

Institute for Christian Studies
FACULTY BULLETIN

Number 2
October, 1981

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The Institute for Christian Studies
1909 University Avenue
Austin, Texas 78705

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FOREWORD

Although the phrase “crisis of authority” has developed almost the status of cliché, the phenomenon to which it refers is nonetheless very real. We are clearly living in a time when the foundational values of Western civilization have eroded to a dangerous degree. This development, auguring the descent of a new Dark Age, presents the church with both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is that Christians no longer may merely assume that the momentum of Western Christendom will continue to provide an environment favorable to Christian faith and life. The church is challenged to re-examine and perhaps totally to rebuild a foundation capable of supporting free and faithful lives.

Yet, the erosion of traditional values also offers the church an opportunity to commend Christian faith to those who, in Isaiah’s words, “grope for the wall like the blind.” In unparalleled fashion, the present situation calls for the church to demonstrate the relevance of Christian faith. These essays are presented toward the end of encouraging Christian reflection regarding the many issues associated with the loss of authority in the wider society and in the church.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

RECOVERING THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH: A SERMON

Text: Matt. 10:1-15

By James Thompson

A well-known theme through literary works and plays has been the question: What would Christ have to do with Christianity? Behind that theme there is the almost universal admiration of Jesus, for Jesus is practically immune to criticism. It has been said that Jesus never had a better press or fewer enemies. He is claimed by a remarkably diverse spectrum of movements and ideologies. He is given high respect even by other religions. The reminders that Jesus remains highly admired are to be seen even in our popular music and our movies.

But would Christ have anything to do with Christianity? If it is true that Jesus never had a better press, this admiration does not extend to the popular view of the church. The usual criticism is that those who speak for him do not follow him, for they are more interested in their own kingdom, power and glory than in the authority of Christ. In one of the most compelling pieces of all literature, one writer imagined a return of Christ to the earth where an all-powerful, authoritative church was angered by his presence. The one who claimed to speak with his

authority finally said, “Go and return no more.” In the popular Broadway play, The Deputy, Rolf Hocchuth pictured Christ’s “deputies,” or “representatives,” as making every moral compromise in order to maintain their own power. Last year I came across a little poem entitled, “The Uninvited Wedding Guest,” which conveyed this sense of distance between Christ and those who speak for him.

The ladies bow in the cathedral bare-shouldered, even in prayer
coquettish and photogenic; While the men, burdened with the affairs
of commerce, look discretely at their wristwatches.

Softly as in the movies hums the liturgy for the festival of wealth and
elegance. Only one whispers softly, “Blasphemy!” The Lord. Alone,
he is totally ignored.

The poem suggests that the church can lose its way. The church may respect the words of Christ and admire him, but not follow him. It may even stand in a position of power and influence without submitting to the authority of Christ. For the author of the poem, the church was the place of power and elegance. Jesus Christ would have nothing to do with that kind of Christianity.

Would Christ have anything to do with our Christianity? I suggest that it is the responsibility of the disciples in every era to return to the words of Jesus in order to discover what he wants us to be. Our text tells about an incident in Jesus’ life where he summoned his disciples and gave them their job description. We are to recognize ourselves in those early disciples, for Jesus is speaking to the disciples in every age. Long ago in Matthew’s gospel we have read about “disciples,” or

“pupils,” whom Jesus called to be with him. Then we are told that Jesus gave an extended lesson on the lifestyle of the disciples. And on another occasion, we read about would-be disciples who came, saying, “I want to follow you” (Matt. 8:18-22). But only now, in the tenth chapter of Matthew, do we see what he wants of them--and us.

The Authority of Christ

“And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity.” The most striking fact about this statement is that Jesus “gave them authority.” It had been Jesus who had spoken “with authority, and not as the scribes” (Matt. 7:28). He had dared to speak on God’s behalf in declaring the holy will of the sovereign Lord. Others recognized that he spoke and acted with authority. A Roman centurion observed his authority when he came to Jesus asking for help for a gravely ill servant. “I am a man under authority,” he said, and he knew that authority involved being able to have one’s orders observed. “Only say the word,” said the centurion, “and my servant will be healed” (Matt. 8:8). He recognized in Jesus an authority that he had not witnessed before. It was the authority to act and speak for God.

At no point was the authority of Jesus more apparent than in Jesus’ call, “Follow me” (Matt. 4:19; 9:9). Those who left their occupations acknowledged his authority over their lives. There is also a claim of authority when Jesus sent his disciples out on the

mission recorded in our text. The whole chapter resonates with commands; Jesus speaks with authority to the disciples whom he sends out to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” They are told that life in his service will be immensely costly. It will involve risks and dangers. It will even separate disciples from their families and jeopardize their peaceful existence.

It has been said that we are a people who are allergic to authority. Paul Minear has written that we have an instinctive negative reaction to the word “command,” for the very notion of obeying a command raises hackles. Today it is universally held that freedom is a supreme value and that assertions of authority destroy that freedom. Even Jesus, who is universally admired, is not often obeyed. The lifestyles and ideologies which wish to praise him are not eager to obey his commands.

