

“By What Authority?”

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

At the entrance of the Philadelphia campus of United Lutheran Seminary stands a statue of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, who is remembered and honoured as the patriarch of Lutheranism in North America. Muhlenberg arrived in Pennsylvania from Germany in 1742 to serve a growing population of German Lutherans and their congregations that had begun to rapidly establish across the region. As he began what he later described as his “errand into the wilderness,” he discovered that while the population of German Lutherans was rapidly increasing, there was a critical lack of qualified pastors to serve these congregations. What was worse, into this vacuum came what he would describe as “pretenders,” persons who presented themselves as pastors but who lacked any legitimate claim to the office and were little more than con artists preying on trusting and vulnerable people:

- “All these men who came to America on their own authority, whether they insinuated themselves into Lutheran or other churches, were commonly called ‘pretenders’ because, as an Anglican put it, they were persons ‘that run before they are sent and pretend they are ministers of the Gospel that never had a legal call or ordination.’” – E. Clifford Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America*.

Sadly, because Lutherans were often confronted by a choice between a “vagabond preacher” or no preacher at all, these “pretenders” were often welcomed into congregations who soon discovered their nefarious intentions. For Muhlenberg, who came to Pennsylvania with credentials from the Lutheran Church in Halle, Germany, and the royal chaplain in London, these “pretenders” who lacked legitimate authority posed a grave threat to the health and mission of the Lutheran Church in North America. In a sermon he preached in 1743, Muhlenberg announced that people should stop making contributions to the “pastor” when they received the Lord’s Supper or had their children baptized:

- “Since these vagabonds are concerned only to get a few shillings for a baptism and the offerings of the Lord’s Supper and thus produce much strife, thereby giving the sects good cause for slander, I have abolished the abominable

custom, considering that there is no need to pay the pastor his salary just at the occasion of the services.” – *Journals of Muhlenberg*.

• Henry Melchior Muhlenberg is credited with ending the abusive practice of these false preachers by establishing the Ministerium of Pennsylvania, which became the first Lutheran body in North America that brought order to church life that included the ordaining of pastors who were given authority by the church to preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, and lead congregations in worship and service. Muhlenberg’s legacy continues to this day when at a service of ordination, the bishop acclaims that the newly ordained pastor “*is a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ. They have Christ’s authority to preach the word of God and administer the sacraments, serving God’s people as together we bear God’s creative and redeeming love to all the world.*” (ELW Ordination). It is by this authority entrusted to pastors by the Church that those of us who serve as ministers of Word and Sacrament practice our ministry in the church, including the proclamation that “*as a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ, and by his authority, I declare to you the entire forgiveness of your sins*” (ELW Confession and Forgiveness).

The issue of church authority that Muhlenberg addressed in the eighteenth century is one that has been important for the Church’s mission from its beginnings. The New Testament concept of authority (*exousia*) rests on three foundations: the power to decide; these decisions take place in ordered relationships, all of which reflect God’s lordship; and as a divinely given authority, it implies freedom for the community. In relation to Christ’s person and work, authority denotes his divinely given right and power to act along with its related freedom:

- “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’” – Matthew 28:18.
- “Then I heard a loud voice from heaven, proclaiming, ‘Now have come the salvation and power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.’” – Revelation 12:10.

In his earthly ministry, Jesus claims authority to forgive sins, to expel demons, and to teach (“*Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught as one having authority, and not as their scribes.*” – Matthew 7:28-29). This authority “*is inseparable from the imminence of the kingdom; with the presence of him who exercises it, the kingdom itself draws near.*” (Geoffrey Bromeley). In his commissioning of apostles, Jesus bestows this

authority upon those who will continue his mission and ministry: *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8). The authority that Christ bestows on the church is a trust that must be used responsibly so that the Church might be a faithful witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ (*“Now, even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for tearing you down, I will not be ashamed of it.”* – 2 Corinthians 10:8).

Authority in the Church is a trust bestowed on every generation of leaders by our Lord, meant to be used to continue the Gospel ministry of *“proclaiming the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”* (1 Peter 2:9). But because of our human sinfulness, this trust can be misused for selfish gains and for seeking control over others; the adage *“power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”* was first used in relation to the abuse of church authority. Those who see their authority not as a trust but as a possession to be used for their own purposes and desires will go to any length to protect this authority, which is why *“when [Jesus] entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?’”* (Matthew 21:23). Earlier in this chapter in Matthew’s Gospel, the Jewish leaders had witnessed a popular Galilean teacher enter the city with crowds hailing him as a king (*“The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’”* – 21:9). They have seen him disrupt the sacrificial worship and symbolically announce the Temple’s destruction, implying that he has authority over the Temple that is greater than their own (*“My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers.”* – 21:13). The religious leaders see Jesus’ actions as a threat to their power base and the way they have enriched themselves through their positions of authority; so, as Jesus continues teaching in the temple, they confront him and demand to know the source of his authority that is motivating his actions in Jerusalem. Their questions about Jesus’ authority are intended to trap Jesus into either admitting that he has no authority from God or claiming that he comes from God, which might open him to the charge of blasphemy that they will later use as grounds for his crucifixion (*“Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy.’”* (26:65).

- “It is an irony that his authority is questioned even though he does the will of God, fulfilling the righteousness of God along with John, who baptized him.

In some sense, he is challenged because he does the will of God and cares for the poor and marginalized. But they ignore it because of fear of the loss of their power or prerogatives as leaders. They know who God is and what he wants them to do, but they do not do what they teach ...” – Yung Suk Kim.

