

With Divine Authority and Power

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How can we best deal theologically with a controversial issue in the church? I do not necessarily refer to our understanding of a point of doctrine, but to the application of doctrine in practical liturgical-theological issues, such as the ordination of women, and moral-theological issues, such as same-sex marriage.

At present we are beset with many controversial issues in the Lutheran Church of Australia and across all the churches in the western world. Think of the role of husbands and wives in marriage and their complementary polarity, homosexual intercourse and so-called same sex marriage, the separation of gender from physical sexuality and gender reassignment. Consider too the rejection of God's law in teaching about sexuality and the proclamation of the so-called 'gospel' of diversity, equity and inclusivity, the address of God as our Mother and the refusal to name him as our Father, the ordination of women as pastors and the celebration of the Lord's Supper with water rather than wine. They all differ in character from each other and yet have to do with the same thing — the exercise of God's authority in the church and his mandates for it.

The most difficult of these controversial issues have to do with the divine service. This is so because what is done there combines doctrine and practice, inseparably so, for the divine service teaches by enacting doctrine. Those matters which involve the public ministry of the holy gospel, such as the appointment of an un-ordained layperson to lead the divine service, the ordination of women, and the ordination of persons who are 'married' to a same-sex partner, are especially vexing and predictably divisive. Because they are matters of doctrinal practice that necessarily involve the whole congregation, it is not possible to reach a practical compromise on them. In practice we cannot both approve and disapprove of them.

For those who reject these innovations because they hold that they contravene God's holy word, their disapproval is also a matter of conscience,

because they call into question their commitment to God's holy word and the validity of the ministry done by these people. These conscientious objectors believe that, since pastors are called to handle the holy things of God faithfully, they must administer them in a holy way according to God's holy word, so that these holy things are not desecrated and the holy people of God are not damaged by disregard for their holiness.

In the LCA we all seem to agree that we depend on the Holy Bible as God's Word to discover God's mandate to us in all matters of doctrine and practice as a divine community.¹ In theory, we also hold that we receive his Holy Spirit and all his blessings through faith in his word. So it follows that the deliberate rejection of his mandates, such as Christ's instruction to preach the Word of God to lead sinners to repentance and offer his pardon to them, has far-reaching consequences for our life and work, the unity and mission of the LCA. Thus, traditionally, we have always held that faith in Jesus and unity with other believers and God the Father is, as Christ himself teaches in John 17:20-21, is created and maintained by the Word of his apostles. Thus, if the LCA disregards what Christ himself teaches through his apostles in the New Testament it will replace their teaching with its own human agenda. If it sidelines Christ's mandates it will need to resort to personal and political power to achieve and maintain the institutional unity.

I assume that we all agree we cannot just cherry pick the parts of the Bible that agree with what is now fashionable to justify what we want to do and what our society wants us to do. How then can we reach agreement on what is God's mandate for us and what he has left for us to determine for ourselves in the light of his revealed will for us? How can we let God be our God and have his say with us? That is what I wish to explore in this reflection on God's exercise of his authority through us and his mandates for its faithful exercise by us as he delegates his authority to us.

I offer this essay as a tribute to my dear colleague and friend Andrew Pfeiffer for his warm pastoral support of me over many years and his immense contribution to my theological development. He has shown me how to speak and

¹ Mandate is a term that comes from the Latin word *mandatum*. It originates from the combination of two other words, the verb to 'give' (*datum*) and the noun 'hand' (*manus*). It therefore refers to the delegation of a task to be done or the presentation of a gift to be given to others.

act graciously with divine authority, because he himself has been a man under authority, the authority of Christ and his authoritative word.

Divine Authority²

In 4:32 Luke remarks that the people in Capernaum were astonished at the teaching of Jesus because ‘his word was with authority’ (NKJV).³ He not only taught God’s word with authority but also enacted that word with authority by casting out an evil spirit from a man. In fact, the people in the synagogue were so amazed at what he said and did that they remarked: ‘What a word this is! For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out (4:36 NKJV).⁴

There are, broadly speaking, two kinds of spiritual power - delegated power that empowers others and usurped power that disempowers them. On the one hand, there is self-assertive, independent power, coercive power that enforces obedience and compliance. By its exercise of such power people gain and retain power for themselves at the expense of others. It is inherently abusive because it comes from disempowering them. It is all too often used to manipulate and bully, oppress and exploit, harass and destroy them. The power of the evildoers and the devil is like that.

