

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Authority of the Preacher

Scripture: Titus 2:15

Code: 80-133

Turn to Titus 2:15 if you will. And I want to direct your attention if I might to one verse as a setting for some things I want to say to those of you who are here for our conference. This is really your time and my time to minister to you.

As I was smoothing through the book of Titus in my preaching I came to verse 15 and it didn't strike me as anything important at first as I planned how I might incorporate it into the exposition of the text. The verse says, "These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you."

The first reading, it didn't seem to me that there was anything very theological there or anything very new. But just the week that I went back to prepare particularly to preach this verse and the following section because there's a flow there, I read that verse and it hit my like a thunderbolt. And I couldn't get past it.

And what struck me was the word authority. I can remember sitting back in my chair after I read that word and every bit of my thought process came to a grinding halt with reference to a sermon. And I just begin to meditate on the word authority.

The apostle Paul is telling Titus that he is to proclaim with authority. I thought about the fact that the teacher is not telling stories, he's not really theologizing; he's not really explaining or sharing insights or counseling. All that may be a part of what he's doing, but what he's really doing is commanding.

The word authority is the word epitagein the Greek. In every other New Testament used it is translated command or commandment. Only here is it translated authority. That's a good translation. It means to speak as one who commands.

The apostle Paul had essentially said the same thing to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4 when he said to him in verse 11, "Command and teach these things." When he said to him in 2 Timothy 4:2, as was read to you earlier, "Preach the word. Be in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort with great patience and instruction." There is a commanding tone to biblical ministry.

I began to think too to the fact that Jesus certainly preached as one having authority. The end of the Sermon on the Mount as indicated in Matthew 7:29, "The people were struck because He spoke as one having authority." That authority is marked out in the first chapter of Mark. That authority is

marked out in the fourth chapter of Luke. It is marked out again in the seventh chapter of John. In fact, they went so far as to say, "Never did any man speak as this man speaks." He doesn't quote the rabbis; He doesn't footnote anything He says; He just speaks commandingly and authoritatively.

And, in fact, in Mark 11:28 they went to him and they said, "By what authority do you do this?" What is the source of this authority? How is it that everything you say comes across as a command? Was it two thousand years of Jewish tradition that gave Him His authority? Was it because He was in line with the reigning theology of the time? Was it because He was lining up with the popular views of the people? Was it His office? Was it His title? Was it His training? Was it His looks? Was it His style? Was it His voice? Was it His communicating skill? Was it His oratory? What gave Him His authority? Where did it come from?

Now the answer comes to us so clearly in the gospel of John, if not many other places, in verse 14. "It was in the midst of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach. The Jews therefore were marveling, saying, 'How has this man become learned never having been educated?' Jesus, therefore, answered them and said, 'My teaching is not mine but His who sent me. If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching. Whether it is of God or whether I speak from myself. He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory, but he who is seeking the one who sent him, he is true and there is no unrighteousness in him.'

What He was simply saying there was, "I don't speak for myself. I speak what God tells me to speak," and therein was His authority.

In chapter 8 of John's gospel in verse 28, at the end of the verse he said, "I speak these things as the Father taught me." In verse 38, "I speak the things which I have seen with my Father." Verse 40, "I am a man who told you the truth which I heard from God." John 12:49 and 50, "I did not speak on my own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent me has given me commandments what to say and what to speak. And I know that His commandment is eternal life. Therefore, the things I speak I speak just as the Father has told me."

The reason Jesus had authority when He spoke was because He always spoke the word of God. The preacher's authority comes when he speaks the word of God and no other time. And to speak the word of God is to command, isn't it?

The Bible isn't full of suggestions. It's full of commandments. Jesus reminded us that when we go into all the world and make disciples, we are to teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.

We are commanders. We speak with authority. Not just authority, go back to Titus 2:15, "We speak with all authority." That is to say the authority is unassailable and the authority is comprehensive.

