

“PROPER AUTHORITIES”
Deuteronomy 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28
A Sermon by John Thomason
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Many of you know that my previous pastorate was in a small town in upstate New York. During my final year there, the parsonage where I resided was broken into twice. The two scenarios were identical. I was in the house asleep in the middle of the night; I heard someone rummaging around in my personal belongings in a dressing area next to my bedroom; when I stirred and stumbled out of bed, the intruder heard me and fled.

How do you suppose I responded to that unnerving incident? Well, I didn't give chase to the burglar; I didn't even stop to see what he might have stolen; I went straight to my telephone to make a phone call. Needless to say, I didn't dial up my doctor or dentist or barber or banker; no, in the wake of a home burglary, I dialed the “proper authorities” – in this case, the local police.

When you and I are faced with an emergency like that one, or when we need a particular kind of service, or when we are simply seeking valuable information, we look to persons in authority. By virtue of an official position they hold, or a certain skill they possess, or a specialized knowledge they have, we regard them as authorities.

Of course, it helps to remember that authorities do not all have the same scope of authority. Different people have different kinds of expertise. My barber back in New York was an expert at cutting hair, but not at catching criminals; so he was the last person I would have thought to call when my home got burglarized. As the pastor of a local church, I may speak and act with authority in a few areas, like interpreting the Bible or counseling the bereaved; but, as you know all too well, I am certainly no guru on matters of plumbing, carpentry, or technology. The point is, when you and I need help or advice or information, it's important to consult the “proper authorities.”

This morning I want to give this term a different twist. For authorities to really be “proper,” they must exercise their authority in a proper way. Just holding an office, a title, or a place of honor and prestige does not automatically make one an expert on a subject or a worthy leader of other people.

We all know the difference between “formal” authority and “personal” authority. When individuals are appointed or elected to a public position, they have formal authority – that is, they have the power to make executive decisions, to hire and fire personnel, to give orders to people who are under them in the chain of command. However, the most effective leaders have more than this – they also have personal authority, an authority they have earned by being competent, trustworthy persons and having a positive relationship with the people they supervise.

Take a mundane example from the school classroom. The regular teacher is gone for the day, and in walks the sacrificial lamb we call a substitute. The substitute teacher has a certain amount of formal authority: he or she has been commissioned by the principal to teach the class for that day. But the substitute has no personal authority because he or she doesn't have a relationship with the students. The students feel free to subvert the sub's borrowed authority with pranks, inattentiveness, and other signs of disrespect.

In this case, the lack of personal authority is not the substitute's fault. It just comes with the territory of being a stand-in for the regular teacher. But there are others in positions of formal authority

who lack personal authority because they are personally deficient. Some lack the proper knowledge or expertise to fulfill their responsibilities. They are like the proverbial cowboy who is “all hat and no cattle” – they claim to be authorities on everything but in fact are authorities on nothing. Then there are those in positions of authority who deliberately misuse or abuse the authority they have been given. In recent times, we’ve seen instances where elected officials peddled lies to the public with catastrophic consequences; where law enforcement officers exercised their power in demeaning and destructive ways; and, yes, where religious leaders betrayed the trust of their followers with false teaching and scandalous behavior.

Notice that this last example is a concern in all three of today’s Scripture readings. Each lesson has its sights set on authorities in the religious realm who are acting improperly.

In our Old Testament reading, Moses is giving his farewell address to the Hebrew people before they cross over into the Promised Land. The Israelites are naturally anxious about who will lead them in the future. They are sure to face conflict, hardship, and uncertainty in their new home, and they want proper authorities to rule and guide them. Speaking as the first and greatest of Israel’s prophets, Moses announces that God will raise up a new prophet, one who will faithfully hear God’s truth and then tell the truth to the people. But Moses also predicts the appearance of false prophets in Israel’s future – leaders who distort Yahweh’s teaching or even speak on behalf of other gods besides Yahweh. Sadly, this prediction is fulfilled time and time again – in Israel’s history and in our own.

