



Transcriptions

The Seduction of Authority

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Annotation: *Chapel Address, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, November 12, 1996.* In this chapel address, Ted Ward cautions ministerial students, men and women, about the dangers of the fact that accumulated knowledge can slip so easily into control and an unbiblical exercise of power. He draws from the example of Jesus Christ in Philippians 2: 1-11 and warns that the world mocks the sort of Christian leadership that turns responsible authority into selfish, bigoted control, and ultimately, the manipulation and abuse of others.



Thank you, Perry, and I appreciate very much the invitation which has come to me to minister today in chapel. This is not going to be terribly humorous. It's not going to be terribly encouraging. I will have admit to being burdened about the fact that the Word of God gives us, not only great cause for encouragement, but also gives us great cause for concern, and occasionally gives us the basis for a great deal of chastisement.

And I would like to speak about an issue that I think is not peculiar by any means to Trinity or to us in this community, but an issue that is a major problem in the church today and to which we can be either more contribution to the negative or some cause for the corrective. Knowing what I was speaking about today, one of my good colleagues, Professor Paul Hiebert, passed me one of his innumerable cartoons. He is one of the greatest collectors of relevant cartoons I have ever run into. So Paul, in his good form, gave me the overhead transparency for this and I said, "Paul, could I

have it in a flat print?” Because as is true with most Christian cartooning, the message is in the words—even as it is in much of evangelical theology—is much more in the words than in the action.

And this particular cartoon actually comes across much better if you hear it read rather than to read it yourself. You see, there is but one character and he appears in all three panels and he is a rather bewildered-looking individual who looks suspiciously like a seminary graduate. Don’t tell me how I know that. I know that partly because of the instruction and in the frame of reference here it’s as if hearing a voice from on high, much like the tone of the old *Mission Impossible*. Those of you old enough to remember, remember the voice on the tape from the *Mission Impossible*?

Good afternoon, Mr. Pious, you have ascended to a position of authority in the church. Your temptation will be to crack heads, impose your views on others, perhaps excommunicate a heretic or two; but your true mission, should you choose to accept it, is simply to love others as I have loved you and to demonstrate my mercy and compassion. [Mr. Pious] Rats! Real religion takes all the fun out of being in charge.

And so it does; and so it does. I speak to you this day of a sober message and my voice is that of anguish and concern. This is not easy. And some of you, after we’re done, will say that this wasn’t even called for in this sanctuary of Christian purity. I really wondered about where to begin. My first plan was to come at it straight on and say, the big issue is that the church in many places is being ripped apart, debilitated, and in many cases disgraced as a result of bad leadership. But I decided that was too blunt, so I wouldn’t start there.

Instead, I would go to my own domain of expertise and retreat and say, well, now, you know I’ve been around the world a little bit in the last few years, and even in 1996 I’ve been in several overseas assignments troubleshooting. And one of the things that we know today to be a fundamental problem worldwide and especially in the activities that are most common in missionary deployment today—and that is leadership development. The problem is that the model of leadership that exists in the church in many places is a model that is hierarchical, managerial, dictatorial, and ultimately authoritarian. And not only does this model exist and thrive, it is being promulgated. It is being promulgated by missionaries from—and I don’t care where you’re from, your country and mine—because this is the experience of many Christians in their own home context. I would love to tell you the tragedies that are coming about because of the bad deployment of missionaries from certain countries that are rapidly increasing their proportion of Christians in mission. I would love to tell you the case, but I’m going to be very polite and not even mention countries. But suffice to say, that you can find several examples even in Asia, where missionary activity is increasing, where the quality of activity pursued by missionaries in the field is destructive as often as it is constructive. Given that the church is planted in many parts of the world today, and given that missionaries are still going out from here, from there, and from yonder to those various places where the church is planted, it is extremely crucial that the model of church and particularly the relationships of leadership and the people within the churches be modeled on the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, not modeled on the experiences that we’ve known back home and in the situations that we have seen as power situations in our own context. But I decided that would probably be too pompous a place to begin, so I wouldn’t do that.

Instead I decided, ultimately, that the only thing to do in a topic of this gravity is to come around with some humor, so that’s where I’m going to start. And the story I’m going to tell you is a

true one and it occurred not very many years ago to me while I was lecturing in Central Africa in a vernacular Bible institute. And we had pastors in from all over the place and we were just going to it over the several days that I was there and having a lot of fun together. But the language barrier was pretty difficult. I had several very excellent translating interpreters and the one person—a person from that community who was doing, I thought, the very best job—kept hanging up. And if you if you really have a linguistic ear you can hear your translator hanging up, even if you don't know the language. When the translator comes to a certain phrase that you've used or a certain passage—after you go back and forth in translating—and you know you've used the word seminary or theological education and he gets to that point and just goes into this big long thing, you know you've got a hang up. In a break, I said to him, "What happens when I say 'seminary' or 'theological education'?" "Oh," he says, "that's very difficult to translate." I said, "I can tell. What *do* you do when you translate it?" He says, "I don't think you really want to know." And I said, "Oh, yes I do want to know. I want to know a lot more than I did 30 seconds ago." He says, "Well, we actually have a phrase that we use and I just have to use that long phrase." "What is it?" I said. He put his head down and he said, "Whenever we get to the idea 'seminary' or 'theological education,' we use a phrase that says, 'Place where little boys go to get big heads.'" Fact: place where little boys go to get big heads.