There is a very strong possibility that the church which sings the praises of Jesus is not inclined to obey him. Jürgen Moltmann has written that any talk of discipleship has been the “stepchild” of Protestantism. We have been uncomfortable in dealing with those hard sayings of Jesus which tell us that discipleship involves a life of obedience to his authority. We prefer to allow the discussion of discipleship to be taken over by fanatics, while we take comfort in his assurances of divine favor. We admire him, but we are disturbed by the claim of authority which dares say to us, “Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

But there is something in our text even more astounding than his claim to authority. It is the fact that he “gave authority to them.” They were not only sent out on a

mission; they were invited to share in the authority to speak on behalf of God! Jesus had much to do with this kind of Christianity. He chose a community to speak and act with his authority--to be, in fact, his "deputies" on earth.

We are that community. Our text reminds us that the church has been called into service to speak with authority. Jesus has called his disciples in all eras to share in the harvest, for which the laborers are few. He takes seriously our role in his mission, and he has paid us the supreme compliment of giving the church the authority to act on his behalf.

If we are a generation which is allergic to authority, imagine the reaction which any talk about an authoritative church will evoke! Many will accept the authoritative Christ in some vague way without accepting the authority of the church. There is the popular impression of churches as institutions determined to increase their power and glory, never capable of admitting their own failures. But this is not the kind of authority Jesus had in mind, for it was authority, and not power, which he placed into the hands of the disciples. They spoke with the authority, not of a sovereign, but of an ambassador. Their authority was only that which had been delegated to them in carrying forward the work of Jesus.

It is the task of an ambassador to faithfully reflect the tone, demeanor, and goals of his sovereign. His authority is genuine as long as he speaks and acts in a way that accurately reflects the intentions of the one who holds power. This is the authority which has been placed into the hands of the church. It is not absolute authority, but the

authorization to carry on the work which Jesus had begun.

Heal Every Disease . . .

The ambassadors of Christ are sent out with the specific authority over unclean spirits, so that they might “heal every disease and every infirmity.” It is that kind of work for which Jesus is remembered. “And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people” (Matt. 4:23). Those who knew little of his teachings knew him as the one who touched lives. He was never insulated from pain. Indeed, it has been said that wherever he went, the place looked like a hospital ward.

That world seems far removed from us. But I am certain that this picture of Jesus presents a continuing challenge to the church. It is always tempting to admire him at a distance rather than to follow him where there is pain. It is also tempting to focus our mission elsewhere. But he has given us the authority to be present where there is pain. He has much to do with that kind of Christianity.

And Say, The Kingdom of God is Near . . .

He gave us the authority to do more than relieve suffering. He saw those sheep without a shepherd, and he sent his disciples to share the good news with them. “Tell them, ‘the kingdom of God is near,’ said Jesus. That is, “Tell them that God is present, and that he offers hope and joy for aimless lives.” It was the message that Jesus himself

had proclaimed. Now the disciples were authorized to declare it.

The popular impression of the church is that we are a people who are always listening and repeating what someone else has already said. The church through the centuries has followed popular trends and movements in an attempt to “keep up” with the relevant slogans. Indeed, there is the temptation to be embarrassed about a proclamation that sounds a note that is not already being heard elsewhere. Could it be that the proclamation that the “kingdom of heaven is near” really makes a difference in anyone’s life? Or could it be that this one proclamation is one that we really find worth declaring?

As I reflect on the disciples who were sent out on a mission, I am impressed by a community which was utterly convinced that its message was worth telling. I am impressed by disciples who had a certainty that those who were like sheep without a shepherd needed to hear a clear voice with a sense of direction. When you recall their willingness to deny themselves for that clear message, you recognize that this simple proclamation gave the community its direction and reason for being. The community had the authority to proclaim.

But what has happened to the church’s authority to proclaim? Our temptation has been to turn inward and to give up on proclamation. We turn proclamation over to others because we are uncomfortable seeing ourselves as people with an authoritative word. But do we not live in a society which has countless people “like sheep without a shepherd?” We watch in amazement at the following gained by practically anyone who speaks with

authority. The growth of the cults in our own times suggests that there are people who are “like sheep without a shepherd.” They are looking for an authoritative message.

To his own disciples, Jesus said, “Do not go into the way of the Gentiles” (Matt. 10:5). There is no such restraint on us, for he sends us into our communities and neighborhoods with the declaration that the kingdom is near. The church lives by its mission to proclaim. Jesus has much to do with the Christianity which does not lose its way.

Credible Messengers

There is the need for more than a credible message. There is such a thing as “moral authority,” which is to be seen in the character of the messenger whose personal life is consistent with the message. “Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff.” The disciples had been liberated from the gods of this world. No longer did they need the securities on which others build their lives, for the disciples had learned to “seek first the kingdom.” Now the disciples’ priorities are clearly in evidence in their freedom from material things,

The church can only speak with authority for Christ when it is willing to pay the price of discipleship. We can scarcely declare that the kingdom is “like a treasure” if we have paid no price to have it.

The Names of the Disciples Were . . .

I must concede that this description of the authority of the church is difficult to

accept, for the church is incapable of living up to the responsibility which this authority involves. Those who criticize disciples from within and without will always have an easy task, for we are very inadequate ambassadors. We tremble to think what authority has been placed into our hands. He has both complimented and challenged us when he sent us on our mission.

Can we live up to this authority? When we return to the story and recall the names of those who were sent on a mission, it occurs to us that most of them are nothing more than names to us. Those who are known to us are remembered primarily for their failures. But for some reason, he called them and gave them authority. He gives authority also to us.

What does Christ have to do with Christianity? He calls us, places his authority in our hands, and sends us to do the work which he began. Too often we have, like the earliest disciples, misused the authority which he placed in our hands and lost our way. But he continues to summon us and send us out with full authority as his ambassadors.

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