

Authority: Each Generation's Quest

Deuteronomy 18: 14-20 Mark 1: 21-28

Authority is something each generation must wrestle with. It should be quickly recognized that authority gets examined, challenged, and affirmed in the end in some direction. It may not end up heading in the same direction once the process is completed.

The 60s were branded by the bumper sticker slogan "Challenge Everything." It made authority a by-word for the exercise of power without reason or foundation. It stood in marked contrast to the 50s and the era of conformity. Yet even the 50s saw the rise of a powerful civil rights movement and the ascendancy of rock and roll in music.

Today, the challenges to authority remain constant, sometimes to the extreme. The authority of science has been challenged, from global warming and climate change, to evolution, to genetically modified foods - GMOs, from routine vaccinations to stem cell research.

The authority of government has been challenged, by the Tea Party which sees a government out of control, by the Occupy movement which also saw a government out of control, but a government hijacked by corporate and banking interests. Self-proclaimed Minute Men challenge the government's handling of border patrol while even the governor of Texas once suggested that secession is always a Texas option. States like Florida would rather have their people sick and their health care institutions in financial trouble rather than approve Federal Medicaid expansion.

The authority of the traditional media is challenged by the huge number of voices and outlets opened by cable TV and the internet. One of the best news sources is no longer ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, CNN or MSNBC. The quality of their news is despicably poor. Surprisingly, Al Jazeera has some of the most objective and thorough news coverage available. If you haven't sampled their work, don't judge. If you do sample it rather than dismiss it, you'll be pleasantly surprised. The BBC also does a better job than the major US networks that most folks tune to.

I could go on quite a while and dig myself a few more holes, but you get the idea. Today's world is very different even from what we knew just 20 years ago. These changes come at us at a bewildering clip. They bring with them new questions about authority, who or what has it, and who or what doesn't.

As Christians, we are people of a faith that was created by challenges to the existing authority. In fact, you can go back to the very first biblical story about humanity in relation to God – Adam and Eve – which is typically characterized as rebellion, but it's another way of describing a direct challenge to the authority of God. That experience didn't work out too well; God is not good with such challenges.

If you think about it, God seems to be the one initiating all kinds of changes and challenges to existing authority and structures. Most Biblical stories and their heroes are about the servants called by God to act on God's initiative to change and challenge the authority of that date and time.

That's what God's promise is in our first reading from Deuteronomy 18. God promises to raise up a prophet of God's word and way who will be just like Moses. God promises to give them his word and commands that the people of God listen and obey that word. There is a warning at the end: *But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.*

At this point in the story line, the succession path from Moses to the next generation has yet to be defined. Authority then becomes the question for the next generation who will be expected to adhere to the covenant established at Mt. Sinai.

But there is more going on than that. Deuteronomy is a later work, coming during a religious reform period, probably at the time of King Josiah's sweeping reforms around 610 BCE. Religious reforms are another instance of authority being challenged. If we pay close attention to the text, we'll see what's being challenged.

That last verse about prophets 'speaking in the name of other gods, or presuming to speak words that God did not command' is not some generalization or random throwaway remark. Something very specific is being referred to, something inspired that remark, most likely something contemporary with the date of the text, not the history to which it refers.

It isn't exactly spelled out, but I would imagine it refers to the abuses that had become common among the so-called prophets who vied for the attention and favor of the kings, these being the court prophets or palace prophets. The openness of some of the rather corrupt rulers to importing foreign gods is well documented in scripture. These same corrupt, unscrupulous royals had no qualms about abusing and exploiting the house prophets in order to have the appearance of God's endorsement of policies, schemes, and various misadventures. We can easily see God being rather steamed at this usurpation of divine authority. Therefore, there is harsh punishment awaiting the fraudulent prophet who does not speak God's word with God's authority.

Then the question becomes, how will we know that a prophet **is** speaking with divine authority? In fact, that is the question in the next verse. The test is when the words of that prophet don't take place or come true that the prophet is proven to have failed in speaking the word of God. The expectation is that God's will gets done. The true and worthy prophet of God provides God's word and expresses God's will and purpose.

