sort of a way of living the Christian life in the spirit of autonomy that marks the world around us. Just a thought.

Coming back then, to the way Paul understands God's authority in our lives as Christ followers, here's an image that might capture the biblical idea of our relationship to God's authority.

IDENTITY and *Authority*



Let me share a closing thought and then leave you with a question or two.

Here's the thought:

There's something that rankles in all of us at the thought of somebody being over us, isn't there? Authority for most of us sits uncomfortably, like an itchy wool sweater. It might look good, but it doesn't feel so good.

I think that because, when we boil authority down, most of us think in terms of submitting to *rules*. Rules feel harsh. Impersonal. Cold. Unbudging. Rules feel binding. They depersonalize us. Limit us. Keep us from being ourselves.

But what would happen if we were to shift our understanding of authority from submitting to impersonal *rules* to submitting to the *rule* of a king who loves us, and chose us to be his own? A King who laid down his life for us, and invites us to live our lives for him? A king who knows what is best for us, better than we do, and has given us his word, and our spiritual leaders, to help bring us into the joy and freedom of a life lived for him?

My sister is a landscape architect. When you think about it, her job is to impose her authority over plants and trees in a way that brings forth their best.

Abandoned Field



Our culture loves life, but it doesn't love limits or constraints on that life. It rebels against the idea of living life according to a certain design, or within certain limits. It celebrates indiscriminate life, a live and let live sort of life. It prizes autonomy, license, latitude, freedom, self-rule.

This is a picture of indiscriminate life, of life that is allowed to grow without constraint or direction, of each plant doing whatever comes naturally. And it's a mess.

And here's a picture . . .

Cultivated Garden



. . . of what happens when all that life is brought under the watchful eye and loving authority of the gardener
each plant situated with care, placed next to other plants with intention and purpose

each section designed and laid out to bring forth its beauty through both similarity and difference right alongside one another;

the ground cultivated and weeded and rid of whatever is detrimental to growth

each plant pruned and pinched back and watered and well fed with a loving eye

the whole organized and arranged according to a design in the mind of the architect,

all this allowing each plant to be even truer to itself than if it was allowed to live however it desired.

The first picture, of life out from under a gardener's authority, is a picture of *license*, of life run amock. It's the life we *think* we want. It's the life this world has.

This second picture, of life under the skillful hand and loving authority of the gardener, is a picture of true *freedom*, of life lived according to design. It's the life we were made for.

Proverbs 29.18

When people do not accept divine guidance, they run wild.
But whoever obeys the law is joyful.

And here's are the questions.

Consider again these crucial questions of identity and authority. How would you answer them? First the questions about identity . . .

Identity

Who are you?
What is truest of all about you?
What defines you? What explains you? What makes you you?

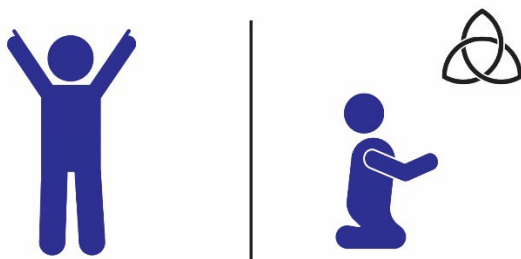
And then the questions about authority?

Authority

Whose are you?
Who is the author: writing the story of your life, deciding the shape of your life?
Who has the last word in your life? Who are you subject to?

As you think about what makes you you, and as you think about who you allow to have the last word in your life . . .

IDENTITY and *Authority*



. . . which is the picture that best describes you?

Which one do you *want* to describe you?

What do you hear as Christ the King's invitation to you this morning?

What is your response?

As we ready to turn and step back into this world, we need our faithful God to lead us. And he will. The same God who has gone before his people through the ages goes before his people now.

Let's worship him and open ourselves to him anew.

Benediction (from I Thessalonians 1.4 and 3.12)

Brothers and sisters, you are chosen by God and dearly loved.
May your love for Him, for one another, and for all others increase and overflow.