

## **By Whose Authority?**

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The Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco

Readings: Jeremiah 5:26-31

Matthew 20:23-27; 10:26-27

AC 7298 and HH Footnote to section 455

**Before I start I would like to mention that several important ideas for my sermon today came from or were prompted by my reading of *Freedom and Evil* by George Dole.**

I don't know anyone that likes to be told what to do. And even though obedience is considered a spiritual virtue, it does not show up often on today's lists of preferred spiritual practices. Obedience responds to authority, authority asks for obedience, but if there is anything we as human beings, especially citizens of the United States, and residents of California like to do is question authority and the last thing authority wants is for you to know is your own power. Authority is a form of power, a type of position power. There are other types of power: financial, physical (both personal and communal like the military power of the US), psychological, and theological.

There might not be anything more frightening than a person with power, one with worldly power like military or financial power, who believes they know God's will. A political leader, especially one elected that believes he also embodies the will of the people, acting on what he believes to be true, can be big enough and strong enough, to get away with almost anything. Victor Davis Hanson, a historian, believes that the army of a nation with democratically elected leaders has a natural advantage on the battlefield against an army serving a despotic king or dictator because the soldiers freely choose to fight. In other words, they have not been conscripted. When you think through the dynamics of this it doesn't seem so far fetched that a well-trained, willing group of warriors can defeat a much larger group that has been forced to fight out of fear. But even a well-

trained army, fighting for a democratically elected government, can disintegrate when the leaders no longer have the support of the people.

Possibly the next most frightening person, is anyone who believes they can interpret God's will or God's law for others; they might even believe that they administer God's justice and feel perfectly justified in cutting off the head of someone whose beliefs are questionable. In the readings from Jeremiah and Matthew today we hear the concern of "priests acting on their own authority" and Jesus being questioned about his authority. That is because we take very seriously, and God does as well, anyone who speaks, or acts, on the authority of God.

People behave differently when they have authority. I remember a book that had a profound influence on my understanding of people in a corporate environment: *Seeing Systems* by Barry Osry. It describes people in a corporate environment in what at first sounds like simplistic categories: tops, middles, and bottoms. If you take a group of people and put some into each group, certain patterns of behavior and perception emerge. Members inside of each group behave in a similar way and describe the other groups with a particular language. Change the position of each group: move the middle to the top, the bottom to the middle, the top to the bottom, and what happens? The same patterns of behavior and speech emerge, especially in reference to the other groups, even though the people have changed. Barry Osry's studies were mild compared to the Stanford Prison Study by Philip Zimbardo where people were randomly grouped into guards and prisoners, and within seven days behaved similarly to the abusive prison guards in Iraq. This happened in spite of the differences between people before they were assigned their role. Randomly appointed authority is difficult to handle, but perhaps no less difficult is authority that comes about by appointment, election or promotion.

Surprisingly in some respects, we, as human beings, have a curious tendency to believe

people that say they know God's will, or say that they have seen and/or spoken with God, or God's appointed representative.

What about the person with authority who then does something to contradict either what they have told us, or who contradicts some other closely held belief? What happens to our perception of their authority? For example, and I'll start close to home: Emanuel Swedenborg, in *Conjugial Love*, gives permission, under special circumstances, for men to have a mistress. There are some historians who believe that Martin Luther thought Jews in Germany would accept "reformed" Christianity once the burden of corrupt Catholic authority was abandoned, and then, when it didn't happen, he later wrote a pamphlet called "The Jews and Their Lies" which some historians believe helped prepare the path leading to the Holocaust. What do the Inquisition or the Salem witch trials look like from our perspective today? I don't know what is the most painful for me to observe: the harm done to children molested by Catholic priests, the agony and dread of priests that would sexually assault children, or the fact that a religious hierarchy, populated with some of the most learned and trusted individuals in the world that hid and/or ignored the overwhelming presence of lies inside the Catholic Church. Sabbatai Sevi, a 17<sup>th</sup> Century Jew who believed he was the Messiah, when faced with certain death if he did not renounce his faith, converted to Islam at the point of a sword; another painful moment for his followers, for him, and I think, for those holding the sword. Regardless of our political or religious affiliation, we suffer when our leaders fail or turn out to be less than perfect.

