

“Speaking With Authority”

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Mark 1:21-28 (GNT) ²¹Jesus and his disciples came to the town of Capernaum, and on the next Sabbath Jesus went to the synagogue and began to teach. ²²The people who heard him were amazed at the way he taught, for he wasn't like the teachers of the Law; instead, he taught with authority.

²³Just then a man with an evil spirit came into the synagogue and screamed, ²⁴“What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Are you here to destroy us? I know who you are—you are God's holy messenger!”

²⁵Jesus ordered the spirit, “Be quiet, and come out of the man!”

²⁶The evil spirit shook the man hard, gave a loud scream, and came out of him. ²⁷The people were all so amazed that they started saying to one another, “What is this? Is it some kind of new teaching? This man has authority to give orders to the evil spirits, and they obey him!” ²⁸And so the news about Jesus spread quickly everywhere in the province of Galilee.

While the miracle healing aspect of the story we just heard draws a lot of attention, the pivotal verse in this episode is the second verse, verse 22, where Mark's admiration for Jesus could be interpreted as an insult against the teachers he's being compared to. Mark wrote, “The people who heard [Jesus teaching] were amazed at the way he taught, for he wasn't like the teachers of the Law; instead, he taught with authority.”

We need to answer some questions to be able to understand why this is such a powerful passage. First, why would Jesus, a newcomer to Capernaum, be invited to teach at the local synagogue? Let's recall that there was only one Jewish Temple, and that was in Jerusalem. But there were many synagogues where Jews worshipped on a regular basis. The Jerusalem Temple was filled with priests, but synagogues didn't have priests. Instead, each local synagogue had a president who was more like an administrator. The president's job was to arrange for various people to teach.

Often the speakers would be those people who had invested great time and training in learning the words and meaning of the Books of the Law of Moses—the first five books of our Bible. They were known as teachers of the Law and were also sometimes called “Scribes.”

The Scribes knew the scriptures so well that they could recite them from memory, and then either look up or recite other works that interpreted the meaning of the scriptures. Scribes were renowned for their ability to pull in just the right passage of scripture and a fitting interpretation of that scripture to apply to a particular situation. They were sort of like today's reference librarians in their ability to put their finger on just the right information.

But the way Jesus taught was different from that of the Scribes. Instead of having to refer to how others had interpreted scripture, Jesus interpreted the scriptures extemporaneously, and aptly. Jesus interpreted the scriptures without having to rely on what someone else said. Jesus interpreted the scriptures with authority. For the listeners it was as though the author himself were commenting on what he had written.

It would be like sitting in a literature class in high school or college. Your teacher engages you in speculating on what the poet meant by a certain word choice in a poem, or what that author intended by using a certain metaphor in a novel. Your class can speculate all you want; you can see what other critics and scholars have written about the author or poet. But if you were able to sit down with the author personally, you'd know what had been intended.

That's what it felt like for the people of Capernaum who had come to the synagogue that morning when Jesus had been asked by the president to read and expound on the Hebrew scriptures. Hearing Jesus speak, the people understood the scriptures in an eye-opening, powerful, moving new way. For them it was as if the author himself were explaining what he had in mind in describing God's plan for the world.

¹ Based on the sermon “Exercising Our Authority” originally preached February 2, 2003.

Now I know a few things about the Bible, but I also know that there are many people who know a whole lot more than I do, and some who know less. I'm probably somewhere in the middle. I would probably strike out if tossed three questions about the books of Habakkuk and Obadiah, but on the other hand, I can discuss the documentary hypothesis of the Pentateuch and the synoptic gospel source theory.

That's why I can identify with those Scribes who are mentioned in the gospels. Like them, I know my way around the scriptures, and can usually find some information that will help interpret those parts of scripture that aren't plain to me. But I can't speak with the kind of authority Jesus had in the Capernaum synagogue—I can't always say right off the top of my head, "Here's what this means, and it relates to this other verse from such-and-such."

Many of you probably feel like I do: you know something about the Bible, but you also know there's a whole lot more you could learn, so you feel a little tentative talking about what the Bible means. Most folks feel that they can't speak with authority about the details and nuances of the Bible. We might be just starting out on our faith journey and consider it a real accomplishment that we know that the gospels are the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, that they tell the story of Jesus, and that they're in the New Testament, not the Old!

Obviously, knowledge of the Bible is good, and important, and a blessing, but we may not yet know the Bible well enough to speak about it with confidence and authority. Still, there are other aspects of our faith where we can speak with authority. We can exercise our authority on what we've experienced because we know Jesus. In fact, we must speak with authority to people we know who aren't involved in this or any other church, or mosque, or temple or synagogue. We must speak about knowing Jesus, because here we can speak with authority.

Let me suggest five areas in which you have expertise.

You can speak with authority about how God loves this world and all the people in it. Why would God create a world, and creatures to inhabit it if God didn't care about them? Almost everybody has heard the Bible verse that says that God loved the world so much that God was willing to send the only Son into that world—not to punish the world but so the world could be saved through him. Let's tell people that it's the truth!

You can speak with authority about how Jesus is the one sent by God to be our Master, our Savior, our brother and friend. Throughout history there have been many who claimed to be from God—or claimed to be God themselves. But no figure has had the lasting impact on the world that Jesus has had. God broke through the dimensional barrier between heaven and earth in the person of Jesus, so we would know God in the form of a human being we could hear, befriend, follow and serve.

You can speak with authority about the strength and comfort you derive from worship. In worship there's something about custom and tradition that can be very comforting and assuring. Both in online worship and when we gather in person for worship there's also something about innovation and experimentation that can put us in touch with God in ways never before imagined. Worship restores our trust, lifts our hope, gives us courage to keep going, and points us in the right direction. Worship reminds us that God is God, that we are not, and we can give thanks for both!

You can speak with authority about the warmth and joy of Christian fellowship and friendship. How empty your life would feel without the people you have come to know and love through the fellowship of this church. How much richer our lives would be if we invited more and more people to experience the joy we know!

You can speak with authority about the assurance we have because of Christ's resurrection. As sure as we're born, we're going to die. That realization can depress us, or it can assure us that God is bigger than our problems, bigger than our world, bigger than death itself. If God's bigger even than death, what do we have to worry about? After all, God's on our side!

Jesus Christ has put us in touch with the author of our stories, the creator of creation. God's generous and unconditional love has been made evident to us in Jesus Christ. That love enables us to survive despite life's challenges, and allows us to see and appreciate the blessings that surround us. Let's tell others, speaking with authority that God has given us because we know Jesus.