Now lest we externalize this matter and think of this as a problem in some other country or some other part of the world, let's try to stay today with our own contexts, with our own selves, and with our own churches in the United States and in the regions that you are representing from other parts of the world. There is, because of human nature, an endemic characteristic in the human being that, unless treated carefully, becomes a fundamental barrier to effectiveness in ministry. It is that characteristic of enjoying being in control—enjoying power. It grows, partly, out of this fact that we are in a theological seminary and in an educated background in order to get the authority and the power that comes from being educated. There is no denying it: education translates to power. And in the Christian community, the authority of the Word of God becomes my basis of authority; and if I add my natural human bent toward power to my accumulated wealth of knowledge, it becomes powerful authority which slips so easily over into control that we must be always on guard.

Churches today are suffering. The cause of Christ is disgraced and the world is mocking the sort of leadership that seizes on authority to turn responsible authority into selfish, bigoted control and, ultimately, the manipulation and abuse of others. Many churches, even within sectors that we represent right here today, find themselves being pastored by people who become so threatened because someone challenges their authority or they haven't completed their control package in the whole situation, that they get people to sign loyalty pledges. And, ultimately, churches are split over the issue of who is the chief around here?

Now in Central America and Latin America there's a term used that I have learned to say with a certain hiss, *cacique*. And those of you from Latin America know very well that that is a very tight word for the chief, the controller, the ultimate behind it all, which is never a word used for God. It is always used for the corrupted power that comes from misplaced use of authority within the assembly of God in order that we can exercise a dominating effect over others. Arrogant pastors become, then, a symbol of false godliness most typically righteous in their own eyes, but in virtually no one else's eyes. And then such persons put down everybody else verbally and circumstantially and, in terms of assignments and roles and respect and recognition; put down others from the general ranks of the church especially belittling and humiliating those who resist being controlled. It

all becomes a big game. And if you really want to catch it, just rear your hand and ask the wrong question in a meeting, especially a business meeting, because the pastor is there with his *cacique* hat on. And we find that this is what ultimately gives people, in such perverted control, the prerogative to abuse people. And sometimes this inflated, distorted sense of power even makes us willing to succumb to things in human relationships that are a total violation of God's law. I believe that, as a matter of fact, this whole posture of arrogant leadership is the Achilles' heel that makes a leader in the church vulnerable to adultery. These are related. Make no mistake about it. It is this presumption that ultimately *I* make the decisions, and ultimately if *I* am doing it and *I* want to do it, then somehow it'll wash through. I tell you, God is still on the throne.

Notice what they said of Jesus. In Matthew 7 in verses 28 and 29 is an absolutely remarkable little response after his message. Matthew 7: "Do not judge, or you will be judged; ask and it'll be given to you; seek and ye shall find." Wonderful teachings and ultimately the response of the people when Jesus finished these sayings, "The crowds were amazed at his teaching; because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers, the scribes."

Now that little passage, "not as their teachers, the scribes" sometimes goes right past us because the scribes and the Pharisees are commonly the bad guys. But there are some particular characteristics of the scribes that Jesus, in his authority, is sharply in contrast with. Now Jesus was a teacher from authority, but as we saw in the opening passage today when that wonderful little hymn of the church—and that's probably what that Philippians 2 passage was—one of the earliest hymns of the church praising Jesus Christ for his humility. Though he was God, he did not seize upon these things to use power, to use control, and ultimately he is the gentle Christ, not the abuser of people.

We contrast that passage in Matthew 7 with the passage in Matthew 23. We see something very exciting. Matthew 23 opens with the reference to the teaching of the law by the Pharisees, and the scribes who are sitting in the seat of Moses. And the imagery there is one of people who have put themselves in a place. They have pumped themselves up into a relationship. They have made something more of themselves than they should, and they are now sitting in the seat of authority.

