

One Name Alone

2nd Kings 19:10-19; Acts 19:8-17



The signers of the Declaration of Independence were rebels. They did not like paying tribute to England, being subject to the whims of a king living across the sea. They did not enjoy what most of their known world took for granted—that the kings in Europe ruled by God's decree. The wording of their declaration took a different tack. They determined that God granted certain parameters within which the kings of the earth were to govern and conduct themselves. They affirmed that God had granted humanity certain inalienable rights with which kings and human authority structures were not to interfere. For their day, this was a brazen statement, for it attacked the heart of unquestioned allegiance to the authority of government.

The framers of our Declaration of Independence pointed to a fundamental problem with issues of state and worship. England and the rest of Europe utilized a system in which the state church held not simply a privileged position, but a position of dominance. The Protestant Reformation had splintered political power away from the Roman Catholic church, but there were still issues as to how church and state would, could, and should relate. While Protestants did not want to give the church control of the state, the political masters of Europe wanted to control the churches. The brash Declaration from the Colonies in America reasserted God's authority above that of the state.

This was treason. This was political heresy. It seemed to revert back to a system of religious dominance of the political sphere. In the conflict between divine authority and political sovereignty, the Declaration opened wounds that had not yet healed. The kings of Europe had wrested power from the Roman church, but they had not addressed the heart of the problem. There was more than one source of authority that claimed the allegiance from the people. They vied for supreme allegiance.

Baptist leaders joined with other voices sounding a slightly different voice. They were voicing a cry for freedom and separation between issues of state and worship. They wanted no interference from government in their allegiance to God. They would not stand for any authority structure to claim a divine authority over matters of faith. They reserved that authority for Christ Jesus alone.

Paul faced similar issues of competing claims of authority and allegiance. Citizenship in that day required allegiance to the gods of the city. Rome claimed authority over all aspects of life. The Jews claimed the authority of their traditions. Paul preached the authority of one name alone—Jesus Christ.

As Paul preached and taught in Ephesus, people began to recognize a different quality of authority in his words and teachings. They witnessed Paul being used by God to heal and expel demons. Word spread of the mighty things that Paul was doing and how God was present and active in his life. Some decided that Paul's authority and teaching was something that they could manage for themselves. They claimed an authority they did not have, seeking to follow in Paul's wake.

Seven sons of a chief priest named Sceva were out exorcising demons. They decided to lay claim to Paul's authority and the power in his ministry. They tried to cast out the demons in the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches. Things did not go very well for them. They tried to borrow authority they did not have.

As with allegiance, authority must be granted. They are based on a relationship and a choice. To claim the name of Jesus, these seven sons of Sceva should have had a relationship of allegiance to Jesus, but they apparently did not. They did not have the authority they claimed. They took the name of Jesus in vain, merely to advance their own interests, but without assuming the responsibilities of allegiance to Christ Jesus as Lord.

“I know Paul and I know Jesus, but who are you?” What right did they have to claim an authority that was not theirs? They came off badly from that experience. They fled bleeding from that encounter and the name of Jesus was held in higher honor as a result. Jesus’ was no authority to be abused or usurped. It would rather be respected and honored. The people recognized that allegiance to Jesus as Lord was required. After all, it was Jesus’ name and authority through which Paul healed, taught, and cast out demons. Such authority could not be usurped for personal privilege, but could only be granted.

The Paul who bowed to the authority of local and imperial officials had yet a higher allegiance. As Peter and John declared before the Jewish authorities, when those authorities and allegiances conflict a choice must be made. Peter and John would not allow the Jewish authorities to usurp the privilege to define God’s will. The demonic did not allow the seven sons of Sceva to claim another’s authority.

The kings of Assyria in Hezekiah’s day were claiming to be more powerful than the gods of the nations all around. They broke the idols and demolished the temples of the peoples they conquered. When they came before Hezekiah, they threatened him with words that exalted their authority above that of *Yahweh*. That was going too far. *Yahweh* responded to Hezekiah’s prayer, noting that while exile was in the making, God would not allow for such usurping of authority.

Authority and allegiance are not always simple matters, especially when they conflict. Declaring independence from England, our forefathers recognized an authority higher than and different from that of the state. They recognized and pointed out that human authority figures and systems were fickle, not always representing faithfully the divine authority they might claim. They would not grant another to speak for God unquestioned. They shouldered their own responsibility to seek and to follow a higher allegiance—one reserved for God alone. These were not Baptists, but they worked from some of the same principles our Baptist forbearers shared. They defined a distinction between matters of allegiance to state and to God. Their manifest reserved its highest allegiance for a people’s relationship with God.

How do we proceed amid competing claims of authority? How do we proceed where there are many forces at play attempting to determine our course of action and the patterns of our lives? There are those in our day and our own convention who would claim to speak for God as God’s only true prophets. There are others who would wipe God’s name from the lips of our society. There are those who call for the use of force to enforce matters of faith as public policy.

Will we claim authority that is not ours, forcing our will upon the lives of others? Will we give up our authority in matters of faith, abdicating to the state our responsibilities in matters of faith? Will we live our lives as faithful representatives of Christ Jesus as Paul, shouldering our responsibility? Will we take His name in vain, serving convenience and comfort instead? Will we give authority to One Name Alone?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*