

The Authority of Christ in the Changing University¹

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On Monday night December 21, I was at home hurriedly preparing dinner. My wife was out doing some last-minute Christmas shopping. Our two boys were letting me know in no uncertain terms that they were *not* pleased that their supper was not ready.

Naturally, that was when the phone rang. As I lifted the receiver, the voice of an older alumnus, whom we'll call "Mr. T.," drawled over the line: "Doc-tah Sa-Leesee?" "Do you wish to speak to Dr. Charles Scalise or Dr. Pamela Scalise?" I asked. "Oh, Dr. Sca-a-lease," he replied. "I understand you're preachin' in the Princeton University Chapel next March. Now I don't want to be presumptuous, but I wanted to tell you about the problems they're havin' at the Chapel."

I knew it was going to be quite a conversation after that opening. People don't usually call me more than three months before I'm to preach a sermon in order to make sure that I've got the right gospel. But, after all, Princeton, the "changing University." I had learned long ago to expect the unexpected whenever people from my alma mater were involved!

So, while signaling the children to learn the virtue of patience, I decided to discover all I could about the needs of Mr. T. What impelled this Southern gentleman to call with a word of admonishment about the sad "situation" at Princeton?

I learned that Mr. T. was a graduate of a class in the mid-50s. He was calling from a small city in Alabama. It turned out that he was a lifelong Presbyterian—not a Baptist. He admitted that he came to Princeton as a pretty nominal Christian, but had rediscovered his faith through the ministry of a Southern Baptist campus ministry group.

In the ten years since his graduation much had changed at "the best old place of all." He had become alienated from the University and especially from the ministries of this chapel. He told me that a while ago he wrote a letter to

the University complaining that the voice of the Christian faith was “muted” on campus. In response, he had been placed on the chapel mailing list and now received preaching schedules and solicitations for funds on a regular basis.

Mr. T. said he was surprised that someone from “the Baptist seminary in Louisville”² would be invited to preach at the chapel. If he was thinking that the invitation might mean that the seminary where I taught is on the primrose path of paganism, he was polite enough not to say so. No, he just seemed concerned that I “preach Christ.” Somehow, Mr. T. seemed to think that if I just preached the gospel to meet the needs of the people at Princeton, then things would be a little better. Perhaps some of his alienation from and anger toward the University and its religious practices could be healed. If somebody—at least during the Christian renewal weekend—could preach Christ, then perhaps the painful Princeton apostasy was not complete. Maybe, through “the foolishness of preaching,” God would again choose to save some—like Mr. T. the undergraduate?—at Princeton. *Dei Sub Numine Viget*³—God could go to Princeton again.

Now, here’s the surprise. I think Mr. T. is right—about preaching Christ. I think he’s wrong about the contemporary university. He’s probably also denying his own continuing spiritual needs and clinging to an ethnocentric form of culture-religion. Yet, I believe he’s right about Christian reconciliation and renewal. Focusing on Christ is the way to healing.

So, this address is dedicated to Mr. T. and to the many others like him who feel their Christian faith alienates them from the University—and more tragically, from other persons of faith.

We will focus on the theological stumbling block—the problem of authority. When you came into the chapel this morning, did you notice the sculpture of Christ over the door into the narthex—the sculpture of Christ the Pantocrator, Christ the Almighty One?⁴

When I was an undergraduate, I used to hurry past this chapel on a regular basis. Most of the time I was on my way to Green Hall, where I not only had classes as a sociology major, but also worked as a research assistant for the Psychology Department. AS I hastened along my busy way during those hectic school years, this chapel and especially that sculpture reminded me of what was really important in life. The artist powerfully portrayed where the real authority in life, where the ultimate source of truth, finally lay. “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me’” (Matt. 28:18).

That’s where the power lies—in the risen LORD. “All authority in heaven and on earth” is a biblical idiom or way of saying “all authority throughout the whole universe” or, more simply, “all authority period.” The risen Christ is the Almighty One who possesses all authority.

