

## AS ONE WITH AUTHORITY<sup>1</sup>

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*The preacher's authority, rooted in Scripture and delegated by God in His Word, finds itself AWOL in contemporary pulpits. But it was not so with Christ's preaching, in that people marveled at His authority. This call to restore biblical authority in today's preaching extols six essential features of proclamation that showcase biblical authority just as God intended.*

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We gather because we are united in the conviction that preaching is central to our lives, our ministry, the church, and the gospel. We understand what is at stake. Preaching is not merely about the temporal concerns of the here and now. Preaching is about life, death, and matters of eternity. Preaching constitutes the means whereby God calls persons into His kingdom and shapes His people into conformity with the character of His Son. In sum, the preaching of God's Word saves and sanctifies, preparing believers for eternity.

The Reformers of the 16th century rightly believed and taught that preaching is the “first mark” of the church. That is to say, where there is the right preaching of Scripture, there is a church; where there is no right preaching of God's Word, there is no church. In this sense, although statisticians may report on the number of churches in America, their data is flawed because it is only a measurement of steeples. Where there is no pulpit that is committed to faithful biblical exposition, there is no church.

What is our warrant to preach? What is our authorization? It comes down to this – God has spoken. God has revealed Himself, forfeiting His personal privacy that we might know Him. He is not silent, and He has commissioned us to speak. He calls and equips men to preach His Word. He is not silent, and we are not to be silent. We are to speak, preach, and teach His Word.

Understanding the essence of expository preaching does not require an elaborate equation. The pattern is simple. According to the Word of God itself,

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a sermon originally preached at the 2009 Shepherds' Conference, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California, March 5, 2009.

the pattern of preaching is for the Word to be read and for the Word to be explained. Expository preaching comes down to a man of God who commits himself to reading and explaining the words of Scripture and then trusts God to honor His Word in the people who hear the proclamation. Once accomplished, this man will come back and do it all over again, and he will continue to do so until he dies or Jesus comes again. Faithful preachers read the biblical text, explain it, and then repeat the process all over again.

The stewardship of preaching is unspeakable. There is not one of us who is equipped for this; no one is up to the challenge. There is no one who has the native and inherent skills to accomplish this task. Just as no one is qualified for salvation, so too, no one is qualified for preaching. Both salvation and the call to the ministry of preaching are by grace alone and to the glory of God alone. God chooses earthen vessels to show His glory.

#### THE ABSENCE OF AUTHORITY IN PREACHING

As we examine the current state of preaching and listen to many contemporary preachers describe their view of the task of preaching, the quick diagnosis is that something is missing. Something is *not* there that *ought* to be there, and that something missing is the one thing most essential – authority. A great question mark hangs over so much of today's preaching; a tentativeness and hesitancy characterizes far too many pulpits. There is a trigger that is almost pulled and a point that is almost made.

One Dilbert cartoon illustrates this. Dilbert, the office worker and main character of the comic strip, talks with Dogbert, his little dog-friend. As the two of them are in conversation, Dilbert spins out an elaborate theory of the universe. Dogbert listens patiently all the way to the end, only to say, "That comes so close to being interesting."

We all have been there, hearing a sermon that came strangely close to preaching. Proclamation *almost* happened. The congregation brushed up against exposition, but the preacher swerved at the last moment. Far too many preachers come really close to having a point, except that something is missing and what is missing is the one thing most essential – authority.

Some would see the absence of authority in preaching as a good thing, a fact illustrated by the textbooks sold in the "homiletics" section of liberal seminary bookstores. For example, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*, by Lucy Atkinson Rose, defines preaching in terms of a conversation whereby the congregation and preacher raise questions together.<sup>2</sup> Answering questions is not as important as asking them, so we are told, and the preacher has no more authority than the congregation does in terms of the equation.

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<sup>2</sup> Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

Fred Craddock, Bandy Distinguished Professor of Preaching and New Testament, Emeritus, in the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, authored a book titled *As One Without Authority*.<sup>3</sup> Published in 1971, the book became a symptom of the 1970s, even as its legacy lives on today. Although in past ages the authority of the pulpit and preacher was understood to be central to the task of preaching, the homiletical approach embodied in the title *As One Without Authority* vanquishes this authority. An authoritative pulpit is an unthinkable notion and an antiquarian relic, it is argued, because the present age has already grown accustomed to dispensing with one authority after another.

