

“Authority in Christ”  
Galatians 1:11-24  
Sunday, June 5, 2016  
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

**Opening.**

The story is told of Christian Herter, that when he was governor of Massachusetts, he was running hard for a second term in office. One day, after a busy morning chasing votes (and no lunch) he arrived at a church barbecue. It was late afternoon and Herter was famished. As Herter moved down the serving line, he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put a piece on his plate and turned to the next person in line.

"Excuse me," Governor Herter said, "do you mind if I have another piece of chicken?"

"Sorry," the woman told him. "I'm supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person."

"But I'm starved," the governor said.

"Sorry," the woman said again. "Only one to a customer."

I'm told that Governor Herter was a modest and unassuming man; but, he decided that this time he would throw a little weight around.

"Do you know who I am?" he said. "I am the governor of this state."

"Do you know who I am?" the woman said. "I'm the lady in charge of the chicken. Move along, mister."

I like that: "I'm the lady in charge of the chicken!" Sometimes it feels good when a person of authority is put in their place.

Of course, in terms of the spiritual life, we don't really know whether Gov. Herter or "the

lady in charge of the chicken” has more authority. The story doesn’t give us that information.

And we know, if we pay attention to the scriptures, that God does not grant spiritual authority to his people based on their position within human power structures. Claiming authority in Christ is different from having human authority through one’s role or position in society.

## **I. Conflicts over authority**

Paul struggles with the issue of authority in his letter to the Galatians. In chapter 2, Paul tells about how he and Peter will divvy up the work of the church. Peter will handle the mission to the Jews, and Paul will handle the mission to the Gentiles. Great idea. But it doesn’t go so smoothly when Peter and Paul encounter other Jews. Peter suddenly gets more Jewish in his behavior. Paul laments that, “...until certain people -- [Jewish Christians] -- came from James, [Peter] used to eat with the Gentiles.” (Gal. 2:12)

Paul’s authority comes “through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:12). But the authority structure in Jerusalem isn’t buying it. Paul must constantly defend the gospel he has received and preached.

The Jerusalem leadership is, basically, the disciples -- personal friends of Jesus. They have been charged with proclaiming his message to the world after his death and resurrection. When we read the stories and writings of Peter and Paul and other leaders of the early church, we value them all as sources of authority, sources of truth. Even – or maybe especially! – when they disagree with one another.

C. S. Lewis writes on the subject:

“Believing things ‘on authority’ only means believing them because you have been told them by someone you think trustworthy. Ninety-nine percent of the things you believe are believed on authority. I believe there is such a place as New York. I could not prove by abstract

reasoning that there is such a place. I believe it because reliable people have told me so. The ordinary person believes in the solar system, atoms, and the circulation of the blood on authority because the scientists say so. Every historical statement is believed on authority. None of us has seen the Norman Conquest or the defeat of the Spanish Armada. But we believe them simply because people who did see them have left writings that tell us about them; in fact, on authority. A person who balked at authority in other things, as some people do in religion, would have to be content to know nothing all his life.”

## **II. Sources of Authority**

In the United Methodist Church we often refer to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral when we talk about authority: “Wesleyan” for John Wesley, the founder of Methodism; “Quadrilateral,” or “quad,” for the four sources of spiritual authority. Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience. Scripture is first and primary. In questions of spiritual authority, we always turn to the Bible first.

Tradition mainly refers to the history of the Church universal. What are the traditions of the church, from the first century on, and how do our questions fit in to that history, that tradition? The Jerusalem leadership, and Paul with his mission to the Gentiles, are all a part of the Tradition of the church.

In the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, Reason has to do with the knowledge of the human race – everything we have reasoned out at this point in time. Often science is referred to in this category, but it could also be philosophy or any form of knowledge that uses reason to arrive at answers to life’s great questions. Paul makes use of reason and logic as he develops arguments in defense of the faith.

But Paul would probably resonate most with Experience, the fourth source of authority in

the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Sometimes individual experiences of God are frowned upon by the institutional church, which favors stability and tradition. Certainly the early church leaders in Jerusalem question Paul's experience as a legitimate claim to authority. But in the United Methodist Church, we make room for experience as one of our four sources of authority.

More than any other claim to authority, Paul relies on his personal experience of Jesus Christ. Scripture has authority, tradition has authority, and reason has authority. But for Paul the greatest authority is that which he "received...through a revelation of Jesus Christ." (Gal. 1:12). This is personal spiritual experience. This is personal encounter with God, with the Holy, with the Divine. Paul is so moved by his experience of Christ that he is willing to take on the top church authorities of his day, the apostles in Jerusalem. As United Methodists, we value that kind of personal faith experience as a source of authority.

It's important that the four sources of authority balance one another. Personal experience must be measured alongside the scriptures. Tradition must be challenged by experience. Reason must be challenged by the other sources as well.

Once we have consulted authorities that we trust in the areas of scripture, reason, tradition and experience, we have the responsibility of making up our own minds about what we will believe and how we shall live. Luckily we have brothers and sisters in our church family to help us in discerning the truth.

### **Closing**

In her last letter to her husband, George Burns, Gracie Allen wrote: "Don't put a period where God puts a comma...God still speaks."

Lucky for us, the Bible contains many writings that balance and critique one another. If Peter and James represent the more traditional, institutional beginnings of the church, Paul

represents the more radical, tear-down-the-walls stream of the faith. Looking at the conflicts between Peter and Paul, we gain insight into our own struggles between tradition and new ways of being the church in this place.

Paul writes: “For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ...And they glorified God because of me.” (Gal. 1:11-12, 24).

May God in Christ Jesus always be glorified in your life and in the life of this church family.

Amen.