What the apostle Paul is charging Titus to do is what all preachers must do. And that is to preach with a commanding tone the word of God. He suggests there are three aspects of that commanding. There is speaking, there is exhorting and there is reproofing.

Those are important words. I want to suggest to you what they mean. To speak means to tell something so that people can hear and understand. To exhort means to force that truth upon them in such a way that they believe and appropriate. And to reprove means to take action so that they obey and submit.

So what are we after? Hearing, believing and obeying. We speak authoritatively so that they can hear and understand. We speak authoritatively so they can believe and appropriate. We speak authoritatively so that they can obey and submit their lives to that which they believe for that which they have heard.

And what is it that we speak? First two words of verse 15, "these things." What are "these things?" Go back to verse one. They are the things which are fitting for sound doctrine. These things have to do with sound doctrine, divine revelation, right back to the word of God which is the emphasis, of course, all through the Pastoral Epistles.

Now, this brief passage confines the ministry to some very narrow boundaries. We are commanders. We speak with authority. The only authority we have comes from the word of God; therefore, that is all we have to say.

Instead of urging Timothy to devise a ministry that would garner accolades from the world - instead of - urging Titus rather. Instead of urging Titus to speak in a way that would soft-sell; instead of urging Titus to tell people what they might like to hear to make the message palatable and easy he says, "Get yourself in the commanding mode and speak the word of God." Hardly the stuff of modern church growth advocates aspirations. Give them what they don't want to hear, not what they want to hear. And tell them that they're bound to it.

And that is precisely the word that I want to share with you tonight. Sometimes people say, "Well, you speak with enthusiasm." And sometime people call it dogmatism and sometimes people call it insensitivity. I hope people can see past the personality of the preacher to realize that what is binding on them is not the preacher's preaching. But what is binding on them is the content of Scripture.

Everyone must be brought under the authority of the word of God. And that is the only authority that we have. We are speaking authoritatively so that people might hear and understand, so that they might believe and appropriate so that they might obey and submit. And, again, when we look at ministry it is so simple. It is so one dimensional; it is the proclamation of the word of God. That's all.

That's what gives it its power. That's what gives it its authority. And, frankly - if we were to carry the point beyond the text here - that is the only thing that can transform life.

The ministry has been corrupted. And it's been corrupted by some mistaken kinds of authority. I want to suggest some of them to you tonight just for your thinking.

There are some who misunderstand biblical authority. They misunderstand where our authority lies and where it ends. There are four categories of mistaken authority. Let me give you the first one. And they're not in any particular order other than the order I thought of them.

The first one is personal authority. Some people think that they have a right to speak for themselves. Some would go so far as to say that they have the power in them that Jesus had in Him. They have the power in them that the apostles had. They even have the power to cast out demons and heal the sick and raise the dead. Some people think that they have some kind of personal apostolic authority by which they can command Satan, command demons, take authority over disease, take authority over death and even command the holy angels to operate in their behalf and even have the authority to demand that God deliver on their request.

They remind me of the people in Acts 19, the sons of Sceva who were trying to cast out demons. And the demons said to the sons of Sceva, "Jesus we know and Paul we know, but who in the world are you guys?" They recognized divine and messianic authority. They recognized apostolic authority but they hadn't a clue who these guys were.

Some who have stepped into the role of ministry even think they have authority to forgive sin. Roman catholic priests think somehow they have been given a delegated right to forgive sin based upon people filing their way through some prescription, or based upon them satisfying some indulgence, or based upon some priestly conference of absolution.

There is no such thing as personal authority. I have no authority. There is no authority granted to me in my office as a pastor. There is no authority granted to me as a senior pastor. I don't have any authority at all apart from the word of God. I cannot speak commandingly; I cannot speak authoritatively outside the boundaries of Scripture.

Because I am the pastor of the church doesn't mean that I have any right to command that anything be done on a practical level or that any particular decision be made with regard to some purchase or some future direction or whatever. I can commend some view to the people as an opinion based upon my information, my understanding, my experience or my wisdom - whatever it's worth. But I cannot speak with authority.

