

The Authorities?

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[0 : 0 0] Well, it seems that there's a crisis of confidence in our civic life. Right now, across the Western world, there appears to be a breakdown in trust of institutions.

Authorities that we once looked to without question are now regarded with suspicion. We're not sure that we can trust them anymore. And so if you take Australia as an example, two of the recent Royal Commissions have been firstly into institutional responses to child sexual abuse.

And then secondly, the Financial Services Royal Commission. Both have focused on authorities which have failed. The first focused heavily on churches, while the second on large financial institutions like banks, with whom we've entrusted our hard-earned cash.

Now, these used to be reputable institutions which we relied on, but not so anymore, it seems. It's not just happening in Australia, of course.

There is a company, a marketing and communications firm, Edelman, which publishes an annual global trust survey. And what they do is they measure trust in four types of institutions.

[1 : 2 0] Firstly, NGOs or non-government organizations like the Red Cross, businesses, governments, and then fourthly, the media. And what they've seen is a growing distrust around the world for these institutions.

So look at the first diagram in your handout. In 2018, 20 out of the 28 countries surveyed are distrusted. So a reading of 49 and below is considered a distrusting rating.

The US in particular had a big decline in 2018. You might guess why that is. Australia, however, is right near the bottom as well, actually much lower than the US, along with the UK and Ireland.

Interestingly, the least trusted institution is actually the media, which in the survey includes both content providers, like news organizations, but also platforms like Facebook and Google.

So on that second diagram on that page, you'll see that they have a rating of 43, which is actually the same as governments. Governments overall, across all the 28 countries, had a rating of 43 as well.

[2 : 3 8] But the media is distrusted in 22 of the 28 countries, one more than governments. Perhaps not statistically significant. But for Australia, media is a clear last.

It's actually scored, if you see on the left-hand side of that diagram, second from last, 31, which is behind even governments, which was rated at 35.

And that's, you know, I did my little survey on Facebook, some of you might have known. I was a bit disappointed, actually. Only 14 people responded. But anyway, of the 14 people who responded, 10 of you actually chose the media as the authority that most let you down.

Three chose the church, I think, and one parliament, which is surprising, actually. But anyway, so 10 chose the media. I'll have more to say about the media next week.

But clearly, across the board, there's a general distrust of authorities at the moment. Now, perhaps none of this is peculiar to our times. But I think one of the things that has added to this sort of malaise is just not just the misconduct themselves, people doing the wrong thing, but also the cover-up afterwards.

[3 : 56] So, for example, the Child Abuse Royal Commission is actually entitled, and I've got it on the slide, that's the actual title, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

So, the focus is actually on the institutional responses, the responses of those who are in authority. And sadly, as we've seen, the response has been one of cover-ups, where those in charge have turned a blind eye, or they haven't believed those who have reported the abuse.

Likewise, the Financial Services Royal Commission, while uncovering misconduct, has also focused on those in authority, those who knew what was happening but did nothing about it, or, in the case of A&P;, deliberately kept it from the regulators.

Of course, we can understand why they've done this. They've done it to protect their organizations, to protect the reputations of these organizations. But the result is the same, isn't it?

It's actually the undermining of trust. When people rely on authorities and trust them with what's important to them, whether it's their finances or their children, and then end up being deceived, then they lose trust in those institutions.

[5 : 20] They have taken these authorities at their word, and then have been let down. I guess it's the same with parliament and governments as well.

You know, you always hear them promise one thing before the election, or during the election, and then after the election, they go back on their word. And so, when they make another promise, perhaps at the next election, people start to not believe them, isn't it?

Likewise, the media as well, we expect our news outlets to be fair, unbiased, and objective in their reporting. What's the tagline for the age?

Independent always, or something like that. But when we see them then manipulate the facts to suit their argument or to keep certain details from us, then it undermines our trust in them as well.

So, if you look on the back of the handout, that last diagram, it's interesting that nearly two-thirds of the respondents think that news organizations prioritize building audiences or breaking the news first, getting the story out first, or pushing an ideology as something that they do ahead of accurate reporting of news.

[6 : 37] And so, you can understand why they get such a low rating for trust as media. Well, that's just a little sort of a bird's eye view of what's been happening.

And there's more that we could probably say about this, perhaps including how the internet makes everything worse, or how, you know, it's interesting, all forms of authority seems to be under attack at the moment, or being distrusted at the moment.

