

Word Alone

When I was on retreat the week before last, one of the pastors there was telling a story about how a toddler in his congregation greets him every Sunday by saying, “Hello, God!” It’s understandable how a young mind might put together that the person who leads worship in God’s house is God himself. You won’t believe it, but a few children have mistaken me for God over the years.

Now wouldn’t it be nice if God was as easily visible and easily accessible as a pastor? Whenever we had a question or a problem we could go and ask God face-to-face and get a quick, clear answer. But since God chooses not to appear in a bodily form to us here, how do we know what God wants to say to us? How do we know what God requires of us, what He wants us to do? Or, to ask the question in another way, where is authority located in the church? Let’s take a bit of a historical approach to answer that question.

Going back to the time of the Old Testament, Moses had a unique relationship with God. God spoke to Moses in a way he had not spoken to anyone else. The Hebrews knew that they could not stand to see God and speak with Him the way we speak to one another. His glory would be too much, too awesome for them. So God came to them through an intermediary, Moses. God shared with Moses the Ten Commandments and gave him authority to lead His people. Moses’ authority came directly from God and the people accepted that. Occasionally there were a few people who questioned Moses’ authority or rebelled against him, but God dealt with

them quickly and harshly because, in effect, they were rebelling against God.

It was a crisis, then, when Moses was about to die. Who would serve as the intermediary between God and His people when Moses was gone? Moses addressed that concern in his farewell speech to the Hebrews, which is preserved for us as the book of Deuteronomy. Moses tells them that after him will come more prophets -- or, perhaps, a prophet. The Hebrew sometimes isn't clear about singulars and plurals. The way that prophecy got worked out in the history of the Hebrews solved that linguistic ambiguity. There were indeed many more prophets who spoke the Word of the Lord to the people, although none of them was quite as great as Moses. But there was also a persistent hope among the Hebrews that one day a great prophet, another prophet like Moses, would arise among them.

Fast forward now to the early years of the New Testament and the ministry of Jesus. Jesus was preaching and teaching in a synagogue, and the people were amazed. What amazed them was the way Jesus spoke with authority. Specifically they said he spoke with authority unlike the scribes. The scribes were educated people and students of the Law of Moses. If I understand correctly, the problem with the scribe's teaching was that it often didn't resolve the questions the people had. When asked a question a scribe might have said, "Well, Rabbi So-and-so says this, but another rabbi says the opposite, and yet another rabbi says something different and..." and the question would go unanswered.

Conversely, Jesus spoke like Moses, with confidence and conviction. His opinions were not derivative or dependent on anyone else's ruminations. Jesus knew God's Word and what it meant. His teaching was clear, precise, and unambiguous. His interpretation of the scriptures was forthright and sometimes original. What else would we expect from the Son of God? Of course, at the time, before Jesus' death and resurrection, no one, at least no human being, knew Jesus was God. I say "no human being" because apparently the demons knew.

While Jesus was teaching in the synagogue a man with an unclean spirit was there. The unclean spirit recognized Jesus as the "Holy One of God," and Jesus rebuked the spirit and cast it out of the man. The point is clear: even this early in Jesus' ministry there is a war going on between good and evil. Jesus stands foursquare against anyone or anything that would trouble God's people. By the power of His Word, Jesus easily vanquished the demon. Jesus has the power to triumph over evil; he can create life and health where before there was only death and disease.

What does this mean to us and how does it concern our question, "Where is authority located in the church?" The head of the church, the ultimate authority, is Jesus Christ. The church confesses that belief in our constitution and other documents. That is what we mean when we say, "Jesus is Lord." Jesus is Lord of all, including heaven, earth, and the church. That's good, that's right and true, but since we can't talk to Jesus the way the people in that synagogue did 2000 years ago, how can we get direction from Jesus? How is Jesus' authority exercised today?

One answer to that question, a very logical answer that has been tried, is “through human intermediaries.” Moses represented God to the people. Jesus appointed apostles to go out and extend his ministry. Are there people today who serve a similar function mediating God’s authority to us today?

Lutheran congregations have pastors and the larger church has bishops, and every denomination has some sort of hierarchical structure. There certainly is a role for such administrators to play in the life of the church, but we wouldn’t want to say that any human being, or even any group of human beings, is incapable of error or holds unquestionable authority. Jesus said to his followers that the Pharisees sit on Moses seat (and that wasn’t a compliment) and Luther pointed out at his trial for heresy that even bishops and church Councils have sometimes contradicted each other. No human being, not you, not me, no one fully stands in the place of the Lord -- even though we sometimes greet ourselves each morning with “Hello, God!”

Okay, so if humans don’t mediate God’s authority, who or what does? Consider this: Moses spoke the word God gave him. In the Nicene Creed we confess that the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets, the prophets that followed Moses. Jesus fulfilled the prophecy that a great prophet like Moses, in fact a prophet greater than Moses, would arise. By his Word Jesus accomplished great feats of power, such as casting out unclean spirits. And we know Jesus, whom we have already said is the ultimate authority in the church, to be, as the Evangelist John describes him, the Word of God himself in human flesh. It follows then that the authority in the church, Jesus’ vehicle for being present among us, is the Word of God. The Word mediates God’s presence to us and the Word comes to us through the

physical means God has ordained for that purpose, the sacraments, and the Bible, which is the written Word. Our final authority is the Word.

We might say then that salvation comes from Christ alone. He alone is our Savior; our salvation is dependent on his cross. That God would offer us salvation is a result of his grace alone. We cannot earn salvation, it only comes through God's love which we call grace. We receive that grace through faith alone. When we acknowledge our ultimate dependence of God, that is the faith alone which receives God's promises. And we hear about these promises through the Word alone. No human philosophy, no study of nature, can reveal God to us. Only God's Word alone gives the wisdom and mind of Christ. The Word alone is sufficient for us; we don't need anything else to be God's people. We don't need a certain style building, we don't need a certain style of organization, we don't need a certain style of political opinions, all we need is the Word alone.

So how do we know what God is directing us to do? How do we know what God is speaking to us today? It's all right there in Holy Scripture. True, it is not always easy to understand what the Bible says. And attempts to dumb down the Bible and make it easier to understand usually just twist its message and take us off in the wrong direction. Some things in the Bible are plain and simple. Some other concepts may take years of study to understand. Having wise guides help, but not every guide is wise. It helps to study with others, but God's truth can't be decided by a majority vote.

So what is it that God is calling us to do? If we go back to Mark chapter 2, verse 15, we see that the message Jesus was preaching in the synagogue was

simply, “The Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Good News.” That’s our starting point, our base line. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus began a new era of history. To be part of this Jesus movement we need to repent, that is turn away from our self-centered, self-indulgent lifestyles and rely on the gospel for our salvation. Everything else God has in store for us in our lives will flow out from that basic truth and we will be guided by His word. As our lives unfold, we offer Him our thanks and praise. Amen.