



*Faith comes by hearing
and hearing by the
Word of God. Romans 10:17*

THE AUTHORITY OF GOD'S WORD

*"These things speak, and exhort, and
rebuke with all authority. Let no man
despise thee."*

- Titus 2:15

The Authority of God's Word

The apostle Paul, of course, is writing to Titus who is his disciple and who has been given the assignment of establishing and strengthening churches on the island of Crete. And he says to him in chapter 2, verse 15, "These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you."

The word that strikes me like a thunderbolt is the word "authority." His responsibility is to speak with authority. The preacher is not a story teller. He is not even a theologian. He is not primarily an explainer. His responsibility is not simply to share insights. He is not primarily a counselor. All that is part of what he is. But primarily he is a commander. The word "authority" is the word *epitag*, and every other time it is used in the New Testament it is translated "command" or "commandment." Only here did the translators take the liberty to change that and instead of saying, "These things speak and exhort and reprove with all commandment," they changed it to "authority." But it doesn't change the intent of the Holy Spirit. It is saying to the preacher, "You are to speak as one who commands." In 1 Timothy chapter 4 we read in verse 11, "Command" - again, another word but meaning the same thing – "command and teach these things." There is to be a tone in the proclamation of the Word of God that is the tone of commandment.

If we were to go back a little bit and just follow this thought, we would start with the preaching of Jesus. And we would be reminded that having completed the great Sermon on the Mount, which is recorded for us in the main in Matthew 5-7, Jesus finished the sermon in verse 27. It says in verses 28 and 29 of Matthew 7 the result was that when Jesus had finished these words, the multitudes "were amazed at His teaching." And what amazed them? "He was teaching them as one having authority," "authority." He spoke in a commanding tone.

In Mark chapter 1, verse 22 we read, "And they were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. And just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit and he cried out, saying, 'What are we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth. Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!' And Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be quiet and come out of him!' And throwing him

into convulsions, the unclean spirit cried out with a loud voice and came out of him. They were all amazed, so they debated among themselves saying, 'What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.'"

In the fourth chapter of Luke, again introducing the next gospel, we find the very same emphasis. Verse 36, "An amazement came upon them all, and they began discussing with one another saying, 'What is this message? For with authority and power He commands.'"

In the gospel of John - not to be left out - the seventh chapter of John, and the forty-sixth verse. The officers answered after a very brief confrontation with Jesus this familiar statement: "'Never did a man speak the way this man speaks.'"

Jesus commanded. Jesus spoke authoritatively. Jesus spoke unhesitatingly, unequivocally. Jesus gave mandates, not suggestions. In Mark chapter 11 He was confronted by the chief priests and the scribes and the elders and they came to Him, and this whole idea of His authority bothered them profoundly, and in verse 28 it says, "They began saying to Him, 'By what authority are You doing these things, or who gave You this authority?'" "You burst on the scene. You never quote the rabbis. You have no footnotes in Your sermons. You quote nothing and no one. And you come off with what are surely not suggestions but are commandments. Where do You get this authority?" That's the question.

Was it two thousand years of Jewish tradition that somehow He had absorbed and condensed down into some really pithy axioms and delivered back to the people, and thereupon gained authority because it was really familiar stuff that they were used to hearing? Was it because He was articulating the current, reigning theology of the most popular teachers? Was it because He was saying things that the surveys indicated people believed? Or maybe His authority came from His office. Maybe His authority came from His title. Maybe it came from His training. Maybe it came from His degrees. Maybe it came from His school. Well, maybe His authority came from His imposing looks. Maybe it was the incredible bearing of the man that just carried the weight of authority. Maybe it came from His style. Maybe it came from His voice. One can only imagine what His voice sounded like. Maybe it came from His unequaled, almost incomprehensible communication skill.

Good guesses, but they're not right. Turn with me, for a moment, to John 7. And I told you I was going to deal with one verse, but I didn't tell you we were going to go all over the place to explain it. John chapter 7 - this is so wonderful - and verse 14, "But when it was now the midst of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach." This is, I mean, this is such a remarkable thing because He steps right into the venue of the theologians that He is assaulting. It would be like me - there's a Jewish synagogue in the midst of this block, and the largest Buddhist temple west of the Mississippi on the other end. But I confess that I preach my sermons here. Jesus went to the synagogue. He went to the domain of the reigning theology that He intended to dismantle. And it was in that place that He commanded. And so it tells us in verse 14 that He began to teach. "And the Jews therefore were marveling, saying, 'How has this man become learned, having never been educated?' And Jesus therefore answered them and said, 'My teaching is not Mine.'" There's the first clue. "'My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me.'"