On the other hand, there is divinely authorised, dependent, constructive power that is used to benefit others and empower them. St Paul calls it the authority to build up people and the church as God’s temple (2 Cor 10:8; 13:10). Those who exercise that kind of benevolent power can do so because, like policemen and judges, they have been authorised to act in a limited capacity with the responsibility for definite tasks. They have the authority to speak and the power to act as long as they remain under authority and accountable to those who have authority over them. They can exercise that power because they are under authority. The power of Jesus is like that. So too is our authority!

Like the words of the prophets and the words of the apostles, the words of Jesus had the power to do what he said because they were the words of his heavenly

² Much of this section is a reworked version of ‘Under Authority’ published in *Logia* 32/3, 2023, 53-54.

³ Biblical quotations in this article are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Both Mark and Luke use the Greek verb *epitasso* which means to put people who speak out of place and act out of order back into their proper place.

Father that he translated into human speech. As God's incarnate Son he was a man under authority. He did not speak and act in his own right but in obedience to his heavenly Father. He therefore spoke with authority and power, the authority of God the Father and the power of the Holy Spirit.

There are two stories that show what kind of authority Jesus had. The first is recorded early in the ministry of Jesus in Mark 1:21-27 and Luke 4:31-37. After calling his first four disciples, Jesus took them into the synagogue in Capernaum and taught the gospel to the assembled congregation. As they heard what he had to say, the people were astonished because he taught them with self-evident authority. They were even more astonished when he used his authority to drive out an unclean spirit from a man with a simple rebuke:⁵ "Be silent, and come out of him" (1:25). The authority of Jesus was verbal and spiritual. He used it to teach God's word and rescue a spiritually disempowered man.

The second story is recorded in Matthew 8:5-13. It is the story of a Roman centurion who begged Jesus to heal his paralysed, pain-stricken servant. When Jesus had agreed to accompany the centurion to his house in order to heal his servant (8:7), the centurion insisted that Jesus should not visit his home because he was unworthy of him and did not need a visit from him. Since he believed in the promise that Jesus had given, he realized that a simple word from Jesus was all that was needed to heal his servant. He said: "only say the word, and my servant will be healed" (8:8). The reason for his reliance on a word that was spoken by Jesus was that, like him with his rank in the Roman army and allegiance to the Roman emperor, Jesus was under higher authority. Jesus could exercise divine authority, because he was a man under divine authority, just as the centurion was a man under authority. That was why his word had the power to heal his servant. Jesus therefore commended him for his faith in his promise and healed his servant by saying, "Go; let it be done for you as you have believed" (8:13). By his decree Jesus healed the centurion's servant. Because Jesus had divine authority, his word had the power to create faith and to heal.

⁵ The Greek term for this in the New Testament is *parrêsia* which means both freedom of speech and confident speech; e.g. Acts 4:13, 29, 31; 2 Cor 3:12; Eph 3:12; Heb 4:16; 10:19; 1 John 3:21.

The power of Christ's word comes from the authority that God the Father conferred on him. He had the Father's mandate for his ministry. The Father delegated his own authority to Jesus; he gave him all authority in heaven and earth (Matt 28:18), the authority over all humanity (John 17:2). He authorised Jesus to speak and act on his behalf. Thus in John 12:49 Jesus says: "I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment - what to say and what to do." Later in John 14:10 he adds: "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works (through them)." Because Jesus was under the Father's authority, the Father did his work through the words of Jesus. This is so because Jesus did not speak his own word but the word of the Father who had sent him (John 14:24).

Jesus was authorised to speak his Father's word (John 3:34; 12:49; 14:24) and do his Father's work (John 4:34; 5:36 17:4). He was able to do this because he received the Holy Spirit from him (John 3:34-35). He did not pursue his own agenda, he did what his Father wanted him to do (6:38; 7:16). Thus even though he was a man, he had the authority to forgive sins (Matt 9:6, 8) and cast out demons (Mark 1:27), the authority to heal sickness (Matt 10:1) and give eternal life to all believers (John 17:2).

Just as the authority of Jesus differs from human authority, so the power of his words differs in its effect from the power of human speech. The impact of human speech depends on the spirit of those who speak it - their personality and vitality, their affability and energy, their confidence and intelligence, their expressiveness and impressiveness, their winsomeness and wit. But the impact of divine speech depends on God's Spirit (John 3:34). Like the breath of a human speaker, the Holy Spirit animates God's word. Inspired as it is by the Holy Spirit, his word inspires both the speaker and the hearer with the same Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowers God's word, so that it does what he says and gives what he promises (John 6:63, 68).

