Authority: assumed or authentic?

Picture, if you will, seven terrified youths on the run. Tearing after them with murder in his eyes is a screaming maniac. They can't escape. The madman tears into them leaving them badly mauled, hurting and well chastened.

In case you haven't yet recognised it, this is an attempt at a contemporary version of Acts 19:13-17 – the story of the seven sons of Sceva who was a chief of the priests. They are obviously disenchanted with 'the establishment'. In the '60s we would have called them hippies. They have rejected an honourable and probably a comfortable life in the home of a chief priest. They have abandoned the dead formalism that such a home symbolised.

They had begun to associate with a group of vagabond Jews who were also 'drop outs'. This group of people started to dabble in the occult. They noticed that the Apostle Paul was having noticeable success in speaking the name of Jesus over demon-possessed people. They thought they would try the same technique. Tragically for them the demon challenged their authority to intrude into his territory (area of control) and we know the result.

What they demonstrated was **assumed authority**. The demon didn't need a lie detector to distinguish between the authentic authority of Paul and the assumed authority of these seven brothers.

Authority is a difficult subject. We live in an anti-authoritarian, anti-establishment culture. We live in a time that has seen huge abuses of authority. So in many minds authority and abuse are synonymous. However, authority can be defined as the right or power to act in a given situation.

My older son is an orthopaedic surgeon with 16 years experience of formal training. He has had three years as a 'junior consultant' orthopaedic surgeon. He needs two further years of training to be declared fully competent! Now at an operating table with a scalpel in his hand he has the authority to operate – not because he has a scalpel in his hand, but because of 19 years of training with all the wealth of knowledge and all the testing experience.

The seven sons of Sceva tried to steal an authority that was not theirs by saying a little formula – "in Jesus' name". What happened to them should be a warning to us! We face an inevitable clash with the powers of evil as we seek to overthrow the Kingdom of Darkness and let the Light in. **No assumed authority is ever going to be enough**.

Religious words and phrases alone have no intrinsic power. Prayer is at the heart of a clash of rival authorities and the enemy will only yield to the authority that is personally related to and authorised by the Lord Jesus.

The implication from Acts for us today is that demonic powers should be able to say, ***"Jesus I know and*** …..(you) ***I know."*** So is your name on the list of those with authority to speak?

In Exodus 17 we have a counter example of **authentic authority**. The People of God urgently needed water. God commanded Moses to take his rod and hit the rock with it and life giving waters started to flow. Just as the people are enjoying the water (probably washing clothes, themselves etc. as well as drinking it) there is a sneak attack by the Amalekites. Perhaps they were jealous of the arrival of this large number of people in their territory. Perhaps they wanted the water for themselves.

What does Moses do in these two crises? He gives us an example of the kind of praying that God answers. We need to take careful note! Does he fall on his face and call on God for

deliverance? This is what he did at the waters of Marah (Ex. 15:22-25), but at Rephidim (Ex. 17:1-7) God told him to use his rod.

Now, when being attacked by the Amalekites, what does Moses do? What would we expect him to do? He turns away from the camp leaving Joshua to lead the novice army and he purposefully marches off to the top of the hill that dominates the battle. He watched!

Now God could have heard him as easily at the bottom of the hill as at the top. Moses is clearly not trying to get closer to God's ear. When we are in positions of intense stress or danger there is a crying out to God from the depths of our heart. It is the appeal of an overwhelmed person! We have been there. We know what it is like. But there is also a form of praying with the rod of God – the symbol of all the delegated authority of God. This is the praying that **initiates a confrontation with the enemy** in his high places.

So knowing he has God's authority, Moses turns his back on friend and foe and climbs the hill. He is determined to initiate a clash of spiritual authorities. He doesn't wait to be commanded because God's honour is involved. His blessings are being stolen (the water of life) and His people are being attacked. The powers of evil are behind all this and they must be challenged.

Moses is not stretching out his hands to God in pleading prayer, rather he is holding the rod of God – the rod God owns and honours. He knows the demonic powers will say, "God we know and Moses we know". Joshua's victory on the ground was proof of the effectiveness of Moses using this rod.

What can we learn from this?

Local attacks are visible evidence of a declaration of war by the demonic powers – ultimately ***"the prince of the power of the air"***.

- Is the expulsion of workers from Morocco a way of preventing the Gospel reaching people?
- Is the murder of eight workers in Afghanistan an attempt to stop more workers going to or staying in Afghanistan?
- Is the increasing persecution nearly everywhere of believers from a Muslim background a sign that local authorities are trying to keep these most effective witnesses from doing their job?

Remember that for each and every provocation against God's cause there is the provision for victory! **Prayer is that provision**. But God needs a man or a woman to precipitate the confrontation in His name. Victory is never in doubt because the Lord Jesus came to destroy the works of the evil one.

Let us challenge ourselves! Are we watching and praying with the authority of God?