Where did He get His authority? It didn't come from Him. This was part of the great reality of the kenosis, that He emptied Himself of His own divine prerogatives. He says, "If a man is willing to do His will," in verse 17, "he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself" - listen to this - "he who speaks from himself seeks his own glory." Do you know why men give their own opinion? That answers it. "He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who is seeking the glory of the One who sent Him, He is true, and there is no unrighteousness in Him." What a statement. In effect He says, "My authority comes because I don't speak My own opinions. I don't speak for Myself; I speak for God who sent Me."

Go over to chapter 8 for a moment and verse 28: "Jesus therefore said" - and again He's in this rather constant dialogue with the current Jewish leaders, and He says - "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me." Go down to verse 38, "I speak the things which I have seen with My Father." Go down to verse 40, "But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God." May I be so bold as to say to you that I could pray no greater prayer than that that would be my life testimony? I told you the truth, which I heard from God.

In chapter 12, verses 49 and 50, there are some books of the New Testament we will skip in this study. John 12, verses 49 and 50, ““For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me commandment what to say and what to speak. And I know that His commandment is eternal life.”” In other words, “If I speak the word which God has given Me, it produces eternal life.” ““Therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me.”” Where did Jesus get His authority? It was because He spoke - What? - the Word of God. That's where He got His authority. He could command because He was reiterating what God had said. And the preacher has authority - listen carefully - but only when he repeats what God has said – only, only.

You say, "You mean you don't have the authority to tell them to paint the wall green?" No. My authority ends when I step outside the pages of Scripture; that's the only authority I have. And if my Lord said, "I speak what the Father tells Me to say," I couldn't imagine a nobler model than that, could you? People say, "Why do you exposit the Word of God with such care? Why do you go through every verse? Why do you go through every word? Why?" Do you understand why now? The preacher's authority comes when he speaks the Word of God. And he has to speak it in the same commanding, demanding way that God intended it to be heard. "Go into all the world," Jesus said, "and when you go, make disciples. And as you make disciples, teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have - Suggested to you? - commanded you," right?

What Paul charges Timothy to do in 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy is “preach the word.” And what he's charging Titus to do - go back now to Titus - what he's charging Titus to do is essentially the same thing. He is saying, "These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority." This isn't, this isn't something overbearing. This isn't a matter of exercising his own personal prerogatives and the power of his own personality or ideas. He is telling Titus to do what I believe God would have every single preacher who has ever lived do, and that is to preach “with authority,” commanding men by virtue of the Scripture to understand what God has said and obey it. That's what we do. And this authority is comprehensive and unassailable so that he says at the end of the verse, "Let no one disregard you." Don't let anybody around it. Periphrone is a Greek word that means “to circumvent.” Don't let anybody try to find their way around the implications of the confrontation of a commanding word from God.

"These things," the verse begins, "these things," and that identifies the content of our preaching. What things? Go back to verse 1: "Speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine." And he's gone on to discuss those things including the great, marvelous reality of the gospel, which has been the immediate theme from verses 11-14. "These things which are sound doctrine, which God has revealed, are the things you are to speak."

This is your responsibility. The content is the Word of God. That's why 2 Timothy 4:2 says, "Preach the word." As I said Sunday morning, "in season and out of season." You can argue about what that means specifically, but in the end there're only two possible times: "in season and out of season." Therefore it must mean all the time. This brief passage confines the ministry to some narrow, narrow boundaries. Simply command people by repeating to them the commands of God on the pages of Scripture.

Instead of urging Timothy in 2 Timothy 4, instead of urging Titus here to devise a ministry that would garner accolades from the world, he urged him to preach what God commanded and prepare to endure the suffering that would inevitably come. Even hardship to the point of death - hardly the stuff of modern church-growth advocates' aspirations. Give them what they may not want to hear and tell them what they may not want to do. Tragically, we have really defected from this. When is the last time you heard a commanding preacher? When is the last time you heard a man preach with great authority and call you to obedient response to the truth of God, which had been elucidated in your presence from the pages of Scripture so that it captivated your mind?