God's word is spiritually effective and powerful because it is combined with his Spirit and energised by his Spirit. That's what makes it different to my words. So, for example, if I visit a sick patient in hospital and say, "Get well!" nothing much happens. At best, my words may cheer the patient for a little while. But when Jesus says the same words to sick people, they are healed. Same words - different effect!

The difference is that the words of Jesus are spoken with divine authority and divine power, the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus has the authority of his Father and power of the Holy Spirit to save those who hear his word and believe in him. He was not authorised to inaugurate a social-political revolution but to rescue people from sin and death and equip them to work together with him as members of God's royal family. He does not use his authority to coerce them to serve him but to deliver heavenly gifts to them and others through them. As the incarnate word of his divine Father, he confers his own filial status and spiritual resources on them. Through his word he gives them the authority, the right and power to be children of God (John 1:12). His word has the authority and power to accomplish all that.

Christ authorises and commissions pastors to speak and act under him and together with him. Since they are under his authority, they are able to speak and act in that capacity. They do not have the power to coerce and control people, like kings or officers in an army. Rather, they have the authority to deliver God's gifts to people on earth. They are authorised to pass on what they receive from him as they receive it from him. Like Jesus, they do that, powerfully and beneficially, as they submit wholeheartedly to him, not only by what they say and do, but also by how they act and how they live.

They are called to be under his authority. As long as they are under the authority of him and his word, they are able speak with divine authority and spiritual power. The more their whole self is under Christ's authority, the more they can speak and act with authority, the authority of Christ. And that involves their conscience. When their conscience is subject to God's word, their teaching touches and moves the conscience of their hearers (Cor 4:1-2). They speak with authority from the conscience to the conscience. But if they do not remain under his authority and submit to the authority of his word, they are unable to speak and act authoritatively with his authority and confidently with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Divine Authority⁶

⁶ Much of this section is a reworked version of 'Foundational Texts' published in *Logia* 26/4: 59-60, 2023.

The many and, at times, somewhat fruitless discussion in recent times on the right interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures in Lutheran circles has one glaring omission. Little or no attention has been given to the classical Lutheran focus on the use of the texts that provide the God-given foundation for a particular doctrine and its practice, the so-called *sedes doctrinae*. This Latin term, which means, quite literally, the seat of teaching,⁷ and, figuratively, its basis, is the formal designation for the foundational texts that establish what is to be taught and done in the church, or not taught and not done in it.⁸ Thus, for instance, the Words of Institution are quite clearly the foundational text for our teaching on the Lord's Supper, its practice, and our faith in it. This is of paramount importance for us because we do not deduce what we teach from general principles, or Scripture as a whole, or a system of doctrine, or even on another doctrine, such as the doctrine of the justification by grace, but from what Jesus and his apostles actually say about it in the New Testament. Those sayings, those words, establish our teaching and practice. In his first letter 4:11 St. Peter seems to refer to this when he says: 'Whoever speaks as one who speaks the oracles⁹ of God' (ESV).

Although the whole of the Bible is, as we confess, in all its parts the word of God, pastors cannot teach all of it at once, but can only consider one topic at a time. In their teaching they therefore need to identify the passages that deal with that topic at hand. Yet all the texts that deal with a given topic do not serve the same function. Even though they are all equally inspired words of God, they do not all serve the same purpose. So those who interpret and apply them also need to determine the purpose and function of each text in its context and distinguish them accordingly. They need to consider whether they establish what is to be believed and done, explain the purpose and significance of that teaching, or

⁷ The image of a seat for teaching is derived from the custom in the ancient world for a qualified teacher to be seated on a chair in a classroom with his students sitting on the floor around them. In the synagogues the chair that was reserved for the teachers of the law was called 'the seat of Moses' (Matt 23:2). The use of this term should not be equated and confused with the use in dogmatics of proof texts, *dicta probentia* in Latin. The function of proof texts was to present statements from authoritative authors to support an argument, like instances of legislation by lawyer in a court of law or footnotes in an academic treatise. In contrast with them the *sedes doctrinae* provide the basis for instruction and its practical implementation.

⁸ For some examples of negative mandates which forbid liturgical or devotional action see Matt 6:2-8; Mark 16:16; Luke 10:16; John 3:18; 1 Cor 11:27-28.