I heard about a Christian evangelical pastor in the South who was preaching to his congregation a few days before the recent presidential inauguration. He had no qualms about talking partisan politics in the pulpit. He identified his political persuasion as righteous and godly, and judged differing persuasions as evil and heretical. He assumed that everyone in the congregation was on his side, which in his view, was God’s side. He went on to condemn the outcome of the election as false and unfair. Then he exhorted his listeners to go to Washington and “Stop the Steal.” And some of them took him literally, traveled to D.C., and took part in the insurrection on January 6. They thought they were taking up arms and storming the Capitol building at God’s bidding.

The issue here is not whether we lean left or right on the political spectrum, or whether we like or don’t like the results of the November election; the issue is whether we glibly equate our take on the truth with God’s truth. Prophets are called to speak with God, about God, and even for God, but not as God. According to Moses, any finite human being who claims to have a corner on God’s truth or speaks untruths in the name of God is a false prophet, an improper authority.

The situation Paul is addressing in 1 Corinthians is different, but it is fraught with the same danger. It seems that the church at Corinth is divided into two camps: on one side, there are the more experienced, knowledgeable, and mature believers; on the other side, there are the newer converts who have less head-knowledge and whose faith is still fragile. The more mature Christians naturally have authority in the church, and the less mature Christians naturally look up to them as authority figures.

And this is where the crisis occurs. The veteran Christians regard themselves as “in the know” – and one thing they know for certain is that eating food that has been sacrificed to idols is not a sin against God. If idols are worthless, then eating food sacrificed on their altars is harmless. And so, Christians who have this inside information eat whatever they want to eat to their heart’s content. What concerns Paul is that newer converts may follow this example and be led to stumble. By returning to pagan practices at the dinner table, they may relapse into all of their pagan ways and renounce their faith in Christ. Paul knows that less mature believers are more likely to backslide into bad behavior.

But notice: what concerns Paul just as much is the bad behavior of the more mature believers. They regard themselves as liberated – free from the old constraints of legalism, free to do anything they wish regardless of its impact on others. They value their individual freedom above all else. Dare I say, these ancient Corinthians are forerunners of contemporary Americans, because people in our society put a premium on personal liberty – you know: my desires, my rights, my privileges, my ambitions. It’s in our national DNA to affirm the authority of the individual and resist the authority of the state, especially when the state presumes to tell us what to do. This stance has produced some desirable results – freedom from tyranny and breathing room to be one’s self. But it has also brought questionable results: “If I want to drive a gas-guzzling car, no one can stop me.” “If I don’t want to wear a mask, no one can make me.” No, says Paul; true freedom is tempered by responsibility. When the authority of the individual takes precedence over a concern for the common good, it is an improper use of authority.

Paul is also troubled by the spiritual snobbery of these mature Christians. They feel liberated because they are enlightened. Because they have knowledge that novices in the church don’t have, they think of themselves as superior in every respect. They say, “Only a spiritual infant would get hung up on something as silly and inconsequential as eating food sacrificed to idols. We’ve moved beyond that.”

Friends, I must tell you that Paul is speaking directly to me when he says that “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Corinthians 8:1b). After earning my college degree, I completed six years of graduate theological education, later invested four years in Clinical Pastoral Education, and have spent 45 years in active ordained ministry. I’ve acquired a lot of knowledge along the way; and I confess that, at times, I’ve worn that knowledge on my sleeve and felt smug about it. I’ve name-dropped great theologians like Augustine and Luther, Barth and Tillich. I’ve flaunted my academic learning and looked down on those who were less learned.