But I think I'm going to leave it at there and turn instead to the second thing on our outline, which is to look at the ways we've tended to respond when there is a breakdown in trust.

How do we see the remedies, or what do we see as the remedies when authorities fail us? Well, if you look at the outline, one of the ways, the first way, I think, is that people then find new authorities.

So, with governments, we've seen how after a government has been in power for a time, and they've let us down enough times, we boot them out and vote the next lot in.

[7 : 45] And it used to be that new governments had a large reserve of trust, which they then used, you know, to implement unpopular but needed reforms. But increasingly, governments have actually started with smaller and smaller reserves of trust, meaning that I think people are now starting to turn on the government much quicker.

Of course, the irony is that we have authority because we actually look to them to give us stability in life. But with the trust reserved constantly at those low levels or near empty, it's been creating a crisis, hasn't it, in Parliament, a crisis of confidence.

People keep speculating whether the government's going to change or the Prime Minister's going to change, which actually robs us of the very stability that we are looking for or we're longing for. And then, sadly, when we finally vote the next lot in, we soon find out that, actually, they're not much better, are they?

And this has happened with the church as well, I guess. We may think that when people stop trusting the church or churches, that they no longer have any other authority as far as moral and spiritual matters are concerned.

But I think that's not strictly true. They simply turn to other sources of moral authority. So in the US, for example, I think it comes in the form of the talk show host.

[9 : 10] So she's no longer on air now, but for a long time, Oprah Winfrey was something of a spiritual guru. If you've ever watched her shows, you'll know what I mean. She does celebrity interviews, but then there's also a lot of stuff that she does about how to live the good life, right?

And her views on morality and spirituality are actually taken very seriously. Probably not by us, but people in the US. So, for example, whenever she recommends a self-help book to her reading club, that book makes it straight to the top of the best-selling list.

So her couch is like a pulpit, isn't it? From which she's actually unafraid to pass moral judgments. Her Me Too speech, for example, the one that she gave at the Golden Globe Awards, actually garnered a lot of attention from the media for the same reason.

Now, in Australia, we don't have a single sort of megastar. I don't think we do. But you just have to tune in to the project, for example. And you see a very similar thing happening. It's not uncommon to see, what's his name, Waleed Ali, spouting his wisdom, isn't it?

About what's right and wrong about any given issue of the day. Whether it's asylum seekers or women's rights or gay marriage or euthanasia.

[10 : 31] You know, they have no qualms about telling you how you should be thinking or acting if you want to be righteous. And the funny thing is that people actually follow them.

They get tweeted and retweeted all the time. And it's as though when people no longer trust traditional authorities, they actually seek out alternatives, even if not everyone is agreed on which authority that should be.

So that's the first response. But the second way people respond is to try and make authority more accountable. And this occurs, I think, when we realize we can't get rid of that authority and so somehow we have to restore trust in it.

So with child abuse, we see, we realize that, you know, we still need institutions like child cares and schools and churches. They still are needed to care for and train our children.

So what we do is then we have to make them more accountable by, for example, requiring police checks or working with children checks. This is similar as well with the Financial Services Royal Commission.

[11 : 42] I think what's going to come out from the commission, although it's not completed, is that we'll see more regulation and more disclosure. We're going to want to make the banks and the financial institutions more accountable.

Now, none of this is a bad thing. I think it's actually good that we have some of these things because accountability stops authorities from having unfettered power. When we know that someone is looking over our shoulders, it actually encourages us to use authority in the right way.

And yet, necessary as it is, I think systems of accountability still have their limitations. For one, accountability still can't prevent failures.

So, you know, having police checks, for example, and the like, they actually don't pick up on first-time offenders, do they? You only get on the register if you've done something wrong in the past. And in fact, I was just reading in the papers, research has shown that up to a staggering 60% of all child sexual abuse may be carried out by minors on minors.

with a high incidence of that in the home. So many of that would go unreported. And so, I think even with vigilance and with the right structures, we can't eliminate all the risk.

[13 : 06] But for me, I think what's more important is that the systems of accountability ultimately cannot replace trust. So, yes, the right levels of accountability and regulation can build or restore trust, but it cannot ultimately replace trust.

Because trust essentially is one person relying on another, an expert or an authority, for them to do something for them. At some point, we have to put our fate in the hands of another and for them to do what they've promised to do.

So, as an example, a regulation helps us to know that the doctor we're seeing is properly qualified and trained and isn't disqualified because of malpractice.