⁹ Or 'sayings'. The Greek plural form *logia* does not refer generally to God's words (NRSV; NIV) but to particular spoken sayings, like a promise of God to someone in the Old Testament (Acts 7:38; Rom 3:2; Heb 5:12), such as those listed in Heb 1:2-13.

provide an example of how it was to be taught and applied. Take, for example, our teaching on baptism! While Matthew 28:18-20 provides the divine foundation for it, Titus 3:4-7 explains its purpose, Romans 6:3-4 describes its significance, and Acts 2:37-41 shows us how it was taught and done by Peter on the Day of Pentecost.

At times foundational texts are clearly identified as such. Jesus does this with his Amen sayings in the four gospels, and Paul does it in his pastoral letters with his designation of certain passages as faithful sayings.¹⁰ But, mostly, we need to infer their status and function from their context. That is a vital part of their call to “rightly handle the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15).¹¹ That has been done for us, in some measure, with some of the most important articles of faith in the Book of Concord.

Luther models this approach well for us in his Small Catechism when he first asks: ‘Which is that word of God’ or ‘Where is this written?’ With that question he does not ask us to provide some proof texts for a particular doctrine. Rather, he focuses our attention on the Biblical foundations for our faith in Christ and life as faithful disciples. They help us discover God’s will and purpose for us, so that we can agree on what we are called to teach and do.

We discover God’s mandate for us from these foundational passages. They authorise and equip us to work with God for the reception and delivery of his gifts in and through the church here on earth. They help us to do that in five interrelated ways. They provide us with a supernatural foundation of our spiritual life, enable God to do his work with us, authorise us to work with God, empower us with his Spirit, and deliver certainty for us in what we teach and do.

First, foundational texts, which report the mandates of Jesus and the apostles, institute **the divine basis** for our faith in Christ and our reception of his benefits through faith in him.¹² Faith always rests on God’s word, because it creates and sustains faith in him, rather than in ourselves, or another person, or even the church. It also confirms our faith in Him, so that we will increase in

¹⁰ See 1 Tim 1:5; 3:4; 4:9; 2 Tim 2:11; Titus 3:8.

¹¹ The sense of this Greek verb is to correctly divide and distinguish something from something else. Thus the Formula of Concord applies Paul’s admonition to the right distinction between law and gospel (FC Ep.V. 1; FC SD V.1). But it may also refer to making other such right distinctions in teaching God’s word to avoid getting into pointless arguments over words (2 Tim 2:14).

¹² The Augsburg Confession teaches that God has instituted marriage (AC XXVII. 4, 15), the divine service (AC XXVII. 36), both sacraments (CA XIII.1; XXIV.1; XXX.12), and the ministry of word and sacrament (AC V.1) as the means for the reception of God’s gifts.

confidence and grow in boldness as disciples who rely on our heavenly Father for whatever we need. Take those words away from us and our faith has lost its divine moorings! It then becomes far easier for the devil to attack and destroy it.

Second, by means of these texts God **authorises** us to do what he wants us to do and what we should do to please him. They derive their weight from his authority. Thus the words of Jesus in John 20:21-23 authorise pastors to act on Christ's behalf by judging sin and pardoning sinners. Or, to give another example, in Luke 11:1-4 Jesus authorises his disciples to use his own prayer, the prayer that he prays for them and all people. They thereby join with Jesus and pray to God the Father together with him. So, with these and many other similar authoritative words Jesus authorises us to work faithfully and obediently with him as we put our faith in his words. But even better and more helpfully than that, they assure us that God is pleased with us by our obedience to his instructions.¹³ He is not just pleased with us as his children, but is pleased with what we do. We therefore can be sure that God is pleased with what we do in our station and vocation in the church and the world because we keep his mandates for us (1 John 3:22).

Third, by these foundational words God himself **works** through human agents and delivers his gifts to his people through physical means, such as a human mouth, words, and hands, as well as water, bread, and wine. His words do not just tell them about him, or what he wants them to do for him; they enact what he says. They are powerful, effective utterances; they are performative words that do what they say and give what they promise. Thus, when the Words of Institution are spoken by a pastor who has been authorised to say them, he speaks them together with Jesus and serves as his mouthpiece and his co-worker. Through his mouth and his hands Jesus gives his body and blood to the congregation and grants them the full remission of sins. So through his words which authorise the administration of the Lord's Supper, Jesus is at work in it and provides his gifts to those who receive it from him. That also applies for everything else that we have been authorised to do in the church.

Fourth, by these words which create faith Jesus **empowers** his disciples with his Spirit to do God's will. Since his words are inspired by the Holy Spirit, they inspire their faithful hearers with the Holy Spirit. His words are filled with God's life-giving

¹³ In article XXXVII.70 the *Apology of the Augsburg* applies this general principle to the divine service by asserting: 'God is pleased only with services instituted by his Word and done in faith.' Tappert, 281.

