

AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH and THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

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[This essay appears in *Ordination and Authority*, Theology and Worship Church Issues Series, No. 8]

Authority within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is kaleidoscopic. Confessional, constitutional, liturgical, cultural, and local realities combine in a dizzying configuration that defies clear description. Because the functioning of this complex pattern of authority within the church is hesitant and inconsistent, the church's authority in the wider culture is uncertain, always problematic, and often ignored. However, in spite of its awkward performance of ecclesial authority, the Presbyterian Church's formal understanding of ministry provides insight into the presumptive nature of authority in the church, and the authority of the church in the world.

All of the church's ministries are grounded in the ministry of the whole people of God, and there is a clear sense in which all people within the church are ordained to ministry in their baptism. Some of these persons are called to particular forms of service, however, and are given particular responsibilities and defined authority. Both the responsibility and the authority of these ordered ministries are understood christologically, for "The purpose and pattern of leadership in the church in all its forms of ministry shall be understood not in terms of power but of service, after the manner of the servant ministry of Jesus Christ."¹ Because certain forms of authority in/of the church are inherent in the service given by the church's ministries, it is appropriate to look at the church's ordination liturgies and the way authority is conceived for the church's ordered ministries.

It is important to understand that the ordered ministries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) include elder and deacon as well as minister of the Word and Sacrament. Deacon and elder are usually seen from the outside as "lay ministries," but within the PCUSA they – together with ministry of the Word and Sacrament – are understood as ordered ministries to which persons are called and ordained. It is also important to understand that these three ministries are exercised in collegial patterns of mutuality; none is independent or self-sufficient.

AUTHORITY AND ORDERED MINISTRY

There are no less than nine ordination vows, the first eight of which are identical for ministers of the Word and Sacrament, elders, and deacons. The first five vows embody the church's formal understanding of authority.

§ Do you trust in the Lord Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

I do.

§ Do you accept the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?

I do.

§ Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?

I do and I will.

§ Will you be a (minister of the Word and Sacrament/elder/deacon) in obedience to Jesus Christ under the authority of Scripture and continually guided by our confessions?

I will.

§ Will you be governed by our church's polity, and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God's Word and Spirit?

I will.

These vows are significant because they are present in the annual liturgical experience of every congregation and the personal experience of every minister, elder, and deacon. The vows indicate a clear hierarchy of authority. The church's teaching is authoritative (and its teachers bear authority) only as it is articulated in . . .

obedience to Jesus Christ
under the authority of Scripture
guided by the confessions
governed by the church's polity
within a collegial ministry

The order is faithful and explicit: Christ, Scripture, confessions², polity, ministry. The order does not ignore personal and ecclesiastical expressions of authority, but it subsumes them under the authority of God the Father Son and Holy Spirit, who is manifest in Jesus Christ, witnessed to by Scripture, and attested by the confessions.

Church members do not make such elaborated vows, of course, and yet members' vows point toward the same hierarchy. Professions and reaffirmations of faith ("joining the church") are always made in the context of *Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant* and include the following vows:

§ Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?

I do.

§ Who is your Lord and Savior?

Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.

§ Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?

I will, with God's help.

The affirmation that Jesus Christ is *Lord*, establishes the fundamental authority within which faithful discipleship is lived out. The core of faithful discipleship is then elaborated (following

confession of the Apostles' Creed) with another vow:

§ You have publicly professed your faith. Will you devote yourself to the church's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers? [see Acts 2:42]
I will, with God's help.

This attention to the church's liturgy is more than a demonstration that Presbyterians can intone, *lex orandi, lex credendi*. It indicates that Presbyterians are exposed regularly to the formal framework of authority within the church, and that their exposure occurs in a context of grateful response to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Most ministers, elders, and deacons – and many members – recognize the pattern of authority: that Jesus Christ is the Word of God and Lord of the church, that the Scriptures bear authoritative witness to the Way of the Triune God in the world, that the church's confessions are reliable expositions of and guides to Scripture, that the church's polity derives from its confessions, and that polity finds expression in patterns of collegial responsibility and accountability.