Craddock wrote these haunting words: “Rarely if ever in the history of the church have so many firm periods slumped into commas and so many triumphant exclamation marks curled into question marks.”<sup>4</sup> Does that not describe the preaching of so many pulpits today? Does it not seem that so many preachers are “curling exclamation marks into question marks” and “slumping into commas where there should be periods?”

Craddock continued:

As a rule, younger ministers are keenly aware of the factor discussed above and their preaching reflects it. Their predecessors ascended the pulpit to speak of the eternal certainties, truths etched forever in the granite of absolute reality, matters framed for proclamation, not for discussion. Where have all the absolutes gone? The old thunderbolts rust in the attic while the minister tries to lead his people through the morass of relativities and approximate possibilities. And the difficulties involved in finding and articulating a faith are not the congregation’s alone; they are the ministers as well. How can she preach with a changing mind?<sup>5</sup>

This is an excellent question. How can a preacher preach with a changing mind? He cannot. Therefore, Craddock was right when he wrote:

How can she, facing new situations by the hour, speak the appropriate word? She wants to speak and yet she needs more time for more certainty before speaking. Hers is often the misery of one who is always pregnant but never ready to give birth.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (1971: repr., St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Craddock describes the situation plaguing so many pulpits today. Authority is the one thing missing from so many preaching ministries. In fact, there is not even an aspiration to authority. Instead, there is resignation in the face of an anti-authoritarian age. We dare not speak with authority, it is argued, because people simply will not accept it. An age of question marks is allergic to the exclamation mark. An age that finds comfort in commas will find resistance to periods.

#### THE PRESENCE OF AUTHORITY IN JESUS' PREACHING

In sharp contrast, Jesus' preaching demonstrated what was missing from the preaching and teaching of his day. Matthew 7:28-29 says, "When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes." The words, "as one having authority, and not as their scribes" served as an indictment of the absence of authority that characterized the preaching of his time. Sadly, much of the preaching in our own day also fails to be characterized by the phrase, "as one having authority."

The phrase "these words" refers back to all the preceding material of Matthew 5-7, otherwise known as "The Sermon on the Mount," so verses 27-28 conclude both chapter seven and the entire sermon. When Jesus finished preaching this message, the people were amazed because they had heard something quite unfamiliar to their ears – a preacher who spoke with authority.

Consider the power and force of this sermon. Jesus sets forth a vision of life in the kingdom of God that transcends our moral imagination and explodes our theological comforts. He warns of hell and commands that we love our enemies. He speaks against trusting in our earthly bank accounts and directs us to lay up treasures in heaven. Jesus reminds us that we cannot add a day to our life nor an inch to our height by means of worry and anxiety. He assures us that our heavenly Father will clothe us in more glory than the lilies of the field and will care for us with an even deeper care than he extends to the birds of the air. Jesus says to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, with the promise that all these things will be added unto us. We are instructed to judge a tree by its fruit, even as we are told that we too shall be judged. We are told to build our house upon the rock of hearing and obeying God's Word, for anything less than obedience is likened to building our house on shifting sand.

Until they heard this sermon, the crowds who gathered to hear Jesus thought they knew what God demanded of them. They understood the prohibition against murder and adultery, but Jesus now forbade anger and lust too. Jesus said, "You have heard it was said," and then cited Scripture texts containing commands familiar to the crowd. He took the teaching further, however, with the words, "but I say unto you," and His magnification of the force of the commands. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill." Jesus rejected rabbinical reasoning and moral casuistry, and He refused to act like an

argumentative theologian or speculative moralist. As a result, Jesus astonished the crowds and turned their moral and theological world upside down.

We can best understand why the authority of Jesus' preaching astonished the crowds if we understand that the scribes had forfeited the authority to speak on their own terms, working instead by a process of citation. Although they read and explained the text, first-century scribes were well known for being able to make the Scripture say anything they wanted it to say. A scribe's normative practice was to explain over, under, and around a text, saying, in effect, "I know what this text *says*, but let me tell you what it *means*." They piled on citations from one rabbi after another, adding up interpretations and multiplying opinions until any sense of an authoritative understanding of the text had been lost. In their thousands upon thousands of words of explanation, the plain meaning of God's Word was lost. By means of their casuistry, they attempted to find ways around the Scripture, beginning with the desired answer and working with the text until they reached that end. Therefore, when the crowds heard Jesus teach "as one with authority," they immediately recognized something they were not hearing from the scribes – those masters of equivocation, spinners of elasticity, and artisans of nuance.