The content is the Word of God. The method is threefold, verse 15: "speak, exhort, reprove." "Speak" - all that refers to is say it so they hear it and understand it. Proclaim it so they hear it and understand it. "Exhort" - say it so they believe it and appropriate it. "Reprove" - hold them responsible to obey it and submit to it.

We preach, then, to accomplish three things: understanding, belief, and obedience. That's the threefold issue. And the force with which this comes is that statement "with all authority and let no one disregard you." There's a sense in which - and I know I'm weighing heavy on this side, but it's so little talked about - there's a sense in which the preacher is an enforcer. I don't, I don't invent the message. It's my responsibility to give it to the sheep, and as much as is within me by faithful exposition, passionate proclamation, so that they can hear it with

understanding, believe it, grasp it, and obey it. I am to enforce it in their lives. I have a responsibility to hold my people to the truth which they understand.

One of the things I confess to you that's true about our church is if you come to this church, you will hear the Word of God. You will hear it every time you come here. You will hear the Scriptures expounded every Sunday you come here, in the morning and in the evening and every other time you come here, and generally to every class you come to. You will hear the Word of God elucidated, and you will hear it in a way that it will be understandable to you, and the application of that you will be able to grasp. And you will be called to believe it as the Word of the living God, and therefore you will be conscience-bound if you're God's child to obey it. We are not to allow people to disregard this Word.

Now, you know, today there is a lot of authority kind of floating around in the Christian realm. I want to digress a little bit. There's a lot of authority floating around in the Christian realm that is illegitimate authority. Let me talk about that because the Bible does speak of this. I just was reminded in my mind of Jeremiah 5, verses 30 and 31. One of the benefits of writing the study Bible was going through every verse in the Bible and finding a lot of things I didn't know about before, which has lengthened most of my sermons because I keep injecting all this information. But in Jeremiah chapter 5, verses 30 and 31, listen to what the prophet says, “An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land.” Now you get the idea that this is something pretty serious: “an appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land. The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule on their own authority.” So we know from what Jeremiah said that it is possible for somebody to usurp authority they don't really deserve, they don't have.

Let me talk about that for a minute. There are at least four categories of illegitimate authority that I would bring to your attention. Number one is personal authority. There are people who think that they have some power in them, some great authority in them that is in themselves. They may say it is by virtue of salvation, and it's by virtue of the power of the Holy Spirit granted to them, and all of that, but they have the idea that in them is some authority. And some of them believe they have authority that is essentially equal to Jesus and the apostles so that they can do what Jesus and the apostles did, like cast out demons and heal the sick and raise the dead. Such people endeavor to exercise that authority, going around supposedly binding Satan, binding demons, taking authority over disease and death. And

sometimes even exercising a certain amount of authority in the realm of holy angels, calling them to certain duties. And in a very brash and strange way very often telling God what they would like for Him to do. And frankly, they are commanding where they have no jurisdiction. They're commanding where they have no authority.

The apostles had that great authority. It was given to them by the Lord Jesus Himself. In Matthew 10:1 they could cast demons out, which they did - always out of unbelievers. They had power over disease and occasionally power over death. We know that. But there are some people who believe that they exercise that same kind of authority when, in fact, the Scripture doesn't indicate that it ever went past the apostles. That's why 2 Corinthians 12:12 says, "The signs of an apostle were performed among you with all signs and wonders and miracles." And if "signs, wonders and miracles" are a sign of an apostle and everybody can do them, then they can't be a sign of an apostle.

Some even think they have authority over sin, thinking they can forgive sin. This goes on in the Roman Church where priests are told that they can somehow grant absolution to people one way or another through some means, mechanical means, ceremonies and rituals. This is an illusion. We bear no authority over the realm of darkness. We bear no personal authority over Satan. We have no authority over sin. We have no authority over the souls of men. We have no authority over holy angels. We have no authority over God.