The Scripture tells us that God the Father has given Jesus this universal authority. Jesus did not usurp all power and authority. He was *given* all

authority. Do you remember the struggle, the temptation that Jesus had with authority early in his ministry? Do you remember how Satan came to him and tempted him wrongfully to try to grasp what seemed to be all authority on earth? Matthew narrates Jesus' struggle in chapter 4 of his Gospel, verses 8-10. "Again the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him, 'All this I will *give* you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Begone, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the LORD your God and him only shall you serve."' " Satan wanted to give Jesus what seemed like all earthly authority, but Jesus said no. "No, Satan, your authority isn't ultimate authority. Your authority isn't all authority. Only God's authority is 'all authority in heaven and on earth.' Only God can give all authority." Jesus did not usurp. Jesus did not wrongfully grasp God's authority. Jesus waited for God's time. Jesus waited until the time when, as risen LORD, God gave him all authority.

Now it is on the basis of this universal authority of Jesus that he gave the Great Commission. That is what the "therefore" means at the beginning of the next verse, verse 19. The universal authority of Christ leads to the universal mission of the church. Jesus is saying, "God has given me *all* authority; therefore, go and make disciples of *all* nations." Universal authority is the basis for universal mission.

The universal authority of Christ is our authority for ministry. The power of Jesus, his authority given by God the Father, is the power of the gospel. It is not the power of force; it is not the power of coercion; it is not the power of the state. The power of Jesus is the power of God's love. Our authority for sharing our faith is the power of God's love. So, if you and I are going to minister with authority, we must minister in the power of God's love. Proclaiming the gospel with authority means proclaiming Jesus Christ, not yourself and your opinions, not myself and my opinions. Preaching with authority means preaching in the power of God's love, not in the power of our prejudices.

If you and I are going to be effective in sharing the Gospel, we must share the Good News on the basis of the universal authority of Christ. That is what the Scripture says. Now when you and I try to share our faith on the basis of Christ's authority, we soon run into a major problem. It is the problem of how we experience the authority of Christ. Different people experience the authority of Christ in different ways. Though Christ has all authority, not all Christians experience his authority in the same way. Perhaps an example of how different people experience authority in different ways might be helpful here.

When I was a teenager, I spent a summer working on the staff of a Bible conference center on Long Beach Island on the Jersey shore. It was the first time I had ever worked at a full-time job away from home, and I was excited

and nervous. During the second half of the summer, I mainly worked in the office of the conference center.

One night I was working the evening shift in the office. I was the only one there; the Director, Mr. Oldham, was in a special meeting with the rest of the staff on the other side of the conference grounds. Suddenly, the phone rang. It was the local police calling about one of our teenage guests who was in trouble. They said that our conference center might be in trouble too because of some of the problems he was causing. Then, in all of my teenage wisdom, I panicked and hung up the phone and raced out of the office. I ran across the conference center grounds in record time and burst into the chapel where the meeting was being held. I rushed up to the Director and shouted, "Mr. Oldham, Mr. Oldham, it's the police on the phone and they say we might be in trouble!"

I will never forget the way Mr. Oldham calmly looked at me. After a moment of silence, in front of the whole staff, he said, "Relax, Charles, the police are our friends."

"The police are our friends!" You see, Mr. Oldham, the experienced conference director, and I, the nervous teenage staff worker, had different views of the authority represented by the police. His experience with the local police was different than my fears about them. He experienced their authority in a different and possibly a better way than I did. Different people experience authority in different ways. Different Christians experience the authority of Christ in different ways.

Imagine that you have in your hand a single strand or string of cord—just one single strand; it is not very strong. Perhaps if you pull on it very hard, you can snap it in half. Now imagine that you have a second strand. You carefully and tightly intertwine it with the first strand. The resulting cord is a lot stronger. You will really have to pull hard to break that cord in half. Finally, imagine that you have a third strand. With greater dexterity than I possess, you manage to weave all three strands together. The resulting cord is much stronger than even the second one you made. It would really be a challenge to try to break it.

Our imaginary three-strand cord is a proverbial image in the Bible. In Ecclesiastes 4:12b, we are told, "a threefold cord is not quickly broken." Our experience of the authority of Christ is remarkably similar to that strong threefold cord of Ecclesiastes. The different ways Christians experience the authority of Christ are woven together to give us that strong cord which will sustain us in the task of sharing our faith.