AUTHORITY LOST

But, of course, this settles nothing. North American culture, characterized by social segmentation and privatization of decision, undermines structures of authority at every turn. Loyalty to Christ is in continual danger of succumbing to forms of "I Determine What God Is,"³ coupled with individualistic (idiosyncratic?) readings of the Bible, selective attention (inattention?) to the confessions, benign neglect (willful disregard?) of the church's polity, and isolation (alienation?) from colleagues in ministry. All of this occurs within the pervasive reality of the church's cultural disestablishment, minimizing its capacity to speak convincingly to an uninterested public.

Long and complex processes of disestablishment have reduced the church's stature, relegating it to the cultural sidelines and forcing it to vie for the attention of an increasingly indifferent society. The church was ill prepared for the loss of its central place in national, institutional, family, and personal life. And so, unable to comprehend the magnitude of its cultural disestablishment, the church evidences an odd combination of melancholy, nostalgia, irregular assertion, management technique, and marketing. Once wedded to the culture, then abandoned by it, the church seeks ways to become attractive again, either by appealing to demographic cohorts, providing a wide range of personal services, or attempting to reassert psychological and social influence. None of this is likely to bring about a renewal of the church's influence, nor should it.

The Reformed tradition's accent on God's sovereignty over all of life, coupled with its stress on the church's social responsibility, makes the loss of ecclesial impact particularly difficult for the PCUSA to bear. "God's redeeming and reconciling activity in the world . . . confronts individuals and societies with Christ's Lordship of life and calls them to repentance and to obedience to the will of God," states the *Book of Order*, which then goes on to assert that "The Church of Jesus Christ is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of

humanity.”⁴ Because of these strong convictions about the church’s calling, the structures of teaching authority remain intact in spite of their sharply diminished effect. A host of denominational and regional entities continue to propose official church positions: the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, the Office of Theology and Worship, the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns and the Advocacy Committee for Women’s Concerns, *We Believe* church school curriculum, the Washington Office and the United Nations Office, and more. At regional and congregational levels, task forces are formed, policies are adopted, and sermons are preached. Yet most of society, and much of the church, resist not only specific “teachings,” but also the very desirability of authoritative official teaching.

The result is that the teaching office of the church – intended to be exercised collegially by pastors, church officials (presbytery, synod, and General Assembly staff), and theological faculty – is crippled in its capacity to “teach what is consistent with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). And, as both effect and cause, the church’s capacity to acknowledge the corporate teaching office is diminished.

AUTHORITY REGAINED?

The church draws on two implicit strategies for dealing with the loss of authority in its own life. The first is to substitute regulation for authority. Because the church’s fragmentation is experienced in diverse practice and diffuse doctrine, attempts are made to legislate detailed patterns of church convictions and behaviors in the constitutional *Book of Order* (consisting of the “Form of Government,” the “Directory for Worship,” and the “Rules of Discipline”). Both official church bodies and special interest groups seem to assume that ministers and members cannot “get it right” without regulations to direct them. Thus, the Directory for Worship – four times larger than a generation ago – includes such directives as the eleven ways in which “members of the community in worship appropriately express concern for one another and their ministry in the world” (W-2.6001) and the seven ways in which “one may meditate upon the Word” (W-5.3002c). The Form of Government’s chapter on ordination to the ministries of the church now covers 33 pages of small print, a third of them devoted to detailed stipulation of the candidacy process for ministry of the Word and Sacrament! An appendix to the Rules of Discipline contains 52 “Forms for Judicial Process (plus Dissent and Protest).” Every meeting of the General Assembly brings numerous proposals to amend the church’s constitution by changing old rules or introducing new rules to govern the church’s life. Rancorous debates within the church center on whose regulations will be enshrined in the *Book of Order*.

Naturally, the regulations are often resented, ignored when possible, and skirted when necessary. The result is that a strategy designed to cope with a loss of authority results in a further erosion of authority. The church’s capacity to teach the liturgy, inviting worshipping communities into the fullness of Word and Sacrament, is diminished when directives are relied on by some and disregarded by others. The church’s capacity to shape ministerial identity, inviting men and women into the fullness of pastoral vocation, is diminished when policies dominate discernment. The church’s capacity to order its life faithfully is weakened when discipline is reduced to law.