But beyond that, beyond that, you just have to trust the doctor, don't you, to make the right diagnosis to prescribe the right medicine. If you're being operated on, you've got to trust that he's going to cut it up rightly, take the right bits out, and sew it back up properly, right?

And you're not going to be awake to be checking on him when he does that. Knowing that the track record is a good one makes you feel better, but ultimately, it's going to come down to trust.

[14 : 24] No amount of accountability will guarantee that nothing will go wrong. And so, accountability is good, but it's not everything. So, that's the second way, and I've included a third way in the outline, but only simply to reject it.

And that way, the third way, is people sometimes want to, because of problems with authority, reject authority altogether, that is, dispense with it entirely.

But again, this is no solution really, because without authority, all we have instead is anarchy and chaos, which is actually worse than bad authority.

Without authority, might becomes right. the one with the most raw power wins. That's what happens when there's no authority. There's no fairness or justice without proper authority.

And so, if you look at parts of the Middle East at the moment, places like Afghanistan or Iraq, that's probably, that's, you know, what actually has happened. It may well have been good to overthrow a dictator or an oppressive regime, but if it leaves a power vacuum, then that's a disaster as well, isn't it?

[15 : 39] Actually, it's been reported that Christians in Syria prefer if Bashar al-Assad had been left in power, well, he's still in power, but if he hadn't been challenged, because even though he's a dictator, at least he allowed them some measure of freedom to practice their faith, which is not the case now in the past that's being controlled by ISIS or used to be controlled by ISIS.

And so we come to the conclusion that there really isn't any perfect way to respond to a breakdown of trust in institutions, which I guess brings me to the two implications I've come to on this matter.

First, I believe that we actually still need authority, because without it, there will be anarchy or chaos. Authority isn't bad, but good, because without it, society cannot function, whether it's at the local community level or at the country level, we need to actually entrust someone to maintain order on our behalf.

We need to trust that someone will help us uphold and enforce the rules so that we can get on with our lives and live in peace. Not only that, I think we're also wired to want to seek authority in our lives, because we know that actually we're finite, we can't know everything, and so for certain things, we actually have to look to others to depend on them, experts, if you like, to act for us.

And so the pertinent question becomes not whether we should trust in authorities or not, but which authorities we actually trust, and if so, whether they are worthy of our trust.

[17 : 22] And here, when I say, when I ask who we're trusting, I don't just mean trusting for the mundane things of life, like, you know, who will make sure that the water is hot or that the water is coming through or there's electricity, but I also mean the really important things in our lives.

Who are we trusting for our happiness, for meaning, for fulfillment, to give us purpose in our lives? And that brings me, I guess, to the second implication, which is that human authority has its limits.

There is no way of reforming it or making it more accountable so that it's fail-proof. Our trust in authorities can be easily, too easily betrayed.

Why? Because all human authority is fallible. Sometimes it's done intentionally and maliciously, but other times is simply done out of fear or self-preservation.

Some of the cover-ups that we've heard earlier about banks and all that, they're not the result of evil monsters seeking to harm others, but they're simply the result of people acting to protect their own interests.

[18 : 39] Perhaps they just wanted an easy life. Perhaps they just wanted to get ahead of the competition. Now, it's no excuse for doing wrong, of course, but all these are just acts of self-preservation, which honestly, if I ask myself and I put myself in their shoes, I wonder whether I would have been more righteous than them.

And even those rare exceptions that we see in individuals acting selflessly, well, they're simply that, aren't they? They're rare. And even if they do them, they're actually unlikely to be able to sustain them consistently in every aspect of their lives.

So yes, other people may promise to protect us, but only so far as I think their self-interest allows them. It's rather like the advice Tobias Beckett gives to Han Solo in the new Star Wars movie.

He says, assume everyone will betray you and you will never be disappointed. It's true. Now, I know it sounds a bit dramatic, but there's a grain of truth in that, isn't there?

People will let us down. The boss who tells you that he's got your back, well, he has until he finds that he needs to retrench you because he needs to cut costs.

[20 : 09] Even our loved ones, people like our parents, well-intentioned they may be, they may not live up to our expectations. Sure, we don't consider that as a betrayal of trust, but we can feel let down anyway, can't we?

Because we've looked to them for protection, security, happiness, fulfillment, we've relied on them and they've failed to deliver. And so, at the end of the day, given the limits of human authority and to humans in general, the question I then ask is, who can we trust really?