Like the threefold cord of Ecclesiastes, I believe that there are three primary ways in which we as Christians experience the authority of Christ.⁵ The first and foremost way is Scripture. We experience the authority of Christ through the Bible. There are a variety of views among committed Christians about *how* the Bible was inspired, but the belief that the Bible *is* inspired is one of the central teachings of our faith. The Bible is the Word of God. Well,

how do we know that? I would like to suggest to you this very simple yet profound way. I believe the Bible is the Word of God because God speaks to me through it. That's why the Bible is the *Word* of God—because when I go to it with all my needs, cares, and struggles, God speaks to me through it. It is not any particular human theory of inspiration that makes the Bible the Word of God. The Bible—God's Word—speaks with its own authority. Our theological theories of inspiration, no matter how devoutly we hold them, are just our feeble attempts to explain the reality that when we go to the Bible, God speaks to us through it. God spoke to God's people in the past through the Scriptures, and God will speak to people through the Scriptures until our LORD returns. So, the first and foremost source of my experience of the authority of Christ is Scripture. Without the record of Holy Scripture, there would be no story of Jesus to tell the nations—only oral traditions from ages gone by. The Bible is the written Word of God. The Scripture is the norm, the rule, that makes all other norms of our faith. In Scripture, as we read God's Word, we experience the authority of Christ in our daily lives.

There is a second strand in our threefold cord of the authority of Christ—the strand of community. The Word of God in the Bible is proclaimed in the community of believers, the church. The Christian community is essential to our experience of Christ's authority in the world. How did you hear about Jesus? Who proclaimed the gospel to you and invited you to follow Christ? I predict that it was other people from the Christian community—whether your parents, pastor, Sunday School teacher, or friend—it was other people from the Christian community who led you to faith in Jesus Christ. Of course, it is conceivably possible that you found a Bible alone on a desert island and were gloriously saved, but it doesn't happen that way for most of us. Even if you found that Bible on a desert island, somebody translated and printed it. The Christian life is not lived on a desert island; it is lived in community with other Christians, who teach us and help us interpret the Scriptures and who model for us Christian life and witness to the world. So, community is the second important strand in our experience of the authority of Christ.

This brings us to the third strand in our threefold cord of the authority of Christ as experienced in our lives—the strand of personal experience. Unless I know that the risen LORD is present in my life—then I cannot consciously experience Christ's authority. Unless I know and accept the reality that Jesus died *for me*, then I am not reborn in Christ. In other words, my personal experience with Jesus Christ is essential for my salvation and Christian life. But there is more than this. For it is not only my personal experience with Jesus Christ at the beginning of my Christian life; it is my personal experience with Jesus Christ throughout all the days of my Christian pilgrimage. When I become a Christian, I become a follower of the risen LORD. So personal experience is the third important strand of the authority of Jesus Christ in our Christian lives.

Now, there you have our threefold cord of authority, which as Ecclesiastes reminds us, “is not quickly broken”—Scripture, community, and personal experience. I am going to try now to give you a little help in remembering this threefold cord of our experience of the authority of Christ. It is a simple little mnemonic, which I hope will help you remember the three strands of our cord. All of these strands of authority may be understood as defining the *scope* of the authority of Christ—the scope of authority: S=Scripture, CO=community, PE=personal experience. Scripture, community, and personal experience are the “scope” of authority.

As we think about our threefold cord of authority, there is one more important aspect we need to consider. If one strand of your cord was only one inch long, a second strand of your cord was one foot long, and a third strand was one yard long, you wouldn't have much of a threefold cord. It certainly could be broken easily even if you carefully managed to weave it together in the first place. A strong cord needs to have *balance* between its strands. If the strands are not balanced, if they are not of approximate equal length, the result will be a lopsided, weak cord. In a similar way, there needs to be balance in our experience of the authority of Christ. Because we are sinful human beings, God has given us checks and balances in our experience of authority to prevent our Christian lives from getting lopsided.

Let's look at some examples of lopsided experiences of authority in the Christian life. First, let's consider the strand of Scripture. Blind misreading of the Scripture can result from a lopsided emphasis on this strand. Here's an easy example. All of you know—and perhaps some of you like me—have even occasionally succumbed to the “close your eyes and point” method of reading the Scripture to discover God's direction. Suppose on the first try you got, “and Judas went out and hanged himself.” Then, undaunted, you tried again and got, “Go and do thou likewise.” I hope you really wouldn't think the LORD was calling you to commit suicide.

