

# Speak With Authority

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The world is much concerned with authority. Who is the boss? Who has the power to make things happen? Who has the power to demand what he wants? Jesus told his disciples that the rulers of this earth lord it over their followers. For them authority means power and prestige. But he added that with his disciples, men who were being given authority in the church, the understanding of authority was to be different. Their authority was the right to serve. They were to put the needs of others ahead of their own.

The visible church is much concerned about authority today. The Roman Catholic Church claims that authority over the whole church lies with the pope in Rome. Others claim authority lies with bishops or with pastors ordained by bishops who descend from the apostles. Others claim the authority lies with the people of the church. Some might even go so far as to say, "Pastors really are not necessary. We are all ministers." Where are we to look for authority in the church? Are pastors authorities?

Make no mistake about it, God's servants, the public ministers of the Word, are authorities, and they are to speak with authority. The members of the congregations are told, "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority" (Hebrews 13:17). The leaders of the church are told to speak authoritatively, "These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority" (Titus 2:15). What kind of authority is it that is exercised by pastors? Where does the authority come from?

My dictionary lists four meanings or aspects of "authority":

- the power or right to give orders or make decisions; "he has authority over them."
- persons who exercise control over others; "the authorities have issued a rule."
- an expert whose views are taken as definitive; "he is an authority on the subject."
- official permission or approval; "he has authority to spend the money."

The authority of pastors is not the first two types of authority, but it should be the last two types. The pastor does not have authority from Christ to give orders or to make decisions beyond those things which are declared by the Word of God. He is not to control the congregation of saints nor to impose his own personal whims upon them.

The pastor is, however, to be an "authority," an expert on what the Word of God says. Through years of faithful study of the Scripture, he is to develop his ability to teach the congregation what the Word of God says about a specific subject as well as his ability to search the Scriptures for what the Word says about a question that has arisen. If he can truly say, "This is what the Lord says," the congregation has the duty to listen to what he says and to follow it, not so much because of the authority of the pastor but because of the authority of the Word and because of the authority of Christ, which lies behind the Word.

The pastor also has the authority to spend the treasures of the church: to proclaim the Word of God, to baptize, to administer the Lord's Supper, and to forgive sins. This authority belongs first of all to Christ, the Son of God, the Savior of the world. Jesus said, "All power, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." He immediately went on to say, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." The authority which the Father has given to the Son to be the minister of the means of grace, the Son passes on to the church. Through the church, the public administration of the means of grace is delegated to the pastor.

The power of the means of grace does not depend on the person or office of the pastor. Baptism exerts its power even when it is applied by a layman or a laywoman in case of an emergency. When one Christian

assures another repentant Christian that his or her sins are forgiven, this is not simply a human assurance, but it carries with it the power of the gospel. Ordination and the call do not give to the pastor power to do things that lie beyond the power of ordinary Christians. They give him the authorization to use the means of grace publicly as the representative of the congregation. This does not mean that the pastor is simply in an office established by men or that he is merely a servant of the congregation. The pastor is serving in an office instituted by Christ, and he has been placed into the office by Christ. The power of the means of grace is derived from Christ's death and resurrection, and the pastor's authority to use them comes from Christ's call. The people are to have full confidence in the forgiveness they receive from the pastor because it comes from Christ through the Word through the pastor.

This should have a practical impact on how the pastor feels about himself, how the congregation feels about the pastor, and how they feel about the forgiveness that they receive. How then should the pastor regard himself? How should he be regarded by members of the congregation? Paul says:

1 Corinthians 4:1 So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God.

2 Corinthians 4:5 For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

1 Corinthians 3:5 What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task.

Acts 20:28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

2 Corinthians 1:24 Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. <sup>13</sup>Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.

1 Corinthians 3:21-23 All things are yours, <sup>22</sup>whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, <sup>23</sup>and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

The pastor is a servant of the congregation, but he is first of all the servant of Christ. Notice the line of representation/delegation in the last passage (from God to Christ to congregation to pastor). The pastor belongs to the congregation, not the congregation to the pastor, but both the pastor and congregation are answerable to Christ.

There is much concern today about the lack of respect for the pastoral ministry (justifiably so). But how should we build that respect? When Paul wants to urge Christians to honor their pastors, he says to hold them in the highest regard in love because of *their work*, or we could say for the Word they speak.

It is unnecessary and futile to try to build respect for the ministers of the gospel and for the means of grace by creating more honorary trappings around the office or the person. We cannot raise esteem for the pastoral office by seeking more honorific titles or more exalted liturgical forms or more elaborate clerical garb. When we set forth the biblical doctrines of the means of grace and of the stewardship of the means of grace entrusted to pastors, that is all that is needed to promote both proper self-esteem for pastors and proper esteem from the congregation toward the pastor.