The second strategy for dealing with diminution of the church's authority entails a reversal of the order of authority embedded in the ordination vows. An attempt is made to proceed "from the bottom up," by seeking to reconstitute collegial patterns of ministerial vocation so that

collegial ministry will lead to regard for
the church's polity, which will encourage attention to
the confessions, which are guides to the reading of
Scripture, which bears truthful witness to
Jesus Christ, who is to be obeyed in all things.

Establishing relationships is seen as the foundation on which the "house of authority" can be rebuilt. Groups within the church that disagree on matters such as the ordination of homosexual persons, the implications of religious pluralism, the shape of mission, abortion, the church's proper role in causes of social justice, and a host of divisive issues are encouraged to establish personal and corporate relationships that will foster understanding, tolerance, and appreciation of diversity. Yet the move from relationship to collegiality is uncertain, and moves beyond polity to common confessions, settled Scripture, and shared Trinitarian faith seem unlikely. In most instances, the relationship strategy only leads toward more cordial disagreement among differing communities of diverse authorities.

THE CORE OF FAITH

The ordination vows have it right. The church does not create its own life or establish its own authority, either through regulations or relationships. A suggestive sixteenth century formulation understands the church as *creatura verbi*: "The holy Christian Church, whose only head is Christ, is born of the Word of God, and abides in the same, and listens not to the voice of a stranger."⁵ The church is the creature of the Word of God (Christ) through the word of God (Scripture). Thus, the church understands itself faithfully when it gives sustained attention to the foundations of the faith, knowing the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit as it receives the Scriptures and heeds the living voices of its forebears through the confessions.

Scripture and confessions direct the church to the heart of faith, and it is from the heart of faith that the church's teaching authority must proceed. The *Book of Order* implies the core of the PCUSA's faith in a chapter that articulates the place of the confessions in the life of the church. The *Book of Order* is suggestive rather than exhaustive, but its list points toward the basic character of the church's teaching.

- In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) gives witness to the faith of the Church catholic. The confessions express the faith of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church in the recognition of canonical Scriptures and the formulation and adoption of the ecumenical creeds, notably the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds with their definitions of the mystery of the triune God and of the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ. (G-2.0300)

- In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) identifies with the affirmations of the Protestant Reformation. The focus of these affirmations is the rediscovery of God's grace in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. The Protestant watchwords – grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone – embody principles of understanding which continue to guide and motivate the people of God in the life of faith. (G-2.0400)
- In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) expresses the faith of the Reformed tradition. Central to this tradition is the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love. Related to this central affirmation of God's sovereignty are other great themes of the Reformed tradition:
 - (1) The election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation;
 - (2) Covenant life marked by a disciplines concern for order in the church according to the Word of God;
 - (3) A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God's creation;
 - (4) The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God. (G-2.0500)⁶

This lengthy citation from the church's constitution holds a hermeneutical key to the reading of the confessions. In turn, the confessions themselves contain a hermeneutical key to the reading of Scripture. Together, then, Scripture and confessions set forth a theological grammar, shaping church teaching that can claim the authority of its subject. Although the church considers each element of the *Book of Order* list significant, it is clear that they move outward from the core of the faith of the church catholic, through the Reformation affirmations, to the distinctive elements of the Reformed tradition. This is not intended as a hierarchy of truths, of course, but it does indicate the necessary movement of the gospel outward from its heart. Thus, if "working for the transformation of society by seeking justice," is detached from "the mystery of the triune God and the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ," it can easily become indistinguishable from the "teaching" of NGO's. If, on the other hand, "justice" is firmly rooted in the divine economy, "transformation of society" is linked faithfully to "the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ."

THE TEACHING OFFICE

For Presbyterians, recovery of the church's teaching authority is tied to the reconstitution of the church's teaching office. Within the Reformed tradition, the teaching office has been conceived as a constellation of teaching authorities functioning together at various levels of the church's life. Teaching authority has been lodged with pastors, church officials, and theological faculty, located in congregations, judicatories, and seminaries. Each of these three has been understood to function within a collegium, and the three have been understood to function together in shared theological inquiry and shared teaching within the whole church. Within the Reformed tradition then, pastors, theological faculty, and church officials share common responsibility for the teaching ministry of the church. Yet the three ministerial offices have become disconnected; they do not exercise a *shared* teaching office in and for the church, and their restricted exercises of the teaching office suffer from a lack of full ecclesial engagement.