As I said, that was the easy example. Now here's the hard one. Do you remember the killer Charles Manson, the cult figure who killed the California actress Sharon Tate because he said God told him to do it? If not, don't worry, there have been numerous similar crazies before and after Charles Manson who have murdered people saying the same thing. Now suppose, God forbid, that Charles Manson knew his Bible. So, instead of just saying, “God told me to kill Sharon Tate,” he said it in this way, “I was reading my Bible and praying to know God's will and I came across the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac in the 22nd chapter of Genesis. Then God said to me, ‘Charles, I am testing you, just like I tested Abraham. I want you to sacrifice Sharon Tate, just like Abraham sacrificed Isaac.’” What would you say to Charles Manson then, besides that he was crazy? Wouldn't you say something like, “Charles, you are blindly misreading the Scripture to conform to your crazy personal prejudices and hatred. The Bible must be interpreted by the community of believers. Look at that story again, Charles. Abraham offered

his dearly beloved son, Isaac, the child of promise, not some actress he hardly knew. The Scripture does not correspond to your situation; you're making a false application. Besides, Charles, Abraham would rather have died himself than sacrifice Isaac. Is that true of you?"

Well, that's enough about Charles Manson and the danger of a lopsided views of the authority of Scripture. The lopsided emphasis on the authority of community is a problem we Protestants also now are facing. A lopsided community strand creates the problem of institutionalism. If you've ever been to the "God box" on Riverside Drive in New York or to the Baptist Sunday School Board in Nashville, you know what I mean. Even in small churches we sometimes hear those last seven words of traditionalism, "We've never done it that way before."

A lopsided view of the authority of personal experience is one of American Christianity's greatest problems. I think it is likely you experienced this problem in your church or campus ministry group last year, perhaps even last month or last week. It is the problem of immaturity, the problem of Christians who have a one-inch strand of Scripture, a one-foot strand of community (if that much), and a one-*mile* strand of personal experience. At its most extreme, immature personal experience goes something like this: "I feel that the LORD has told me to do such and such. Never mind what the Bible says about it—to tell the truth I don't really even know. Never mind what other Christians think about it. God is leading me to do it and I'm going to do it and that's final." My friends, that kind of attitude may some day produce a Charles Manson, but it will never result in a mature disciple under the authority of Christ. Our experience of the authority of Christ must balance those three strands of Scripture, community, and personal experience. The balance is not easy to achieve.

Have you ever tried to stand on a ladder and pain window trim? Well, after much procrastination, I have. I stand up there on that aluminum ladder which I tried to rest solidly on the uneven ground. Hopefully, some friend and co-worker is steadying the base of that long ladder as yours truly, the uncoordinated home handyman, climbs nervously up to the top by the window. I plant both feet firmly on the ladder. With one hand clinging to the ladder, I grab the brush in the other, dip it in the paint, and reach out—oh so carefully yet clumsily—to try to paint those *tiny* pieces of wood between the glass window panes. Painting trim is a real balancing act! You need to keep your balance if you're going to succeed.

Living a growing Christian life under the authority of Christ is a real balancing act, especially if you are going to succeed in sharing the gospel with others. Your feet must be firmly planted on that long ladder of Scripture which reaches all the way from the ground to the top. Hopefully, the guiding hands of your friends and co-workers in the Christian community with the help of the Holy Spirit are holding the ladder and steadying your climb. With one tightly clinging to your personal experience of Christ and the promises of

God's Word, you take hold of the opportunities God has placed before you. Then you reach out to others—oh so carefully, yet so clumsily—as you share your experience of God's grace with them and point them to the risen LORD.

The scope of the authority of Christ in Scripture, community and personal experience is the basis for our Christian lives. May God help both Mr. T. and each of us to maintain our balance as we reach out in the name of the LORD Jesus who declared, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

1. The following address is a revised version of a sermon, originally preached as part of a Christian Renewal weekend at Princeton University. I would like to thank Joseph C. Williamson, Dean of the Chapel, and P. Michael Arges, Baptist Chaplain at Princeton, for their kind invitation to participate in this event. Scripture readings for the service were Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 and Matthew 28:16-20.

2. My wife and I both served on the faculty of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

3. This Latin phrase is Princeton's motto: "Under God's will [or power] she flourishes."

4. The great tympanum over the main entrance to the chapel (west portal) depicts the majesty of Jesus Christ as described in Revelation 4 and 5. For further information on the design and decoration of the chapel, see Richard Stillwell, *The Chapel of Princeton University* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971). As part of his ministry, Michael Arges, the Baptist Chaplain, gives insightful tours of this magnificent building.

5. For a more detailed discussion of this theme see Charles J. Scalise, *From Scripture to Theology: A Canonical Journey into Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), especially pp. 20-22.