Some people would say we need to return to the Bible for guidance and they take a more literal look at what is being said, trusting in the authority of scripture. Rather than trust human beings, trust God's word. Ok, let's try that. I'd like to read from the book *Freedom and Evil* by George Dole:

“To glimpse the problem faced by literalists, we need only look at Paul asserting that we are justified by faith apart from the works of the law (which is in Romans 3:28), then look at James asserting that we are justified by our works and not by faith alone (in James 2:24). ...Before Paul makes the case for salvation by faith, he has already described God as one who will reward people according to their works, giving “glory, honor and peace to everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Greek” (Romans 2:10), but I am not aware of any conservative Christian church, or any liberal one, for that matter, that teaches that Jews are the first to be rewarded” (150-151).

As Professor Dole states earlier in his book: “the more absolute a church’s claims to possession of the full truth, the more ingenuity is needed when one or another of its “truths” proves indefensible.” It is hard for me not to think that some of the values we have in the United States like free speech, equal opportunity, private property, and free markets, are things quite different than what we claim them to be. Our ingenuity in defining these seems to be running at an all time high.

Roughly 2700 years ago construction began on the Great Wall of China, an effort to protect several kingdoms that eventually stretched over 4000 miles. In August 1961 the Berlin wall was built, also for protection, both to keep people in and keep people out. Over the centuries countries and kings have built castle walls, moats and other barriers. The Chinese dynasties did not last. The Berlin Wall came down roughly thirty years after it was built. In spite of the futility of building walls--no matter if your perspective is long term or short term--Israel is building a wall and the United States is proposing a barrier between the US and Mexico. It would not take much of a prophet to predict that thirty years from now the world will have changed in ways that will make the walls and their builders look foolish, small-minded, and strategically wrong. It is likely that they will have completely misread what all the “signs” were pointing to.

In matters of authority and power we tend to externalize our solutions, that is, we place our faith in things like position power, money, physical prowess. Also, we place authority outside of us, in other people, or in texts; we place our security in walls that we can build. By externalizing authority we project our inner fears on the external world, hoping that our ability to control the

external environment through laws, force, or financial well being, will somehow save us. This projection is precisely what prevents us from entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

Over and over again, if we read the Bible closely, looking for what Swedenborg calls the inner meaning, we can see, as Rachel pointed out last week in the story of David and Goliath, and as we are reminded by George Dole: “The whole drama (of the Bible, of life) is impelled by God’s purposes, and time and again the hearer is reminded not to trust weapons, or horses or numbers” (155) and we might say walls.

The authority of texts, the authority of people, and the powers of the material world are unreliable. If we can’t depend on Swedenborg, Martin Luther, the US government, or any other person in whom we place authority, who and what can we depend on?

We have to approach issues of authority and power with a certain kind of flexibility and humility.

First I would like to suggest that it is we, us, each person individually, that grants authority. It does not exist outside of us. We collectively grant authority to our government in different ways: one by elections, another by obeying laws our elected officials make. This is one of the most appealing aspects of democracy: authority is given and taken away by the people who are governed. But it does not answer the question of how to govern. Does the elected official act according to the will of the people? Or does the elected official act according to what he or she believes to be right? Do they interpret their election as a sacred trust to govern? Or do they see their authority as a chance to rule and impose their own values? Let’s not confuse authority with how authority is enforced.

Authority comes from inside of us and unlike financial or physical power it is a spiritual phenomena. If we say, “Trust in God,” or that “all authority comes from God” we might be correct

on one level, but such a general statement leaves us far short of understanding how and why we trust God. Ultimately we have to bring it to the personal level, just as if we were being questioned in the same way the priests questioned Jesus. What is the source of our actions? In answering this question we can tread awfully close to blasphemy and/or narcissism. It is not something outside of us that we acquire, but something that we notice and cultivate in our inner being. Internally, we have the power to decide issues of authority, issues of sacredness, and issues of truth.

In Exodus the people of Israel receive external law in the form of commandments, we also read in Deuteronomy of God, speaking through Moses, explaining that the law has been placed in our hearts, and this is echoed later in the book of Joshua. But we also see in Joshua the choice of the people for an earthly king and God tells Joshua, “they have not rejected you, they have rejected me.” The people gave themselves up to a different level of authority that had profound consequences.