Sadly, many preachers today are also artisans of nuance. They will hint at what a text might be about, but leave a seed of doubt as to whether the text is actually about anything at all. These modern day spinners of elasticity and masters of equivocation speak a dozen possible interpretations of a text without coming to any firm conclusions. Even worse, they label as "dogmatic" anyone who claims to have a sure and certain understanding of a text of Scripture. Further, when the plain understanding of a passage threatens to offend their congregation, these preachers assure the listeners in the pew that there is a way through the trouble, an interpretation that will not bother their modern ears. Just give these preachers twenty minutes to spin and nuance, and the congregation will have forgotten what the text even says.

Some preachers get behind the pulpit and spout the findings of one professor after another. Just like the scribes who piled up rabbinical teaching, these preachers stack up modern-day theological and biblical authorities in order to explain away the clear teaching and moral force of the Word. The sermon becomes an urging of the congregation to "choose ye this day which professor you serve," and the authority of the Scripture is vanquished.

By way of example, in a recent cover story titled, "The Religious Case for Gay Marriage," *Newsweek* magazine cited authorities who argued that the New Testament does not actually forbid homosexuality, if practiced in the context of a committed homosexual relationship.<sup>7</sup> The apostle Paul described homosexuality in these terms: "...men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of

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<sup>7</sup> Lisa Miller, "Our Mutual Joy," *Newsweek* (Dec. 15, 2008): 28-31.

their error” (Rom 1:27). These scholars, however, claim that the “unnatural” act to which Paul referred was for a heterosexual to commit a homosexual act. However, it would be perfectly natural, so their argument goes, for a homosexual to commit a homosexual act. Such hermeneutical sophistry will go to any length possible to find a way around the text.

We should not be surprised when this happens at the hands of those in the world, for this is exactly how we would expect them to mistreat the Word of God. The real tragedy, however, is that there are many who claim the name of Christ and who stand in the pulpit who perform the same sort of sophistry, doing everything they can to get around the text. Of course, some get around the text by simply preaching a sermon without a text at all, or by only choosing texts that are unlikely to cause offense.

If you are actually going to preach the Word of God in your ministry, then hear and heed this promise – you *will* get in trouble because the Word of God will lead you into trouble. The Bible will require you to speak of things that people will say they do not want to hear. But Scripture is the Word of life for those who are dying and in need of the true cure for their soul. Nothing less is at stake than eternal life or death.

Many years ago, Theodor Adorno wrote a book titled *The Authoritarian Personality*, wherein he warned that we should avoid any claims to authority, and that persons who feel a need for authority are revealing their psychological sickness.<sup>8</sup> Adorno’s ideas were based on Freudian concepts of childhood development. He believed that when someone poses as an authority, what he or she is really seeking is the acquisition of power. We should take note of the irony that Adorno, having written an entire book on this subject, probably considered himself a leading authority on these ideas.

Fred Craddock was right. We do live in an age that is militant against authority, but this rebellion did not begin in the 1970s. It began in the Garden of Eden, and we all now live in this Genesis-chapter-three world, rightly defined as being anti-authoritarian. In such a context, there is much at stake for preachers and preaching. The word “authority” is rooted with the word “author,” but an anti-authoritarian hermeneutic even denies that God is the author of Scripture. A mode of preaching that resists an authoritative Word, however, insults the Scripture as the Word of God.

Looking back at Matthew 7:28-29, we read that the crowds were amazed and astonished at Jesus’ teaching. They knew they had never heard anything like this before, and they understood that life and death hung in the balance. As revealed in the Gospels, this radical note of authority resonated throughout Jesus’ entire ministry. In Mark 11:18, the whole crowd was astonished at His teaching. When Jesus taught at Capernaum in Luke 4:32, the people were amazed at the authority of his teaching. In John 7:46, officers said, “Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks.” Further, in Mark 6:2, when

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<sup>8</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper, 1950).

Jesus taught in his hometown, the people responded by asking, “Where did this man get these things, and what is this wisdom given to Him, and such miracles as these performed by His hands?” Jesus taught and the hometown crowd was astonished. Take time to ponder the essence of what they are asking about Jesus: “Where does he get this? Where does he come up with this?”

