

As One Without Authority

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During a brief stint when I taught Homiletics, I gathered a number of books on the art of preaching, one of which had a title which struck me and has always remained with me - *As One Without Authority*. It was authored by Fred Craddock, perhaps the premier professor of preaching in the country for over three decades. The title registered so deeply with me because it was the most concise and profound description of the preacher I had ever encountered. First published in 1971, the book was Craddock's response to the "crisis of preaching" which was being widely discussed at the time. Preaching had been receiving very negative press, the whole discipline called in question, and there was experimentation in alternatives to the traditional sermon.

In the wake of the tumultuous sixties and the challenge to all of society's structures and institutions, including the church, there was serious doubt as to the viability of the church in general and especially the sermon as an effective instrument of communication in particular. Craddock addressed the issue head on, acknowledging the legitimacy of much of the criticism of traditional preaching, but affirming his continuing confidence in the place and power of the spoken word.

But the only hope for preaching in the present historical context was for the preacher to recognize that he or she was "as one without authority." Of course, this had been true since the rise of the Modern age, especially in the wake of the Enlightenment, and classical Liberalism of the nineteenth century was an attempt to accommodate the Christian faith tradition to the knowledge of the modern world. The Liberal movement was a recognition of the loss of all forms of authoritarianism - of tradition in Eastern orthodoxy, of the church in Roman Catholicism, and the Bible in Protestantism. Still, in large measure, these respective confessional traditions managed to ward off the acids of modernity and operate as though the traditional sources of authority remained in place.

That was my experience. Graduating from seminary in 1960 and assuming my first pastorate in Spring Lake in the congregation I now serve (although after four years I left for a period of seven years, returning in 1971), I came armed with "the authoritative Word of God." The Bible, inspired by the Holy Spirit, was inerrant and infallible. The preacher's authority lay in the faithful exposition of the biblical text. Even though serious biblical criticism had been around since the late eighteenth century, it was not seriously engaged in the conservative evangelical tradition.

But, after seven years of pastoral experience and preaching, I found my authoritarian foundation crumbling. As I became aware of a critical approach to scripture, it was no longer possible for me simply to assert, "The Bible says" I had to begin again. I needed a new foundation if I were to continue in a preaching ministry. A European pilgrimage that lasted for four years was not simply a quest for an academic degree, but an existential quest for a religious faith I could believe in with intellectual integrity and preach with authenticity. My search and research were intensive - and the quest continues, but of this I became convinced - there is no authoritarian claim that can ground authentic religious experience, whether the claim be grounded in tradition, church or scripture. The witness to religious experience - in my case, the witness of the preacher, is precisely that - it is witness. One stands within a valued tradition, the tradition is embodied in a community, and the community has a founding story which is the font of the tradition. One may believe the founding vision or event was the revelation, the manifestation, of the Sacred, of the Mystery that grounds Reality, but the expression that gives witness to the vision or that relates the event is human expression. All of the great religious traditions are human, imaginative constructs issuing from the founding experience. Someone has written that all of our present religions are the ossified remains of past prophetic and ecstatic visions.

This being the case, one who preaches does so as "one without authority" - one witnesses to that of which one is convinced is good and true and beautiful in order to challenge, inspire, encourage, and comfort those who constitute the community. The preacher knows the tradition through long study and experience and seeks to understand the wisdom and insight that have come to expression in the tradition. And one must know one's own world, as well, having a sensitivity to present human experience, an awareness of what is playing upon one's contemporaries. Only then is one ready to address the community gathered in worship hoping to hear some word that will illumine the human situation.

That word must come with authority, but without authoritarian claim. Dietrich Bonhoeffer described the difference thus:

Someone can only speak to me with authority if a word from the deepest knowledge of my humanity encounters me here and now in all my reality; any other word is impotent. The word of the Church to the world must therefore encounter the world in all its present reality from the deepest

knowledge of the world, if it is to be authoritative. The Church must be able to say the Word of God, the word of authority, here and now, in the most concrete way possible, from knowledge of the situation.