Such an imagined authority is false and foolish, non-existent and a proud illusion.

There's a second kind of authority that is a mistaken authority and that is church authority. Through the centuries, churches have judged themselves to be authoritative in spiritual matters. This too is an illusion. It is a false and destructive attitude and churches go around dictating and commanding where there is absolutely no jurisdiction.

The greatest model of this would be the Roman Catholic Church or the Orthodox Church, but they're not alone in that. There are many others. The Roman Catholic Church successfully was able to take all authority over the souls of men and nations by virtue of their teaching. Not biblical teaching but what became known as the Magestarium. And the Magestarium was non-biblical data collected by the church. Sometimes it's called tradition, but the technical name for it is the Magestarium. Based on apostolic succession, based on the decrees of infallible popes, based on some continuing revelation through church designed and approved creeds, traditions, articles of faith, excathedral pronouncements, councils, etcetera the church began to articulate a binding commanding data. Doctrines like the worship of Mary, purgatory, treasury of merit penance, perpetual virginity and so on and so forth that relating to Mary all were deemed to be true because the church Magestarium said they were true. And they were used to bind men's conscience. And the church became the controller of men's souls. The Roman Catholic Church in its own eyes became the final authority and had every right to command people to adhere to its self-designed dogmas and command and even kill those who didn't.

In fact, it can be simply stated, the word was under the church. And the church's authority was way beyond the Scripture.

The Eastern Orthodox Church basically followed the same pattern. And the Eastern Orthodox Church claimed authority by liturgy. There was a rejection obviously of certain councils and there was a rejection of the papacy. But the Eastern Orthodox Church basically came up with infallible extra biblical data in a series of seven ecumenical councils that started in Nicea in 325 and ended in Nicea in 787. And in between there were five councils in-between those two. And those basically designed the Magestarium of the Orthodox Church.

And the Orthodox agrees with Rome that the church can speak infallibly beyond the bounds of Scripture. It can invent its own articles of faith and that the church sits in judgment on the Scripture.

But the truth is the church has no authority beyond the pages of the Bible. God is the only authority and the only things we know about His commands and His will is that which is revealed through the pages of Scripture which is, "The faith once for all delivered to the saints. And anybody who adds anything to that is in danger of having the plagues," written in the book of Revelation, "added to him."

The ultimate authority then is God. All binding scriptural commands come from Him through Scripture alone, not popes or councils, or articles, or creeds, or articles or tradition, or Magisterium. In fact, that's exactly the reason Jesus indicted the Jews in Mark 7:8 where He said, "You have substituted the traditions of men for the commandments of God." And that was an indictment against their apostasy not a commendation of their spirituality.

No word outside the Bible is authoritative in the realm of the soul. And, frankly, I believe to deny that Scripture is the sole authority is a form of blasphemy.

Thirdly, another mistaken notion of authority is what we could call rational authority. I don't know if that's the best way to describe it, but I think that in explaining it you'll know what I mean.

Rational authority - by that what I mean is that there is a certain authority bound up in human wisdom - human reason. Now, I'm - it's nice to be able to think. It's helpful. But, even at its best, human reason is limited, fallen, selfish, protective, ego-centered, self-justifying, and sinful. And, as such, human wisdom cannot invade the supernatural realm. And it certainly can't create a relationship with a living God. And it certainly can't transform a soul.

No one would ever enter the secret place of God's life by human wisdom, even the human wisdom of a Christian or of a pastor. It's amazing to me constantly how people even in the framework of Christianity and even in the framework of ministry think they can come up with a better way to evangelize than the Bible, a better way to proclaim the gospel than the Scripture.

Reason is a false standard of authority. Some people are clever and innovative and interesting and provocative and stimulating and all of that stuff. But only the word of God transforms life. And only the word of God is authoritative.

That's why when I preach I use biblical illustrations 95 percent of the time because they not only illustrate truth, but they are authoritative.