We need to drive down the middle of the road between two ditches, or putting it more prosaically, we need to keep a balance between two proper emphases. On the one hand, we do not want to over-exalt the priesthood of believers to the detriment of respect for the pastoral ministry. But we need to remember that disrespect for the public ministry is not a result of a proper emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. It is the result of the misunderstanding and misuse of the doctrine of the priesthood of believers. On the other hand, we do not want to undercut or deny the role and the rights of the church in the calling of pastors as a result of a misguided effort to brace up the public ministry with artificial props. Pastors come from Christ through the

church. To have a balanced view of the ministry and to build respect for the ministry we must emphasize both the *from Christ* and the *through the church*.

It is certainly a great thing that a pastor is able to give new life to a dead baby with water and words. It is certainly a marvel that after he has spoken a few words Christ's body and blood are present in the Sacrament. What awesome power to be able to forgive sins. When the first pastors returned from their first mission, they were amazed and joyful that their power was so great that even the demons of hell submitted to them in Jesus' name. Jesus, however, sobered them with these words, "Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Lk 10:20). "Your names are written in heaven." When Lutheran pastors need joy and confidence to sustain them and give them courage for their work, these words are enough: "Your names are written in heaven." Not "you can absolve," "you can baptize," "you can consecrate," but "your names are written in heaven."

Authority comes from the Word. Therefore the pastor's confidence in what he says and does is to come from the Word. The people's confidence is to come from the same place. When a person wonders, "Are my sins really forgiven?" he is not to look to the person or office of the pastor for his assurance but to the words of Christ which have been spoken. They and they alone are the power of God unto salvation.

There is a temptation facing Lutheran pastors today to direct people to ordination and the office of the pastor for assurance. Some are even seeking ordination from Catholic or Orthodox or Episcopal bishops thinking that this can give them an "apostolic succession" that will give greater authority and assurance to their words of absolution. This misguided notion is reflected in a recent joint statement by the faculties of the Missouri Synod's two seminaries.

"Call and ordination" are essential for conduct of the ministry. Ministers do things in the place of Christ....What is the sign of authority for ministers today? It is their call and ordination, which assure that they act by divine right and on the authority of Christ. This truth makes such ideas as "lay ministers" invitations for difficulties and troubles to ministers whose authority is doubtful and to laypersons whose assurance of God's grace may be questioned.<sup>1</sup>

This makes the assurance of absolution depend in part on the ordination of the absolver. This is similar to the view of Wilhelm Löhe who taught that only the office holder could absolve in the full sense and that ordination gave certainty that absolution was more than an empty word. This tendency to place part of the authority and assurance of absolution on ordination is looking for authority and power in a very different place than that in which confessional Lutherans have always looked for it. Confessional Lutherans have always looked for authority and assurance in the Word alone. To look for it anywhere else is to deny the central affirmations of the Reformation, by grace alone, by faith alone, by Scripture alone. To look for assurance of forgiveness in ordination and the pastoral office is to begin to slide back into Roman Catholicism. Franz Pieper says:

The false officiousness promoted by the Romanizing Lutherans undermined the article of justification. Basically, they made grace and forgiveness depend in the church on whether one was *rite ordinatus* [rightly ordained]. However, Christian doctrine, Lutheran doctrine, Missouri doctrine is the following: wherever the gospel of God's grace in Christ is proclaimed, I can be confident in it regardless whether proclaimed by a pastor or a layman, an adult or a child, a man or a woman, a duly called and ordained minister or someone right off the street. God's grace, won for us by Christ, is set forth in the gospel. No matter how the gospel comes to us, we can receive the grace of God from it. Indeed, even if no one were to tell us the gospel at all, and we were only to see it scribbled in a sentence on the wall, this sentence would convey us God's grace in Christ. And we would possess this grace as soon as we appropriated it through faith.

According to Lutheran doctrine any Christian, even a child, can perform absolution as validly and effectively as a pastor. Absolution lies within the gospel; thus whoever speaks the gospel to a sinner

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<sup>1</sup> "Seventh Lecture on Justification," in *The Church and Her Treasure*, St. Louis, MO: Luther Academy, 2007, p 50.

brings him absolution; and if the sinner believes, then he has forgiveness of sins.... Absolution is nothing more nor less than the gospel.<sup>2</sup>

People in the pews should be confident of the authority of the pastor to declare forgiveness of sins. It is the authority of Christ. Pastors should speak with authority whenever they are speaking the Word of God. But we need to seek that authority and assurance where God has placed it. In the Word.

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<sup>2</sup> "Seventh Lecture on Justification," in *The Church and Her Treasure*, p 93.