When I was a seminary student, I went on a field education trip to a small charismatic church in a poor neighborhood of Louisville, Kentucky. I saw an uneducated preacher foaming at the mouth as he was speaking in tongues, and thought to myself, “I’m too sophisticated to do that.” I heard other pastors preach “hell-fire and damnation” sermons and spout their ignorance about the Scriptures; I saw some churches close their doors to people of color and bar women from positions of leadership. In many instances, I responded like the Pharisee does in Jesus’ parable when the sinful publican shows up in the temple to pray: “I thank God I’m not like one of them.”

Paul surely prefers knowledge to ignorance, but he knows that knowledge brings its own set of temptations, and it’s not the only measure of Christian maturity. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up,” Paul says. What he desires from these enlightened Christians is a sense of humility about themselves and a spirit of charity toward others.

Over the past year, you and I have been talking about some weighty and thorny issues: the place of gays and lesbians within the Church, the status of black people in society, the relative importance of a candidate’s character in determining his or her fitness for office, the balance between individual freedom and social responsibility during a pandemic. In the midst of all this discussion and debate, the people I have most admired, who have had the most personal authority for me, are not the “know-it-alls” who must win every argument and make their opponents losers. No, the people I’ve most admired are those who know a lot but also know what they don’t know, who offer “open hearts, open minds, and open doors” to others who think differently than they do. They are what Paul would surely call “proper authorities,” persons who exercise their authority in a proper way, who know that in God’s eyes it is more important to be loving than to be smart or right.

Which brings us to our third Scripture lesson, and to the only person in human history who is truly a proper authority. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is a young man in a hurry. Everything happens "immediately"; there is a sense of urgency about him and the people around him. Here in chapter 1, Mark tells us that when Jesus calls his first three disciples, who are all fishermen, "they immediately dropped their nets and followed him" (Mark 1:18). They recognize an authority when they see one and respond quickly.

These men walk down the shore together and enter the synagogue at Capernaum, where Jesus now faces a tougher audience. But Mark says, "They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (v. 22). In case you're wondering, the scribes are the proper authorities when it comes to interpreting the Jewish Law. This gives them a lot of formal authority, but they don't have much personal authority. They just say the same things over and over again and get the same results – lukewarm assent, boredom, and apathy. But Jesus' audience here is "amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching – with authority!'" (vv. 27-28a).

Annie Dillard once observed that when Christians listen to Jesus today, we nod in approval, but our heads are uncovered. Dillard said that if we really thought about Jesus's gospel, we should wear crash helmets at church! What Jesus says is astounding and amazing because it is pioneering and transforming. Hugh Anderson wisely reminded us that "when Jesus taught, things did not stay as they were, but God himself was on the move against all evil forces of the world."

And this is precisely what we see happening here in Capernaum. A man who is demon possessed is in the synagogue audience. The demon cries out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God" (v. 24). Jesus speaks and acts immediately, rebuking the unclean spirit, commanding him to be silent and come out. And by the authority of Jesus' words, the demon comes out. This is what prompts the amazement of the onlookers: "A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (v. 27).

Notice, Jesus is identified here as an authoritative teacher, but Mark doesn't even bother to tell us what he teaches. Jesus doesn't try to impress others with how much he knows; he doesn't play a game of one-upmanship with the narrow-minded people in the pews; he doesn't throw his weight around for personal gain. No, Jesus shows us the proper use of authority, which is to confront evil and do good, to heal and to save. Jesus knows that the greatest power in the world is the power of love, and this is the only power he chooses to exercise.

One of the reasons Jesus' authority is amazing is that it is unique; but the wonder of it is that he shares his authority with us. If Jesus is amazing in the 1st Century, maybe Jesus in the 21st Century – the body of Christ, Jesus on earth in churches like ours – can also be amazing and astounding. Instead of being merely a church where nice people do nice things, maybe we can astound the world. John Chrysostom envisioned it this way: "Let us astound them by our way of life. This is the unanswerable argument. Though we give 10,000 precepts in words, if we do not exhibit a far better life, we gain nothing. Let us win them by our life." Friends, this is the proper use of our authority.