Theological faculty work within independent institutions that respond more to scholarly, educational, and organizational dynamics than to ecclesial realities. Yet they shape the degree programs and continuing education events that prepare women and men for theological, liturgical, educational, and missional work within congregations. Church officials work within centralized structures that are more responsive to organizational goals and bureaucratic dynamics than to congregational reality. Yet they shape the requirements and procedures that define the ecclesiastical space within which men and women live pastoral ministry. Pastors work within individual congregations that are often self-contained, isolated from other congregations and indifferent to denominational and ecumenical realities. Yet they bear direct responsibility for supporting the full Christian formation of the church's women and men.

The Reformed teaching office has fragmented into three separated teaching locations, and each of these has fragmented into multiple perspectives on Christian faith and life. Moreover, none of the three locations understands teaching *in and for the church* as its primary vocation. Theological professors teach students, of course, but academic colleagues are the tacit audience for their scholarly work. Church officials understand their responsibility as managerial rather than educational. Pastors are burdened with a bewildering set of demands, but few see teaching at the core of pastoral life. Not only do the three ministerial locations fail to exercise a *shared* teaching ministry in and for the church, each fails to exercise fully a *separate* teaching ministry in and for the church. It is little wonder that authoritative teaching in the church is merely formal, and that the church too often finds itself listening to the voice of a stranger.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

Christian Churches in North America exhibit a broad range of ecclesial self-understanding and ecclesiastical governance. From Orthodox and Catholic churches, through churches of the Reformation, to newer evangelical and Pentecostal churches, churches exhibit different formal structures of authoritative teaching. Yet all of the churches experience the erosion of authority in/of the church. Accordingly, all can approach the problem by clarifying the core of faith that is to be taught and modeled, received and lived, and all can work on the problem by striving to (re)constitute a shared teaching office at all levels of church life.

(Re)constituting the teaching office is as problematic as it is necessary, however. It is not simply a matter of *who* is to teach, but *what* is to be taught. North American culture is characterized by the loose conviction that truths are multiple and that diverse, even conflicting truths should be treated with tolerance that often leads to benign indifference. What is true of our culture is also true within the church. North American churches are no longer communities of shared commitment to commonly acknowledged truths. Unwilling to grant authority to creeds, institutions, or persons, we have become impatient with theology, distrustful of doctrine, and wary of institutions. Leaders are followed only as long as their direction is either agreeable or peripheral to our concerns.

We live in a heterogeneous world, and so we desire a church that is inclusive of society's rich diversity. Our celebration of diversity goes beyond the natural varieties of race, ethnicity,

gender, and personal gifts, however. We also make room in the churches for a wide variety of preferences, opinions, convictions, and beliefs. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in the chapter of the *Book of Order* on “The Church and Its Unity,” states that the church must be “responsive to diversity in both the church and the world” and that this diversity includes “different theological positions.”⁷ Within every church, many members and ministers simply assume that theological and moral truths are different for different Christians.

Before the term “postmodern” became stylish, Peter Berger described the implications of all of this for the church. Noting that the English word “heresy” comes from the Greek *hairein*, “to choose,” Berger described our current situation: “In the matter of religion . . . the modern individual is faced not just with the opportunity but with the necessity to make choices as to his beliefs. This fact constitutes the heretical imperative in the contemporary situation. Thus heresy, once the occupation of marginal and eccentric types, has become a much more general condition: indeed, heresy has become universalized.”⁸ Berger’s clever play on the common root for *heresy* and *choice* highlights the contemporary unimaginability of heresy as well as the universality of choice. If authoritative teaching is problematic within the church, and coherent, shared faith is lacking, the authority of the church in the world is easily reduced to the marketing of religious goods and services in the culture’s lifestyle marketplace.

