

# Editorial: Authority: Whose, what and how much?

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Authority is a hot button. What is it, who has it, and how much does a person have?

[David Garland](#) and [Dennis Wiles](#) addressed the topic of authority in two separate opinion articles on Romans 13, the passage made popular in 2018 by former [Attorney General Jeff Sessions](#). Garland, a biblical scholar, offered a scholarly view, and Wiles, pastor of First Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, offered a pastoral view, both of which matter for a proper understanding of Paul's words about authority.

What follows is an editorial view, as you might expect.

## Authority in the news

President Trump recently made an interesting assertion about his authority that Christians ought to mull over.

During his press conference on April 13, Trump waded into the discussion on authority when he made an intriguing declaration. To read and compare the transcript of his press conference, click [here](#) and [here](#).

When asked what authority Trump has to reopen the country, he said: "Well, I have ultimate authority ... The president of the United States has the authority to do what the president has the authority to do, which is very powerful."

In response to reporters asking for clarification of his authority, Trump responded: "When you say my authority, the president's authority, not

mine, because it's not me. This is when somebody is president of the United States, the authority is total, and that's the way it's got to be."

"It's total. Your authority is total," a reporter asked.

"It's total. It's total," Trump responded.

A few seconds later, he was asked, "What does the authority cover?"

"The authority of the president of the United States, having to do with the subject we're talking about, is total," Trump said.

Reporters continued to question Trump on his understanding of presidential authority and later questioned Vice President Pence about Trump's understanding.

"Well, make no mistake about it. In the long history of this country, the authority of the president of the United States during national emergencies is unquestionably plenary," Pence said after stating that he supports "the president's leadership under the national emergency declaration that he signed."

[Plenary](#) means "complete in every respect: absolute, unqualified."

## Scope of the debate

The debate during the press conference was specifically about whether or not the president of the United States has authority superseding that of state governors to lift restrictions, namely restrictions impinging upon the economy. Pence further circumscribed the context to national emergencies.

The following day, [Trump seemed to step back](#) from the position he stated Monday evening by saying: "The governors are responsible. They have to take charge."

I will leave it to constitutional scholars to determine whether or not the president of the United States has total authority under any circumstances, national emergency or otherwise.

Instead, I will consider the notion of a human being having “ultimate” or “total” authority. My consideration is not a critique of Donald Trump, nor is it an attempt to influence your vote in the general election scheduled for November 2020.

## **Where authority comes from**

Authority is a critical part of Christian belief, and so Christians do need to pay attention when politicians talk about their authority. How does what they say square with what Christians believe about authority?

Just last week, Christians all over the world read Jesus’ response to Pontius Pilate, who said he had the power—authority—either to free or to crucify Jesus.

“You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above,” Jesus said (John 19:11).

After Jesus rose from the dead, he said the words Christians take as their ultimate marching orders: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18).

According to the revelation given to John, Jesus is the only one worthy of ultimate authority because he was slain, because he “purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5), and because he is “the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (Revelation 22:13).

The authority Jesus claimed as his own and that is ascribed to him is not a delegated authority. It is not authority he has by virtue of being elected to a

position, nor is it a special kind of authority granted by emergency declaration. Jesus' authority is eternal and truly is ultimate, total and unequalled.

## **How we respond to authority**

When anyone other than Jesus claims total and ultimate authority, Christians must remember their own declaration that Jesus is Lord. This declaration means the same thing now that it meant 2,000 years ago. It means no one else is Lord.

When any human being says he or she has ultimate, total authority, Christians at the very least should pause. They should tap the brakes and remember no human being has anything more than limited authority. They should ask themselves, "What is this person saying, and what are the implications?"

In fairness, Trump did not claim to have total authority over all things. He did limit his authority to that which "the president has the authority to do" and as "having to do with the subject" being discussed in the press conference. Pence further circumscribed Trump's authority to what is allowed in a national emergency.

We do need to honor authority, even if it isn't easy. And very little seems easy right now. In fact, in times like these we are more apt to jump to conclusions or to go along with a confident leader than we might in better times. Authority is not honored best by either response.

We can honor authority best by going to our highest authority to ask for wisdom for our earthly leaders in these days.

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