And then lastly - and I'm going by these quickly - lastly, experiential authority. I'll always remember the lady who said, "Frankly, I don't care what the Bible says. I know what I experienced." I saw a guy on Christian television the other night who was talking. And I don't even know if he knew what he said, but he said, "There's a verse for this. There's a verse for this." And that's like, "Eureka." You know, I found a verse for my theology. There's a verse for this.

And later in the conversation, the same fellow said - they were talking about this verse. And this is a quote because I wrote it down. He said, "And, you know, it says that in the Bible, but, more than that, I've experienced it." And that was an affirmation of truth. And it was the reverse of what Peter said.

When he said, "We were with Him in the holy mountain. And we saw Him transfigured." But we have a more sure word of prophecy: Scripture.

There's no authority in experience. Feeling is not truth. Intuition is not truth. Mystical goose bumps do not indicate truth. The only authority we have is the word of God. That is it, nothing more.

G.I. Packard in an article he wrote in the Presbyterian Reformed Journal, said, "The Bible is the real preacher" - I love this - "And all the role of the man in the pulpit is, is to simply let the passages say their peace through him. For the preacher to reach the point where he no longer hinders or obstructs his text from speaking is harder work than sometimes realized."

You know, the biggest problem I have in Bible study is getting me out of the text; all my presuppositions, all my preconceptions, all my ideas and letting that text speak. Packard closes the statement by saying, "However, there can be no disputing that this is the task."

Let me read it to you again, "The preacher is to reach the point where he no longer hinders or obstructs his text from speaking. And that is harder work than is sometimes realized."

Packard went on to say in the same article, "Preaching that does not display divine authority both in its content and its manner is not the substance but only the shadow of the real thing." I'm afraid there's a lot of shadow preaching. Preaching is being the voice for God to command. And only as the preacher is under the word can he command anything. That kind of preaching not only brings God's authority, but it brings His presence and His power. The only preaching God desire is authoritative, commanding, and it only occurs when we speak the Scripture.

And, you know, there's so little of that today. And, as Packard suggested, the biggest hindrance is the preacher. He just won't work hard enough to get out of the text.

In another article that Packard wrote in the Ashland Theological Journal back in 1990 he said this, "Self-projection undermines and erodes authority. If be his words and manor, 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 his channeling any kind of sense of divine authority. What he does not feel himself, he cannot mediate to others." James Denny said somewhere that you cannot convey the impression both that you are a great preacher and that Jesus Christ is a great savior. He might have added, "Or that the Lord is a great God."

"God projection and Christ projection rather than self-projection is the way to communicate and engender in one's hearer is the sense of one's authority in one's preaching." Then he goes on to say, "Self-reliance in the act of preaching is another hindrance to the true authority in preaching, just as self-projection is. It too has the effect of inducing the hearers to attend to the messenger rather than

the message. In other words, to man rather than to God and authentic authority is eliminated when that happens." End quote.

Sadly, as essential as this is, to the effective proclamation of divine truth, the church's purity and power, it is very rare - it is very rare when men speak with biblical authority. As John Scott said, "There are many popular preachers today, but where are the powerful ones?"

And, actually, the truth is commanding is not what the people want to hear. They like sharing a lot better. Commanding is not popular and the church has caught the spirit of the day. The church wants to be entertaining, interesting, clever, sensational, tolerant, ego-building, and strong, authoritative commanding pulpits which bring the words that bear heavily on the heart are not popular.

Why? Why is commanding, authoritative preaching unpopular today? Let me give you a few reasons. Well, let's see. How many did I write down? Well, I'll give you five.

Number one: poor preaching. Poor preaching or what we could call non-preaching is so common. Many have never heard the real thing. And when they hear it they think it's unkind or strange, foreign. And if it's penetrating and convicting and the conscience is hammered with the blows of biblical authority they think you're brutal and insensitive.