At issue is the unity of the church’s faith as well as its order. The church is visible to the world; its unity or disunity in confession, worship, love, and service is apparent. Thus, more is at stake than simply the authority of the church. The divided church calls the authority of the gospel into question. Bruce Marshall puts the matter starkly: “The credibility of the gospel – of the message that the triune God gives his own eternal life to the world in the missions of the Son and the Spirit – depends upon the unity of the church by which that life is exhibited to the world. . . . The unity of the church is a necessary condition for holding the gospel true.”⁹ The unity of the church is not simply a matter of institutional arrangements that *assert* unity by pointing to cooperation, councils, reconciled diversity, and so-called full communion, while maintaining separate denominational existence. The movement toward unity among the churches was once difficult because each church incorporated unified understandings of its faith and order that conflicted with other churches’ unified understandings. Now, thin inter-church patterns of “unity” may be facilitated by a breakdown in the unity of faith and order within the churches. The credibility of the gospel is called into question not only by disunity *among* the churches, but by disunity *within* the churches.

THE CHURCH’S AUTHORITY IS GROUNDED IN HEARING

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s formal structure of authority, set out in its constitution and expressed in its ordination liturgies, has it right. The church’s exercise of authority does not reflect its formal understanding, however. The disjunction exists because the issue is not the *church’s* authority, but rather the authority of the *gospel* in the church and in the church’s witness to the world. Internal diffusion of faith and order, coupled with continuing division among the churches, renders ineffectual the church’s attempts to proclaim the good news of Christian faith and life.

Karl Barth's discussion of the *ecclesia docens* and the *ecclesia audiens* continues to provide a useful angle of vision on the church's dilemma. "The Church is first and foremost a hearing Church, and only then and as such a teaching church," says Barth. "In consequence [dogmatics] must itself seek above all to listen; and its primary function consists in inviting and guiding the Church to listen afresh to the Word of God."¹⁰ The question of authority in/of the church is profoundly theological, focusing first on the gospel and only then on the church itself. Organizational systems, leadership techniques, and communication strategies do not shape the *ecclesia docens*, for only as the church recovers its vocation as *ecclesia audiens* will it bear the authority of the gospel.

The hearing which dogmatics must demand from the teaching Church is a fresh hearing of the promise which is the basis of the Church and its message. The Word of God became flesh. The prophetic and apostolic witness has been proclaimed in the world. The Church itself has its origin and continuance on the basis and in the power of this happening. Therefore the Church has the promise that Jesus Christ will be present in its midst and to speak through it, that this presence and voice of His is to be its life, and that living in Him and through Him it is to be the light of the World.¹¹

Authority within the church, and the church's authority in the world, are not commodities to be produced or concepts to be asserted. Reconstitution of the church's teaching office is not instrumental to the church's revitalization or its renewal. Ecclesial authority exists only in fidelity to the One who has been given "all authority in heaven and on earth." It is only as we "listen to him" that the church can speak with the Lord's authority and so be worthy of attention.

NOTES

¹ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Order* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2005) G-14.0103.

² The PCUSA *Book of Confessions* contains eleven creeds, confessions, and catechisms: the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed, the Scots Confession (1560), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), the Westminster Confession of Faith, together with the Shorter and Larger Catechisms (1647), the Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934), the Confession of 1967, and A Brief Statement of Faith (1991). "In these confessional statements the church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do" (*Book of Order*, G-2.0100).

³ Ingolf Dalferth, "I Determine What God Is!" *Theology Today*, 57.1, April 2000.

⁴ *Book of Order*, G-3.0103, G-3.0200.

⁵ "The Ten Conclusions of Berne" (1528) in John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches* (Garden City: Anchor Doubleday, 1963) p. 129.

⁶ *Book of Order*, G-2.0300-.0500.

⁷ *Book of Order*, G-4.0400.

⁸ Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1979), pp. 30-31.

⁹ Bruce Marshall, "The Disunity of the Church and the Credibility of the Gospel" *Theology Today*, 50.1, April 1993, p. 82.

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.2, trans. G.T Thompson and Harold G. Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956) § 23, p. 797.

¹¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.2, p. 806.