When you are preaching and teaching the inerrant, Spirit-inspired Word of God with authority, the Holy Spirit communicates the Word through your preaching and into the hearts of the congregation. As this happens, many will ask – “Where does he come up with this?” and, “Where is he getting this?” The answer that glorifies God is that this life-giving Word comes from God. This wisdom does not come from any other source; it is the Word of God. The crowds asked of Jesus, “Where does this come from?” because they correctly recognized that His sermons were not abstract, religious discussions – they were life and death.

We must be careful here, for we are not Jesus. When Jesus taught, He spoke as one having inherent authority for He was and is God in human flesh. When Jesus spoke, God spoke. Jesus could pick up the scrolls of the Old Testament and say, “You have heard it said...but I say to you,” because He was the incarnate Word who alone had the authority to define the written Word. He spoke the very words of life. Jesus was able to give authoritative teaching on how to pray, how to trust, and how to live. Jesus alone could say, “The gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it” (Matt 7:13). Jesus alone could warn against false prophets who look like sheep and devour like wolves (Matt 7:15). Jesus alone could say, “There are many who claim my name I do not know” (Matt 7:22–23).

Observe how the inherent authority of Jesus functions within our focal passage of Matthew 7. In verse 24, Jesus concluded the Sermon on the Mount by saying: “Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock.” Take note of that phrase: “these words of mine.” It appears again in verses 26–27: “Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell – and great was its fall.”

In these verses, Jesus drew specific targeted attention to His own authority. He not only spoke of what God said through the Torah, the Law, and the prophets, but Jesus also said that the one who hears and obeys “these words of mine” is likened to a house built on a rock. That is to say, His words carried the weight of divine authority. Only Jesus could say that obedience to “these words of mine” would determine the standing or falling of a person. Only Jesus could say, “These words of mine” are a matter of life and death.

As preachers, not one of us can get up and say, “If you build your house on my words, then you are building on a rock. Reject my words, and your house is on sand.” Yet, although the preacher’s authority is an entirely different authority than that of Christ, it is a real authority nonetheless. The preacher’s authority is that of one who has been commissioned to teach and preach the

inerrant and infallible Word of God. We are commissioned and called to preach the Word – the inscribed Word inspired by the Holy Spirit. We do say, “Listen to these words and live. Reject these words and die,” but we do so because they are God’s Word, not our own. We are speaking upon God’s authority, not our own.

When a preacher takes even one step backward from the full authority of the Word of God, the pulpit becomes instantly relativized. The one thing missing is the one thing most essential, and that is for the preacher to have full confidence in the Word of God. A preacher must stand up, preach the Word of God, and then let the transformation and renewing of minds happen where and when it happens. This is no tame thing. This is life and death. The Word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and it is bread to those who are hungry.

#### SIX VITAL ASPECTS OF PREACHING

Our authority is a delegated authority; it is not our own. Our authority is part of our commissioning and our call. God equips those who are incompetent in order that whatever competency shows up in them is to His glory and not to their own. Preachers, we are not given an inherent, guru-like wisdom so that we can get behind the pulpit and share our meditations. Rather, we are given God’s Word to preach, in season and out of season. We are exhorted with imperatives like, instruct, correct, teach, rebuke, but we do not have any authority inherently in us that qualifies us to do that. The authority is God’s alone and the authority is in His Word, but that authority is assigned to us.

We are to “rightly to divide the word of truth,” (2 Tim 2:15) and insofar as we rightly interpret and understand the text, we will rightly teach. We use a hermeneutic of obedience rather than a hermeneutic of suspicion because we believe this is the Word of God. We understand our task as preachers to be that of coming to terms with what the text means in order that we can declare, explain, and apply it. The most important part of our task is to declare the Word, because the Holy Spirit alone can perform the inner application. The Holy Spirit speaks individually to human hearts and does the work that is invisible and unreachable to us. Martin Luther taught preachers that their responsibility was to get biblical truth from their lips to the ears of the congregation, and then they should go home and sleep while God moved the Word from the ears to the hearts. You cannot go there yourself, but the Word of God can and does and will.

We are earthen vessels, chosen by God despite our earthiness and our utter lack of qualification. Preaching is a responsibility and a stewardship. Either we will be effective because of the power of God’s Word, or we will crash and burn and take many with us. The stakes are that high. The one thing missing is the one thing most essential: declarative preaching, expository preaching, doctrinal preaching, confrontational preaching, corrective preaching, and passionate preaching.