In a contrast with "Jesus taught as one having authority," the scribes, Matthew 7, the contrast. The scribes were, Matthew 23, people who were using a position in order to puff themselves up. Matthew 23 the first 12 verses. I think you're hearing today a sermon on this passage and it'll be one of the rare sermons until you get nerve enough to preach one yourself. I have rarely heard Matthew 23 the first 12 verses referred to within a sermon, even—to say nothing of a question of being the basis of a sermon—because it is too incriminatory for any of us who are careless in this matter of the abuse of the authority of God's Word. The criticisms in Matthew 23 range from hierarchy. They sit up here. They tell people what to do. They are up here and down there's the people who do the work. They're aloof from those people that they're trying to serve. In fact, they're controlling them. All of this is here in this passage. They want honor. They want respect. They want to be puffed up. They want people to recognize them. They want fine titles.

Now, of course, that is exactly what we're talking about here today, and this is not some archaic moment. This is the teaching of our Lord Jesus in reference to the temptation of human beings in all cultures in all times. Don't tell me that in *our* culture, that's the way leadership is. I come from a culture where that's the way leadership is, too. I get sick and tired of people throwing that up

at me saying, well, you don't understand our culture; that's the way leadership is. Come *on!* I'm a human being. That's the way *people* are! Our Lord is warning, not against cultural habit; our Lord is warning against a deceitfulness of Satan in the heart. Let us understand it plainly: everything they do is to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries wide, the tassels of their garments long. They love the place of honor at banquets. Oh, but you see, that was a different cultural moment in history. Baloney! That's you, me, us, wherever we're from, wherever we are, and however we are called to minister. These are our temptations.

Our Lord ends this teaching up by saying, "You are not even to be called 'Rabbi'." He puts it on us. "You have only one master, and you are all brothers." One of the most plain teachings about the relationships of the people of God in fellowship that you have in all of Scripture. "You are not even to be called 'Teacher', for you have but One teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

May I recommend to you that you fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ around the Word in those first 12 verses of Matthew 23 as often as you possibly can as you move into leadership responsibilities. Do not accept roles and tasks. Do not accept badges. Do not accept uniforms if you are prone to this being puffed up in your own eyes. I wonder, even, about some of the things we do to people on this campus: train them to be pastors with one hand, and policemen with the other hand. Terrible, terrible. We should hire outsiders just like you hire outside undertakers; somebody has to do it. We need, as the people of God, not to feed our ego and our control motives. And if we are control freaks, we need to get a hold of ourselves and we need to humbly beseech the Lord God in heaven to give us deliverance from this very awful, devastating human characteristic.

I'm tempted to bring in a contemporary news event: after most of this was organized and thought through just a week ago—boom! Aberdeen, Maryland. Those of you who read the newspapers or occasionally watch the television know exactly what I'm talking about. You say, what has that to do with this? For heaven's sake, don't make a connection there. Oh, yes. It is the same connection. It is the misuse of power by people who find themselves part of a dominant group who can control the lives of other people and they learn to enjoy it. *Sin!* That could never happen here. Don't you believe it! This is a community dominated by men who tend to verbally abuse women. *Sin!* "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves."

We have but one Lord. We are each brother and sister. Along with the rest of us, we are the people of God. We stand together as peers before God. We differ in gifts and calling, but we stand together below and in the service of the lordship of Christ. Thus, we must be on our guard. Beware what can happen if you get an appetite for authority. It begins when the authority we represent turns into that hazardous stuff, influence. Because influence goes to power. Power goes to control. Control goes to abuse. Abuse goes to tyranny. What should we call that human characteristic? Poor leadership style, hmm; bad habits, hmm; personality quirks, hmm. No. It is all this, but it must be called what it is. Since it is disobedient to the explicit teaching of our Lord and since it violates the weight of Scripture, we must call it . . . sin.

We are here in this sanctuary of learning to gain a responsible grip on the authority of Scripture. Knowledge, itself, adds to our power. We move steadily into recognition and influence

within the church. At some point, each of us will begin to think of the ministry to which we have been called—as *my* ministry and, thus, the seduction has its grip on *you*. It is not *your* ministry. This seduction lies waiting to ensnare any of us who accept leadership responsibilities within the church. Into what pit will it drag us: to control, to power, to abusing others, to becoming ensnared even in sinful personal relationships because we have become able to believe in ourselves; to have faith in our own power and influence? These matters are, indeed, related. We must beware. We must pray for God’s protection and for deliverance from the great seducer, himself. Let us pray:

Father, may we be cautious. May we be prayerfully careful that in our personal style and our appetites, in our view of our own importance, we keep a discipline that brings it all under the lordship of Christ. We praise you, Father, that you have given us these instructions. We see the damage that is done when people violate these instructions. Make us willing, Father, to accept your correction, and keep us close enough to you that we can come to you over and over and over again in prayer for the deliverance from the ways of the evil one who would make of our very human nature something ultimately of a disgrace to our Lord Jesus Christ. May this not happen. May we be kept in your hand. May we be found faithful in humility in the image of our Lord Jesus Christ. May this mind be in us, even as it was in our Lord. Amen.