Still later we have Jesus, who is not only clear about where authority comes from, he also declares that all the ideas about an earthly kingdom and temple are obsolete. His kingdom is not a kingdom of this world. In Revelation 21, we can read that in the New Jerusalem, there is no temple, no external manifestation of God’s kingdom. What an interesting turn of events, true understanding changes from the external to the internal.

One of the most interesting changes in my own thinking, over the course of my life, has been my understanding of what it means to have authority. No matter how much I may have wanted authority or power, no matter how much power and authority I exercised, it took me a long time to realize I had no authority. That statement may sound somewhat like a contradiction, but it was true. Any authority I thought I had in reality existed inside the people who were willing to give it to me; on my own I had none. Then, once I realized the dynamic of authority, I was able to accept that it

was something that came from inside me, but whenever I tried to own it, it disappeared.

So I do not stand before you with any idea that I have any authority. As a minister I think I can only stand up here as an individual trying awfully hard to align myself with the complete divine love and wisdom of God, the same responsibility I think that rests with you. There are times when I can truly open my eyes, see something, and it feels like I have been asleep. But I take solace that when two people are sleeping in the same bed, one might, while sleeping, roll over and wake the other person up. So, while I am up here thrashing around, I hope one or more of us will wake up. I have heard ministers say more than once that they have been thanked after a sermon for something they did not say.

The second point I would like to make is I think we need to get used to uncertainty, and this is where humility is important, because the more we think we are in control, those are the moments where we likely have the least. I'd like to turn to another quote by George Dole:

“...Certainty has no necessary connection with truth. That is, it is quite possible to be absolutely certain and absolutely wrong. “Certainty” is not what we think about something; it is how we feel about what we think. If certainty and truth have no necessary connection, it follows that a search for truth may lead us away from certainty and that a search for certainty may lead us away from truth.”

Martin Buber describes this state as “Holy insecurity, life lived in the Face of God” (Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*).

At no point in the Bible, nor do I believe in a mature spiritual perspective, are we ever asked to stop thinking or not to think for ourselves, or give up our internal sense of authority and truth. As the reading from Swedenborg points out: there is no need to be instantly persuaded about the truth. I think Jesus understood this when he answered the question on the source of his authority, even under the pressure of knowing that he was being set up for a charge of blasphemy by the question, a charge punishable by death. He was working from an authority based on an inner understanding of

his own relationship with the divine. How could he possibly tell someone about authority who was looking for external signs, someone unwilling to encounter God in the present moment, someone who was not in touch with how true authority is given or acknowledged?

As Swedenborg explains, real theft is claiming ownership of something for ourselves that belongs to God, like assuming spiritual authority. Giving something authority is a matter of bestowing sacred trust, something we cannot claim as our own, yet something that has to be acknowledged by inner work, and the inner work is a full turning toward God, the free and willing alignment with the purpose of God, that allows all that is good and true to pass through us into the world in our actions and words. Spiritual authority is the consequence of, and contained in, the act of living truth. We recognize it in other people, in God, based on our experience of how the universe functions on all levels, physical and spiritual. We have evidence. Sometimes we get it wrong, we stumble, the people we grant authority stumble and fall as well. All of us have to get back up and keep going because authority and understanding require intense spiritual effort.

We can get afraid, and it does not always seem practical to minimize the value of material things. We all understand that in a physical world there are necessities, but let's not get confused about our necessities as a consequence of our fears and attachments. If we continuously externalize our understanding of authority, of divine laws--projecting our ideas of the way things should be on the exterior world--we fail to look inward to the true source of authority, the true source of divine love and wisdom, and the understanding that heaven exists, here and now. This is our true heritage, the true kingdom, and it is not just this externalized world. It flows from the spiritual out to the material, not from the material to the spiritual.

Authority rests with faith, love, truth and flows out from them. Here is where spiritual obedience is important, here is where we need to be loyal, rather than loyal to something we



construct externally by either physical or psychological means.

Swedenborg gives us an important clue by joining love and truth. “Love is ultimately realistic because it is not afraid to understand”(Dole, p. 187), and I would add this, love is not afraid to understand the truth about material reality of the world, the emotional reality of a person, or the spiritual reality of God. Love may even function in some ways through our intellect. This characteristic of love is what I believe leads Jesus to say to those that let go of their fear, that everything will be revealed, that every secret will be made known.