One can see the distinction between authority and authoritarian claim in the comment in the Gospel of Matthew at the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount:

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

The scribes represented the professional religious leadership, guardians of the tradition, whose office had authority, who operated within the established structures of an official religious institution. They made authoritarian claims, but something about Jesus' teaching outside the authorized system carried its own intrinsic authority - Jesus spoke to people and the word found resonance within them because he touched the vital nerve of their present existence. He pierced through to their soul; though he was one without authority, the integrity and authenticity of his word carried weight.

Religion in general and Christianity in particular have been marked by authoritarian claims and have sought to control the people. Dostoevsky has the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov* rail at Jesus,

Thou didst desire man's free love, that he should follow thee freely,... there are three powers, three powers alone, able to conquer and to hold captive for ever the conscience of these impotent rebels for their happiness - those forces are miracle, mystery and authority. Thou hast rejected all three and hast set the example for doing so.

Authority in the sense of an authoritarian claim has marked much of the story of the Church, but its day is past and, where it still exists and even seems to thrive, it is the shrill last gasp of a dying enterprise. What is true for the preacher who is as one without authority is true for all areas of religious leadership if we are seeking a spiritual religious experience, or a religion of Spirit.

After some fifteen billion years this amazing cosmic drama on whose stage we have appeared relatively so recently has seen the emergence of Spirit. Whether one would speak of purpose and intentionality or prefer, rather, simply to stand in awed awareness at the creative process and revel in the mystery and miracle of the gift of life and of consciousness that enables one to contemplate the wonder of it all and be grateful, the fact is we know of a spiritual dimension as part of our human existence. And where there is Spirit, there is freedom. Where there is Spirit, there is non-coercion. Where there is Spirit, there is no authoritarian claim.

For the preacher, for the religious leader, for the whole enterprise of the Spirit, one must be as one without authority. In the Spirit, one bears witness to one's truth and it will find resonance or not; one offers a vision or a dream and it is embraced or not; to enforce one's word or demand adherence to one's plan can occur only in the absence of the Spirit.

One will see it or not, understand it or not, offer allegiance or not. The Spirit's word and way must be embraced freely, affirmation being elicited without threat or coercion, for the Spirit has no power, is completely vulnerable - helpless unless one sees and freely follows. The Spirit is as one without authority and all that is spiritual is defenseless against contradiction.

Spirit needs form and too often form is the death of Spirit. The institutionalizing of the Spirit in structures necessitates order and power and thus the dilemma and the question whether a spiritual institution is possible. The greater the success in terms of numbers, facilities, and staff, the greater the threat to the Spirit. The larger the program, the greater the need for large budgets and administrative oversight. Strategies for success seldom begin with the imperative to guard and protect the fragile and vulnerable Spirit.

Yet, just as from matter has arisen Spirit embodied in the human, so the human needs community as the embodiment of Spirit. There is no other way. But, let the one who would address a word to such a community and one who would lead such a community recognize that such a one will always be as one without authority.

That strong and vibrant religious institutions are possible is without question. History is replete with examples of dominating, controlling institutional religions ascribing their prosperity and power to the blessing of God. Triumphalism and arrogant assertion of divinely vested authoritarian rule have been ever present in the annals of religious history. Whitehead, in his *Process and Reality* writes,

When the Western world accepted Christianity, Caesar conquered ... The brief Galilean vision of humility flickered throughout the ages, uncertainly ... The Church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar.

Speaking of the Galilean origin of Christianity, Whitehead claims,

It does not emphasize the ruling Caesar, or the ruthless morality, or the unmoved mover. It dwells upon the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love; and it finds purpose in the present immediacy of a Kingdom not of this world. Love neither rules, nor is it unmoved; also it is a little oblivious as to morals. It does not look to the future, for it finds its own reward in the immediate present. (pp. 519f)

Surveying the religious landscape, one wonders if the fragile flower of the Spirit can survive, whether there will be eyes to see and ears to hear that truth that comes to expression without authority.