Second reason: low expectations. People go to church; expect to be briefly interested; psychologically bumped up a few notches on the self-esteem scale; nothing more - certainly nothing harsh or judgmental. And, in fact, if somebody shows up and gives them some profound theology, even if they understood it, they wouldn't know what to do with it because they wouldn't have a frame of reference to stick it in. So it would just sort of float there, the legacy of poor preaching and low expectations.

Thirdly: spontaneity. I can remember one preacher who said - he was being interviewed on the radio and the interviewer said, "How do you get your sermons up?" He said, "I don't get them up. I get them down." I never got one down yet; I got to get them all up, you know. People hear so much spontaneous off-the-cuff preaching. There are preachers today who invent their theology even as they speak. And this is why they have no appetite for well prepared, profound, challenging, rich, insightful, provocative thinking deep truth. They have no theological frame of reference to put it in, and it seems isolated and irrelevant. And they walk out saying, "That was pretty heavy stuff, but that's not going to help me cope with the fact that I don't like my job."

Fourthly: liturgy. There are a lot of churches that are into a liturgy; stand up, sit down, bend over, turn right, turn left. I remember I was in Scotland one time and I was preaching in Edinburgh and a great time. I was asked to preach on a certain church there; great, old granite church. And a man said to

me, "Now today we'll have a full church." I said, "Wonderful, what do you normally have?" He said, "About 20 people, but it will be full today because you have to come today to keep your membership in tact." So he said, "We're going to extend the time - the sermon to 18 minutes." Scotland is a long way to go for 18 minutes.

Now I knew I had to pack into those 18 minutes Matthew 7:21 and 22. "Many will say unto me, 'Lord, Lord.' And I'll say, 'Depart from Me. I never knew you.'" After I preached that 18 minute sermon he came to me in the back and he said, "That is an amazing thing you just did." And I said, "What was amazing about it?" And he said, "The whole thing came out of the Bible." That's exactly what he said to me. In some churches there is just a liturgy and sermonizing is just a piece of the liturgy.

But fifthly is the spirit of the age. I think the church has been infected with the anti-authority attitude that exists in our culture. Our culture wants tolerance, unity, nothing definitive, nothing divisive, right. And that has come into the church. Commanding people is just unacceptable. I was talking to some pastors today who were telling me there's a great conclave of churches coming together - pastors and church leaders coming together. And these are happening in a number of areas and are largely attended. And the first thing they ask you to do is to check your doctrine at the door and come in and embrace one another in a non-judgmental love.

That really is the spirit of the age. The secular or sinful culture doesn't want to be confronted; don't tell anybody what they can do or can't do. And that same kind of mindset has slipped into the church. Our whole society is anti-authority. Why is that? And I'm kind of stacking some things at you, but why is that?

That's the nature of sin. Sin is lawlessness. Sin is rebellion. It's because of a lack of moral absolutes. If you don't have an oral standard, how can you say anything authoritatively? How can you command anybody anything if there isn't any standard? If you reject the Bible and you have no law and you have no standard and all you have is opinions, then there really isn't any such thing as authority. Everybody does what is right in his own eyes.

And, then, thirdly, another reason why we have an anti-authority society - not only it's the nature of the human heart to be rebellious and because of the moral absolutes - but because of the failure of parents to discipline their children. Children are growing up without any sense of authority. In many cases nobody's even home. Everybody's gone, breakdown of the home, sexual immorality, divorce, failure to teach children the meaning of respect for authority has created a generation of young people who don't respect anything at all.

Then you have the media destruction. Number four of my little list: the media destruction of authority. They do everything they can to destroy everybody who's in authority. Anybody who's anybody they're going to try to slice up, from the president on down including the police, leaders.

Then you have fifthly, the failure of leaders. They abuse authority. They fail to model virtue. They sin scandalously and people say, "Hey, they're no better - no better than anybody else. They're all the same."