First, we need *declarative* preaching from preachers who will stand up and say, “This is what the text says, and, if that is what the text says then that is what the text means.”

Second, we need *expositional* preaching that preaches through the Bible, not picking and choosing what one thinks the people need. Why did God give us the Bible if we are supposed to go through it and find what we think our people need? Our task is to teach the Word – all of it. There are people who will come to Christ while hearing a sermon on the genealogy of Jesus or the annals of the tribes of Israel. The preacher’s task is to put every text of Scripture within the context of the gospel and the saving purposes of God. By the end of every sermon, people should hear a period, not a question mark.

Third, we need *doctrinal* preaching that instructs the church concerning the truth of the Christian faith and shows how doctrine is to be fleshed out in everyday life.

Fourth, we need *confrontational* preaching. In an age in which both confrontation and authority are hated, we need preachers who are willing to confront unbelief, heresy, false teaching, superficial gospels, and synthetic understandings of the truth.

Fifth, we need *corrective* preaching that helps the church to practice discernment, knowing the difference between truth and error. Corrective preaching leads the church into growth and maturity.

Sixth, we need preaching from men who are *passionate* for God and the gospel. If a man is called by God into a ministry of preaching, and he correctly understands what the Word of God is and what preaching is all about, then how can his preaching lack passion? With life and death hanging in the balance, a preacher should not come out of his study until he is ready to burst the door open, walk into the pulpit, and say, “Open your Bible, because God has a word for you and I get to bring it to your ears.”

## CONCLUSION

The one thing missing is the one thing most essential. There are question marks where there should be exclamation points. There is hesitancy where there should be boldness. There is advice where there should be teaching. There are ideas where there should be doctrine. There are impressions where there should be imperatives.

We are told that when Jesus had finished these words the crowds were amazed at His teaching for He was teaching them as one having authority and not as their scribes. When people hear us preach – especially when lost people hear us preach – they should be amazed at the preaching. They should be astonished. When God’s people are drawn into the act of preaching and begin to understand what is really taking place as God speaks His words of life through his preacher, they are continuously amazed. To move from unbelief to belief is not to lose the amazement – it is to lean into it. For everyone who has come to know the one, true living God and the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior, every

opportunity they have to hear the Word of God is another opportunity to be astonished. If calluses ever build on the heart of a believer, so that he hears the Word of God but finds it only mildly interesting, then this is a reason for repentance.

Brothers, as you prepare to preach, pray that your people and anyone else who hears you will say, "He teaches as one having authority and not as the other ones we heard." It is God's authority, not yours. It is God's Word, not yours. Brothers, pray that when you preach, your own congregation asks, "Where did he come up with this?" Then, their question will be answered as they are drawn into the Word of God. The unclear will become clear as the Word of God and the Holy Spirit ministers to the believer's heart. Where there was once confusion, there will be clarity.

There is just not enough amazement going on in too many churches today. There is not enough astonishment, and the one thing missing is authority. The diagnosis of that absence is a lack of confidence in the Word of God, and such an absence indicates that preachers fail to understand what it means to preach. They do not understand the calling. Authority is the one thing absent, and authority is the one thing we must recover.

Preachers must quit trying to establish their own authority because they end up doing it in all the wrong ways. Preachers try to establish their authority as a therapist through relational counseling, or they identify their authority as a manager who knows how to organize religious institutions. If you do this, however, you will turn yourself into a moral casuist, saying to your people, "If you have a problem, then we will find a way to reason it through."

Do not try to establish your own authority. Without apology, stand only on the authority of God Himself, entrusted to us in His Word. Do not lean away from that authority. Never back off and never equivocate. Do not spin elastic and do not share nuance. Do not preach impressions or opinions.

Brothers, as you teach and preach the Word of God, it comes down to this – people are going to be amazed, or not. Astonished, or not. If the Word of God is preached, they will be amazed. If the Word of God is preached, they will be astonished. If the Word of God is preached, they will be saved. If the Word of God is preached, believers will grow to be conformed to the image of Christ. If the Word of God is preached, things visible and invisible will take place. All this can only take place by the ministry of God's Word. People will be astonished and they will walk away saying, "I had better read that passage again." Then, stand back and watch what happens to a church that evidences that kind of amazement and astonishment.

When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching for He was teaching as one having authority and not as their scribes. By God's grace and for His glory, may the same thing be said of your preaching ministry.