Spirit (John 6:63). That's what makes them so powerful and effective. So by speaking God's word Jesus imparts the Holy Spirit (John 3:34; 20:21). Wherever God's word is truly spoken, or rightly employed, the Holy Spirit sanctifies believers and empowers them to do God's will. Take, for instance, what happens in Holy Baptism! The words of Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20 empower both the pastor to baptize in God's name and the baptized person to become a child of God. Thus, in his Small Catechism Luther gives this answer to the question of how water can do such great things: "Certainly not just water, but the word of God in and with the water does these things, along with faith which trusts this word of God in the water. For without God's word the water is plain water and no Baptism. But with the word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit..."

Fifth, these authoritative, Spirit-giving words **provide certainty** for uncertain consciences. They are comfortable, comforting words. For us Lutherans that is their most significant pastoral purpose, for all Christians beset by uncertainty. Our faith in Christ is always contested by the world, called into question by our sinful nature, and attacked by the devil. In every way the devil tries to undermine our assurance of salvation and our confidence that what we do is pleasing to God. When that happens, these foundational words are our defensive and offensive weapons against temptation. So, when the devil charges that I am not a true believer, and God is not pleased with me because I have failed to do His will, I can say, "Yes that may be so! But it is written, 'He who believes and is baptized will be saved.'" That applies in a special way for those of us who are pastors. It helps us out in our uncertainty about our work. When the devil accuses us of failing to be good pastors, as he so often does, we can refer to our ordination with its foundational words from Jesus for the office of the ministry. So certainty in faith and life depends on what is provided for us in the *sedes doctrinae*, the fundamental words of God. There is no divine comfort apart from them.

So What?

So far I have been speaking rather generally about how best to resolve practical theological problems in the church at large. But now in conclusion I want to narrow that discussion down to whether the LCA can and should change its adherence to the traditional, ecumenical teaching which prohibited the ordination of women.

If what I have argued is true, then we can only do so if we have a clear, generally agreed Biblical mandate for this innovation. To be sure, we agree that it is possible to change to a customary practice and its implicit or explicit teaching. But with strict conditions! Thus Luther and the reformers quite readily changed many current practices. But they did not do so without a clear Biblical mandate. Take, for example, the distribution of Holy Communion in both kinds! They insisted on the distribution of Christ's blood to all communicants, because, as they rightly argued, and in an effort to revive an ancient custom, they had a clear mandate from Jesus to offer his blood to the whole congregation in Matt 26:27-28 and Mark 14:23-24.

The traditional, ecumenical teaching that women are not to be admitted to the ministry of word and sacrament in the divine service is based on the commission of the apostles by Jesus¹⁴ and the prohibition of Jesus and Paul in 1 Cor 14:33b-38 and 1 Tim 2:12-14. It is true that the interpretation of these passages and their present relevance to the ordination of women in the church has been recently challenged. But they still remain, even for those who reject them, ignore them, or don't quite know what to make of them. In contrast to the traditional teaching those who advocate the ordination of women have not been able to present the church with any Biblical mandate for it. The best they can offer is an inference from Paul's teaching in Gal 3:27-28 on the union of men and women with Christ in baptism and their common status as heirs with him. But an inference is not a mandate. It cannot be used to establish a binding teaching and its practice, let alone overturn a divine mandate. Surely a previously accepted, traditional, ecumenical practice that rests on a now disputed mandate overrides a fashionable innovation that is not based on a any agreed divine mandate. If it is approved, it will be without any secure foundation. It will be like a house that is built on sinking sand rather than a rock.

If the LCA decides to introduce this change politically without any explicit, divine mandate, its introduction, no matter how currently popular, will burden consciences and accelerate disunity, for how can we then be certain that God approves of it? By what authority can this be done? How can we be sure that we do not desecrate God's holiness if we allow women to be pastors? Will we then

¹⁴ See Mark 3:13-19; Matt 28:16-20; John 20:19-23.

continue to enjoy God's blessing on our worship and our life together in his holy church? Will not the devil use our disregard for Christ's command, his 'mandate' (1 Cor 14:38), to attack us spiritually and divide us institutionally? Will he not use our disregard for these words of God to disregard other parts of New Testament and Christian doctrine that are unpalatable to us and the world around us? Surely, we must avoid that at all costs, so that we do not unleash an avalanche of unforeseen and unintended consequences on the church.