In contrast to the chief priests and elders of the people, Jesus has been recognized by the crowds as one who teaches with authority. His authority to heal is recognized by a Gentile, and he has authority to forgive sins that he confers upon his disciples:

- “The centurion answered, ‘Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed.’” – 8:8.
- “When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings.” – 9:8.
- “Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.” – 10:1.

In typical rabbinic fashion, Jesus responds to the demand of the religious leaders with a question of his own, which puts the Temple authorities in an awkward position: *“I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”* (21:24-25a). By mentioning John the Baptist, Jesus evokes a picture of a stream of prophets through Israel’s history, the authentic bearers of God’s Word, although rejected and killed by the people’s leaders (*“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!”* – 23:37). His opponents’ teaching, on the other hand, is “of human origin” – they do not teach with God-given authority but advocate human tradition:

- “Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ‘Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.’ He answered them, ‘And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition ... for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God.’” – 15:1-6.

In contrast to Jesus, the chief priests and elders respond with strategy and expediency rather than with concern for truth. If they acknowledge that John’s mission was from God, they will have to explain why they have not accepted his message. If they claim that it was of human origin and that he was a false prophet, they will run afoul of the popular opinion that John was a true prophet. The leaders decide that it is better not to answer at all; *“So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’”* (21:27a).

But now they have fallen into a trap themselves; their refusal to answer allows Jesus to respond in kind, and to make their duplicity clear to all: *“Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”* (21:27b).

Despite the Temple authorities’ evasive answer, Jesus exposes their rejection of John the Baptist’s teaching with a parable about a man with two sons. The father asks his sons to *“go and work in the vineyard today”* (21:28), an Old Testament image for Israel that Jesus has already utilized in his parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (20:1-16). The first son refuses his father’s request, which was a shameful act of defiance (*“Whoever forsakes a father is like a blasphemer, and whoever angers a mother is cursed by the Lord.”* – Sirach 3:16), but he later changes his mind and went out into the field. The second son, on the other hand, originally agrees to work in the field, but in the end disobeyed and did not do his father’s will, in contrast to Jesus’ teaching that *“not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven”* (7:21). In addition to illustrating the theme that God requires deeds rather than empty words, the specific meaning of the parable is that the Jewish leaders originally said yes to the prophetic message from God delivered by John the Baptist, but the Pharisees and Sadducees did not accept his message and repent. When the authorities respond to Jesus’ question *“which of the two did the will of the father?”* by responding *“the first,”* Jesus announces that *“truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you”* (21:31). Tax collectors and prostitutes were at the bottom of the socioreligious scale and outside of God’s covenant; they were the kind of people that the religious leaders look down upon the most. Yet, like the first son, these notorious sinners, who rebelled initially, repented when they heard the exhortation of John the Baptist. *“That Jesus would say **these** outsiders will enter God’s kingdom before the chief priests and elders would have been completely astounding – and offensive.”* (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). At the same time, Jesus links the leaders with the second son. They had the Law and by taking office affirmed that they would do God’s Will. But when God sent John calling all to repent, they did not believe him. They will find themselves watching the sinners enter God’s kingdom before them; *“for John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him”* (21:32). It is implied that if they fail to repent, they will be left out of the kingdom:

- “I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” – 8:11-12.

Jesus prefaces his parable with the question “*what do you think?*” (21;28), which signals to the chief priests and elders that he will not allow their previous strategic silence to stand. Since his question is about characters in a parable, it is indirect, and they cannot avoid answering it. “*When they do, they who sit in judgment of Jesus already condemn themselves. Their attempt to trap Jesus has resulted in self-condemnation.*” (M. Eugene Boring).

The authority by which Jesus preaches, teaches, and heals is an authority that is his as the one who is “*true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, [and he] is my Lord.*” (*Small Catechism*). It is an authority that Jesus proves in both word and deed; when John the Baptist sends his disciples to ask Jesus “*are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another,*” Jesus responds by pointing to his deeds that are proof of the authority he possesses as the one who is *Emmanuel* – God with us:

- “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes not offense at me.” – 11:2-6.

As the Church of Jesus Christ that has been entrusted with Christ’s authority to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and to serve in his name, the proof of the authenticity of our authority comes not only in the words we speak but also in the way in which we live. The proof that we are truly living and serving as Christ’s Church comes in the way we live as God’s people, embodying the love of God in Christ Jesus, “*serving all people, following the example of Jesus, and striving for justice and peace in all the earth.*” (ELW Affirmation of Baptism). As discipleship may be defined by hearing the Word of God and living in obedience to that Holy Word, being the Church of Jesus Christ means that we acknowledge that “*what is essential in the kingdom of God is not one’s position, knowledge, or authority even if it is from God, but one’s change of mind and doing the will of God.*” (Kim).

The statue of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg at the entrance of the Philadelphia Seminary is a reminder of his legacy in establishing church order among Lutherans in North America so that congregations would have the confidence that those they called as pastors had been trained, and examined, and ordained to serve the Church as authentic ministers of Word and Sacrament. Whenever I place the stole over my shoulders as I prepare to lead worship, I am reminded of the privilege and responsibility that has been entrusted to me to serve as a pastor with Christ’ authority to preach, teach, and forgive sins in his name. But the proof of the authenticity of

my call and authority comes not only from a piece of cloth or a certificate on my office wall; it comes when I strive to live and serve as a faithful servant of our Lord, striving to live in accordance with the vows I made on the day of my ordination. May all of us who have been called in baptism to serve our Lord in word and deed be faithful servants of the one who has entrusted the precious gift of the Gospel to us, so that we might shine the light of Christ before others, *“so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”* (5:16).

Amen.