

# Baptistway: Questions about authority

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- *The BaptistWay lesson for Feb. 2 focuses on Luke 20:1-8, 20-26.*

It's become trendy for some megachurch celebrity-pastors occasionally to invite the congregation to tweet random questions to be addressed on the spot. This is nothing more than a contemporary version of "stump the pastor." While I would think twice before subjecting myself, I've watched others open themselves up to this kind of questioning. If you've ever sat in on something like this, perhaps you've observed what I have.

These events always begin innocently enough. Everyone has questions—things they don't understand about the Bible, concerns the Bible doesn't address and a desire for greater clarification regarding things they've always been taught about their faith. If the pastor or teacher is quick-witted and intelligent, the session may go quite well for a while.

At some point, however, the tone begins to change from honest inquiry to hostility and trickery. Someone who thrives on self-righteous head knowledge will deliberately ask a tough question in an attempt to make the teacher look stupid, or someone who disagrees with an answer will strike up a debate.

We do not always do well with questions, especially those with multifaceted answers and/or answers we don't like. In Luke 20, Jesus deals with these kinds of questions. As he answers thoughtfully and intelligently, he also does something we should strive to do in all of our conversations and teaching about God. He points to a higher authority.

**Tough questions**

The first question is not tough because of its content but because of the unwillingness of his questioners to accept the answer. “‘Tell us by what authority you are doing these things,’ they said. ‘Who gave you this authority?’” (v. 2). By this point in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus already has begun a deliberate journey to the cross. Certainly those asking this question either were present or heard about what the crowd was saying when he entered Jerusalem a few days before in the midst of much fanfare: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” (19:38). It wasn’t so much what they were asking that made this question difficult, but there was no way Jesus could answer it that would make them happy.

The question in verses 20-26 seems like a practical one: “Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” (v. 22). Spies pretending to be honest asked Jesus this question. Luke tells us “they hoped to catch Jesus in something he said so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor” (v. 20). It’s impossible to see this question as being uninformed by the triumphal entry and Jesus’s identity as the promised Messiah and King. Again, the question itself is not all that pressing; but the motives behind it hope to catch Jesus in civil disobedience.

### **Complex answers**

Jesus didn’t give easy answers to these nuanced questions. Instead, he used them as an opportunity to point his hearers to the ultimate truth. His concern was not simply giving an acceptable answer, but giving an answer that caused his hearers to examine themselves. To those who questioned his authority, he posed another question: “John’s baptism—was it from heaven or from men?” (v. 3). This was not a question they could truthfully answer in fear of being stoned. Jesus knew they rejected his message, and by pointing them to it, he is forcing them to consider their motivations. They didn’t care who gave Jesus authority; they already had rejected him.

Likewise, Jesus’ answer to the question about taxes avoids a simple yes or

no. By pointing to the image on a denarius and saying, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s,” Jesus is telling them their question is not all that important in the kingdom of God. Money belongs to the kingdom of the world and should be treated as such, while the total allegiance of one’s life belongs to God.

### **One authority**

Both answers, while influenced by the hearts and motivations of those being spoken to, point them to an authority above themselves. In Baptist life, so much of what we do is centered on autonomy. My Catholic aunt once asked why there are so many Baptist churches. I told her it is because anyone has the authority to start one. This is part of what makes our heritage great. It allows us to adapt, multiply and share the gospel in ways relevant to our contexts. Unfortunately, it also can be the biggest source of our quarrels and contentions. We must caution ourselves against losing sight of where our autonomy comes from—the authority we have in Christ. When church or our spiritual lives becomes about ourselves, purposely or not, we’ve gotten off track.

In a similar manner, acknowledging God’s authority will shape the way we address those who do not. Through Jesus’ example, we have a model of how to respond thoughtfully without getting defensive to the tough questions nonbelievers might level at us. Whether we are asking a question, giving an answer or sharing an opinion, our goal always should be to point others and ourselves to a higher authority.