Who can we really trust not to let us down? And the answer, sadly, is no one. There's no sure guarantee, is there? Now, some of you may be here thinking, oh, that's alright, I'm totally independent of mine and actually, I don't need anyone.

I'm just going to trust in myself. Well, if that's how you think, just hold your horses because that's our topic for the third Sunday. So, I won't go into that now, but you're more than welcome to come back in two weeks' time and we'll deal with that.

But putting that aside, that sort of leaves us in the dilemma, doesn't it? That we need authorities we can trust on the one hand, and yet ultimately, there aren't any human authorities that are fail-safe.

[21 : 29] Well, I want to end tonight by giving you my solution or my story, what I've put my trust in, which I think has helped me to resolve this dilemma and given me a way to live my life with peace of mind.

And it actually comes from our first reading tonight in Psalm 20. Let me read again verses 7 to 9, which is actually the conclusion of the psalm. The psalm is asked like this, Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm. Lord, give victory to the king, answer us when we call. Now, the psalm is written back in the days when authority, power, and might are expressed in chariots and horses, and where the king is a symbol of human authority.

But here, it's interesting, isn't it, that people look to God as their protector, the one who gives them victory and security in life. But what is interesting too is that the people haven't dispensed with human authority because they still want their king.

They're still looking to God as their ultimate authority in whom they trust, but they're asking God to give victory to their human authority.

[22 : 50] Oh Lord, save the king, they pray. Answer us when we call. And so for me as a Christian, it's to God that I ultimately look to put my trust in.

It's not that I distrust human authority, but I recognize that there's an authority that sits above all human authority. So if human authorities do the right thing and I benefit from it, then I can be thankful to God for it because he's the one who ultimately made that happen.

He saved the king as it were. And actually, when we look around in Australia, even though we may whinge, we do have authorities that function well, don't we? We have roads that are safe, we have hospitals that work, schools that run well.

We can generally trust our authorities, can't we? We can trust them to maintain law and order. And so within the limitations that I've talked about, we do have authorities in Australia we can trust.

trust. And if we compare ourselves to other countries, you know, where they don't even get the basic necessities, we can give thanks to God for our authorities, can't we?

[24 : 03] But I also know not to put all my trust and hope in them so that if any human authority fails me, I know that God is still there as my ultimate authority.

So that it's not in chariots and horses that I've put my trust, but in the name of God. And so if calamity should strike me, and there's no guarantee that it will not, I know that I've not fallen out of God's protection, but that I'm still within His plans and His purpose.

Now some of you may well ask me how I know this to be true. Because if I've just said not to trust in human authorities which I can see, or we can see, then how can I trust in God whom I can't see?

Some of you here might even doubt that God exists at all. And all those are very good questions. And I could answer that personally by pointing out the ways in which God has been faithful and trustworthy to me, how He's protected and guided me.

But I think what is defining evidence for me of God's trustworthiness are actually found in the events of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

[25 : 20] For it's what God's done through His Son Jesus that proves to me that He's trustworthy. Jesus' death, not just for me, but for everyone who puts their faith in Jesus so that we are no longer enemies of God but children of God, that is the thing that shows me that God is trustworthy.

And this logic is actually found in our second reading tonight when Paul in Romans says this and I put it up on the screen, What then shall we say in response to these things?

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also along with Him graciously give us all things?

In other words, if I can trust God to send His Son, not to spare the one He loves most for our benefit and for our salvation, if God has done this most difficult of things, then surely, surely, He can do the less difficult thing which is to give us all things.

And so for me, everything hangs on Jesus and what He did. Now if you're here tonight and you've grown up simply hearing about Jesus in passing, maybe it's just over the news or at school or simply at Easter or Christmas and you haven't really had a chance to delve deeply into what I've been saying, then tonight is your opportunity to change that.

[26 : 56] We're actually going to run a course, there's a little pamphlet in your handout tonight called Christianity Explored and it starts on the 22nd of July on a Sunday. In it, we are going to go through systematically the things, the key things about Jesus, looking at one of the Gospels to understand what Jesus did and why.

So if that's you, can I encourage you to come along and join us because if God is truly worthy of our trust and I'm saying that He is, then we can indeed and trust all that we have, all of our lives to Him, including our happiness and our fulfillment in life.

Surely, if this is true, then it's worth checking out, isn't it? I myself can vouch for this, but please don't take my word for it because after all, I'm only human.

Rather, please come and check it out for yourselves and dig deeper into it to discover it for yourself first hand.