Yet the prophet isn't so much bringing change when God's word is presented. Invariably, the prophet is calling God's people back to the historic and sacred foundations. The prophet's mission is God's challenge to worldly authority which has managed to replace God or manipulate God's promise so that the religious institution

serves the unworthy and unscrupulous, not God. The prophet aims to bring the people back to the foundations of true faithfulness in the one God, Creator and Sovereign.

Turning to Mark's gospel, we have the account of Jesus' first work of ministry, his first miracle, and exorcism of an evil spirit. Again, we have Mark's very tight and terse writing style. In Capernaum, Jesus and his new disciples – freshly called from their fishing occupation – go to the synagogue, and Jesus is guest teaching. It says, *The people were amazed because [Jesus] taught as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.*

This is already reminiscent of the fraudulent prophets who failed to speak God's word in the passage from Deuteronomy. Here, it isn't prophets but teachers of the law who fail to speak "with authority," another way of saying that God's word was not evident to the people.

(By the way, it would be a big mistake to equate the Deuteronomic promise to raise up a prophet like Moses as fulfilled in Jesus. First, Jesus was not simply a prophet – a lot more than that. Second, there were many prophets who spoke God's word *before* Jesus. Finally, it's doubtful that the Deuteronomic editor intended that a single prophet like Moses would be raised up – they had no end times theology, for instance. Rather it is that a new prophet or prophets would be raised up for each generation.)

So, we hear that Jesus does speak "with authority," does reveal God's word and way, and the people of God respond, like sheep to the shepherd's voice. This new voice doesn't go unnoticed. *Just then*, says Mark in his urgent voice, the voice of an evil spirit spoke from a man in the congregation. *What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!*

First, we can tell the evil spirit is not alone since the evil spirit talks about "us." The evil spirit is able to identify Jesus during or after he has done his teaching. Jesus didn't walk into the synagogue with a halo; that would have been a dead giveaway about being the One from God. No halo, nothing special, until Jesus taught God's word and way. Then there was no mistake; the evil spirits knew who this was – the Holy One of God.

Jesus rebukes the evil spirit and commands the spirit to come out of the man, which it did, shaking the man violently and emerging *with a shriek*.

This confirms to the people that this teacher of the day's lesson was indeed special. Notice the words: *'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.'* The expression "miracle" is not used. The focus is on the teaching, and that with authority. As a bonus, the evil spirits obey him.

What did Jesus teach that was so persuasive? That answer goes together with the Deuteronomy passage, doesn't it? Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God, the holy community that God intends for creation. The Kingdom of God is always founded on

justice and righteousness; justice is to be the foundational hallmark of our common life, and righteousness is to be the foundational hallmark of the personal, individual life of the faithful. Then there are the values of love, grace, mercy, peace, blessing, and new life that are all reflections of God's word and way.

We may not know exactly what Jesus taught, but we know that it focused on the Kingdom of God and its sacred values. It was not the compromised, half-baked rambling of those who try to cow and coerce, who try to justify and defend, who try to claim sacred authority and yet show no evidence of knowing the heart and spirit of God. Yes, they claimed authority and demanded respect and typically received it. When Jesus taught, the people of God received a breath of fresh air, the heart of spirit of God. It was unmistakable.

Let's realize that authority gets wrestled by every generation, in the time of Moses in his face-off with Pharaoh, but also during the time of the kings, and again in the time of Jesus. Each time, it is God who challenges authority, challenging us to come back to God's heart and spirit, to the Kingdom of justice and righteousness, to the values of love, grace, mercy, peace, blessing, and new life. We have to wrestle with these things to remain true to the heart and spirit of our God.

The church is simply a reflection of that wrestling. And if the church isn't wrestling, then it hasn't been authentic in its dealing with God's word and way. When we clear aside all of the distractions that come along, and push off from the legalisms, the traditions, the old familiar, then we can behold and embrace what God truly intends.

We're updating ourselves in our seasons of wrestling, not to be in line with the newly ascendant cultural norms, or to be contemporary, or to be acceptable. We seek always to be true to the heart and spirit of our God, and to the teachings of Jesus. If we haven't put love, grace, mercy, peace, blessing, and new life at the forefront, then we haven't really wrestled, and the promise of God gets more remote for a generation. May we wrestle like Jacob and receive our blessing.