There's a second area of mistaken authority, and I guess we could call it church authority, or ecclesiastical authority. There are many who believe that the church literally is the authority in the world in spiritual matters. And this too is an illusion. It's a false and destructive attitude. And people in churches are commanding where they have no jurisdiction. I suppose most notably, historically, we would draw to our attention the Roman Catholic Church, which has tried to take all authority over the souls of men and nations by virtue of church teaching - not in the Bible - which we know is the magisterium, the compendium of tradition that has developed based on their view of apostolic succession, papal infallibility, and continuing revelation beyond the Bible. The Church has taken its creeds and its traditions, its articles of faith, its ex cathedra pronouncements, its councils, etc., and created what is called "the magisterium," a body of authoritative teaching by which the Church exercises extra-biblical power over the souls of men and women. It propagates doctrines like purgatory, treasury of merit, penance, the perpetual virginity and co-redemptive work of Mary, and all of those

kinds of things which are not in the Bible, and holds men and women to those things. It pronounces upon them disastrous results for certain kinds of sins and treats other kinds of sins as trivial. The Roman Catholic Church in its own eyes is the final authority, the only legitimate, true, and perfect interpreter of Scripture. It has every right therefore to command people to adhere to its dogmas and to its commands. In fact, the Word is under the church.

The Eastern Orthodox Church claims authority and liturgy over the, over the people who are in it. And they basically claim it as a result of the infallibility of seven church councils. The first one was in 325 at Nicaea. This last was in 787 at Nicaea. And during that period there were seven ecumenical councils which formed the magisterium of the Orthodox Church, which is also binding on the souls of men. They agree with Rome that the Church, only their Church, can speak infallibly in tradition and articles of faith, and that the Church exists over Scripture.

True Christianity has always said this: the Word is not under the church; the Word is over the church. The church is not the authority over the Word or over the souls of men. The Word is the authority over the church and the souls of men. God is the final authority. He has given His authoritative commands by divine revelation through the prophets and apostles who wrote the Bible. The only authority in the universe, the only true authority is God, and the expression of His authority is in the Word of God. And I'll say it as clearly as I can: all binding spiritual commandments come from Him through the Scripture alone, alone. Popes have no authority. Councils have no authority. Fathers have no authority. Creeds have no authority. Articles have no authority. Traditions have no authority. And new revelations have no authority. Mark 7:8 says, "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." Nothing new today.

So the only authoritative word from God is the Bible. And therefore, the preacher who is to speak with all authority has no possible task beyond proclaiming the Bible. No word outside the Bible is authoritative, no word. No word outside the Bible is authoritative in the realm of the soul. And God has demanded that we preach His Word in a way that can be heard and understood, believed and appropriated, submitted to and obeyed. And when men and women will not hear it with understanding, and believe and appropriate it, and submit and obey, there are serious consequences. Is that not true? For the unbelievers the consequences are eternal hell, and that is so profoundly serious as to shake us to the very root. And for believers who

will not submit and obey the authority of the Word, there is the promise of chastening. To deny that Scripture is the only authority, I believe, is a form of blasphemy.

There's another mistaken notion about authority. I guess we could call it rational authority. It is, it is helpful to have a good mind and use it. But your ideas and my ideas and anybody else's ideas make no contribution to redemption, either to salvation or sanctification. And it's fine for me to share my ideas and you to share your ideas, and that's all well and good and there might be some helpful, practical matters that we do in sharing our ideas that have some great influence. But in the end, the only thing that matters is the Word of the living God. And if our words help to clarify the truth of God, help to apply the Word of God, to enrich the Word of God in the understanding of the given people at a given place and time, then that's what God asks of us. But if we offer our words independent of Scripture, as if they bear some authority because of our intellectual ability, that's a false authority. Reason at best is limited, fallen, selfish, protective, ego-centered, self-justifying, and sinful. And the best you can do with your best ideas - your best concepts - the best you can do is only temporal, right? Because when it comes to eternal matters, only the Word of God deals with those. Only the Word of God makes the dead so alive. Only the Word of God sanctifies. Reason can't get men to salvation, and it can't get men to sanctification. Only the Word of God can when presented in a reasonable way, in an understandable way.

So that's why we have to lift up the Word of God. We need men who take all their skills, all their mental skills, all their emotional passion, all their creativity and apply it to the exposition of the Word of God, so that they can bring to bear on any culture, on any person, at any time, the richness of Scripture. We shouldn't be assuming that somehow our ideas have any redemptive merit.

And I guess we could throw in a fourth kind of false authority, which we would call experiential authority. I remember a lady said to me one time, "I really don't care what the Bible said, I know what Jesus told me." And I know that's the kind of bizarre and offbeat comment, but it's not too far from the truth of things that you see and hear today. It always concerns me when - just a couple of weeks ago a lady came to me in another place where I was preaching and said, "You know, I need to talk with you because the Lord told me to tell you something."