Another reason why we have an anti-authority mentality is because of humanism. Do you know in America we have an overestimation of personal rights? We're absolutely wild about personal rights. And that's the sort of humanism that's been sewn into our culture. We're engulfed in a sea of personal freedoms. That's all you ever hear about, personal rights, equal rights. Our constitution said God created all men equal and that's not true but we believe it.

They may be equal - they may be entitled to equal treatment under the law, but they're not all equal. Up until the renaissance in Europe when we had the truth - when we had the birth of humanism supplant the truth of Christianity - the Reformation didn't last very long. Then came the Renaissance. The Bible, up until that point, had been considered the authority by the western world. The enlightenment, rationalism - the Renaissance changed all that. The Bible was put aside; the human mind was worshipped. There was no biblical authority, no divine authority. The Bible was just some book of prose, an ancient, flowery, ethical book. And humanism took over.

The only reason humanism didn't usurp the whole American culture for so long was that renaissance intellectualism had arrived along with Reformation faith in Western Europe. In Eastern Europe, Reformation faith was massacred in the communist revolutions, and all they were left with was humanism. In the western part, humanism coexisted with Christianity to one degree or another, and it kept the lid on humanism.

But, systematically, Christianity is being eliminated, and what is rising now is unexpurgated humanism. And humanism doesn't want any structure and it doesn't want any morals and it doesn't want any laws and it doesn't want any limits and it doesn't want any restraint. It doesn't want any control. It just wants to do whatever it wants to do. People want autonomy; they want freedom; they want self-determination. It's not a - it's not a time where you can just come along and exercise authority.

The fact of the matter is - and it's a most interesting one - that even in the communist world where there was no Reformation faith, they held on to authority. And people there understand biblical authority better than people in western culture. I see a compliant church in Eastern Europe. I see people who step willingly and anxiously and eagerly under the authority of the word of God without a battle. I don't see that here, even people in the church.

So we live in an anti-authority time. Now do we capitulate; do we come up with a new way to do things? Or do we follow the injunction of Scripture to speak and exhort and reprove with all authority.

And at the end of verse 15 he says, "Let no one disregard you." Don't let anybody go around you, circumvent you.

We have a tremendous challenge. Those of us who preach speak authoritatively to a culture that doesn't want any of it. But will you remember this? Faith comes by hearing the truth. And if we mess with the truth, then we cut people off - right - from what God is able to do in their life.

One closing quote and then I want to stop. J.R. Packard again, "Preaching has authority when both its substance and its style proclaim in a transparent way, the preacher's own humility before the Bible itself and before the triune God whose word the Bible is." There's so much in that sentence. "Preaching has authority when both its substance and style proclaim the preacher's humility before the Bible." He goes on, "It is as the preacher himself is truly under and is clearly seen to be under the authority of God in the Bible, that he will have authority and be felt to carry authority as God's spokesman. It needs to be obvious to the hearers that he has put himself whole-heartedly under the authority of the God whose emissary he is, of Christ, the Chief Shepherd whom he serves as a subordinate shepherd. And to whom he must one day give account of his service, and of the Holy Spirit, whom he trusts each moment as he preaches actually to communicate the divine message to his hearer's hearts. It is those under authority who have authority. It is those whose demeanor models submission to the Scripture and dependence on the Lord of the Word to mediate the experience of God's authority in preaching. Only those preachers, who are under the authority of the Word, will ever convey that authority." It's what we're all about.

And so, says Paul, "These things - the things that become sound doctrine, the revelation of God - speak, so the people may hear. Exhort so that they may believe. Reprove so that they may submit with all authority, comprehensive and unassailable. And don't let anybody get around that authority." Let's pray.

Father, so many things to say. Thank you for a wonderful night. Thank you for the expressions of love and kindness from our dear brothers from Eastern Europe. Thank you for expressions of kindness who were here by way of letter tonight and shared their love. Thank you for the Word; thank you for the music; thank you for the day. Our hearts are so full. Lead us now to rest, and as we rest, to rejoice and awaken tomorrow with a new commitment to be who you want us to be. We pray, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

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