How do you know when the Lord's telling you something? Is there a red light on your head that starts spinning? How do you know? How do you know when the Lord is telling you something? I believe the Lord leads through His Holy Spirit. I believe God has providentially ordered the circumstances of my life. I believe the steps of a good man are ordered by God. I believe I'm living out the unfolding of God's will for my life in a wonderful and unfolding way. But I have no clue what God is doing in that process. I have no physical way to sense that. Nothing happens to me. No light goes on, no bells ring, nothing buzzes. As far as I know, in my entire life God has never said anything to me. I've never heard anything, and I've never felt anything. What God has to say to me He wrote down. Yes, I believe He's leading. Yes, I believe He's prompting my life. Yes, I believe His Spirit is directing. But I don't have any physical way to sense that invisible work of God. I believe that the Spirit of God lives in me. I can't feel that.

There's no authority in your experience. You can't base any kind of doctrinal conclusion on your experience, on what happened to you. You see, there's only one authority, and that's the Word of God. That's it. J.I. Packer wrote back in 1986, "The Bible is the real preacher, and all the role of the man in the pulpit of the counseling conversation is to simply let the passages say their piece through him." Now that just defines expository preaching to me. "Let the passages say their piece through him. For the preacher to reach the point where he no longer hinders or obstructs his text from speaking is harder work than is sometimes realized." What a great statement.

You know my biggest problem? To get myself out of that passage, not myself into it. Somebody says to me, "What does that verse mean to you?" Who cares? You don't care what it means to me. What does it mean to God is the issue. What would it mean if I never lived? It doesn't mean one thing to me and one thing to you. The toughest thing is to get my presuppositions out of that passage. And, you know, when I know somebody in the church who is giving me a bad time, I want to make that passage preach to them, you know, how do I get that out of there? All those presuppositions and all those bents, and then I've got a really great outline, and three points work and point four doesn't. How do I tweak the verse to fit the outline, you know? I've got to get myself out of there. And that's the real battle.

Packer closes that little comment by saying, "There can be no disputing that this is the great task, get yourself out of that passage. Get all your presuppositions out of that passage. Get

all your ideas and attitudes out of that passage and let the passage say its piece through you.” Packer writes on another page in that same article, "Preaching that does not display divine authority, both in its content and in its manner, is not the substance but only the shadow of the real thing," end quote. Great statement. Preaching is being the voice through which God commands, and only as the preacher is under the Word can he command anything, anything.

I really believe God desires authoritative preaching. I really do believe that God wants us to speak directly to the souls of men in the second person - you. And sadly there's little of that today, little of it. And the biggest hindrance is usually the preacher. It is for me.

Again Packer writes in another journal article, "Self-projection undermines and erodes authority. If by his words and manner the preacher focuses attention on himself, thus modeling some mode of self-absorption or self-satisfaction rather than humble response to the Word that he proclaims, he precludes all possibility of channeling any sense of divine authority."

He says this, “James Denney said, ‘You cannot convey the impression both that you are a great preacher and that Jesus Christ is a great Savior.’” Take your pick. God projection, Christ projection, must win the day over self-projection if you want to have a sense of divine authority in your preaching.

I confess that such commanding is not what people want to hear. And I confess personally that I've suffered some slings and arrows because I feel this is what God has called me to do. I want to do it in a gracious way. I want to do it in a loving way. But I cannot equivocate on the Word of the living God, and I must preach it with authority, not my own authority, not the authority of the church or an office, but the authority of the Word of God. But we live in an anti-authority day, don't we? People are used to poor preaching. They're used to low expectations. They just want to come, be briefly interested, psychologically bumped up a few notches. Anybody who is harsh, judgmental, seems insensitive and out of touch. They especially like spontaneity in their sermons, off-the-cuff preaching. They don't have a real appetite for well-prepared, profound, challenging, rich, insightful, provocative, deep-thinking truth. And when you give them a big dose of theology, they don't know what to do with it because they don't have any category to stick it in. It's like a foreign language. And we live in a day when there's a whole anti-authority spirit, isn't there? I mean, everybody is against

every authority. So it's not a real good time to be an authoritative preacher from the world's view. But I don't have to answer to them. I do have to answer to the God who called me to preach His Word.

Well, Paul told Titus and all the rest of us preachers these things. “Speak and exhort and reprove with all authority, and let no one disregard you.”