

# “Amazing Authority”

Mark I.21-28

<sup>21</sup> And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. <sup>22</sup> And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. <sup>23</sup> And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, <sup>24</sup> “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.” <sup>25</sup> But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “**Be silent, and come out of him!**” <sup>26</sup> And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. <sup>27</sup> And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” <sup>28</sup> And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee. [ESV]

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Mr. Bruce R. Johnson

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Sermons come together in many ways. Two significant influences on this sermon were Thomas Boston (dead for 278 years) and those members of Hope who talk to me from time to time about whether what I preach or teach is in some way “practical.” Boston talks about making the holes in the fisherman’s net too large. By this he means preaching doctrine so general that you can swim thru – *e.g.*, “You need Christ.” Well, yes, but why? Or, in terms to be fleshed out as we go, “Sez who?” I have a feeling that I’ve made the net openings too large in some cases and too small in others . . . and that has made me impractical to you.

So, in an effort to be more useful – I offer you this morning an eleven-point sermon.

I. In the beginning, God made the heavens and the earth.<sup>Gen. 1.1</sup> Every sermon explicitly or implicitly starts here.

- A. There is a God.
- B. He is a person.
- C. To be a person is to be purposeful.

This is another way of saying that we see meaning in life. You’ll meet Arthur Leff in a few minutes. When you do, imagine what it would be to be Arthur Leff and to begin to wonder if your life’s work has meaning (kids: future life’s work).

Now back to Mark: Our passage combines two episodes that make the same point. In the first, Mark shows that Jesus teaches with unique *authority*, unlike and indeed surpassing that of the scribes. The second part is an account of an exorcism. The episodes are knit together by v. 27, in which Mark notes that all the people – and he emphasizes *all* – are astonished, for the authority by which Jesus expels a demon is the same authority by which he teaches. The combined stories demonstrate that *Jesus’ word is deed*. We might call this the first “small doctrine” (“diminutive doctrine”) of today’s passage.

II. Invested with Authority. Recall from chapter 1 that “when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’”<sup>Mark 1.10-11</sup> He was invested with the highest authority possible . . . but not all were there to witness. So, after calling his first disciples, . . .

III. Jesus enters a synagogue and begins teaching. Authority Greater than the Scribes. What the congregation hears is unlike anything they’ve heard before. Reactions range from astonishment to incredulity. To what can they compare his teaching? The scribes are the only available standard.<sup>1</sup> This incident took place before universal education and literacy, and scribes were in great demand throughout the ancient world, especially in Judaism where the written code of the Torah regulated Jewish life. What did a scribe do? He was a Torah professor, teacher, moralist and civil lawyer, in that order – many vital roles. By the first century, their prestige reached almost legendary proportions,

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<sup>1</sup> James R. Edwards, **The Gospel According to Mark**, p. 54 (hereafter “Edw.”). Edwards does not follow the older tradition of initially capitalizing the first letter of the third person singular masculine pronoun when it refers to a member of the Godhead. Although I prefer that tradition, I will, for the sake of minimizing reader confusion, adopt the contemporary practice of using all lower case letters even when I am not quoting Edwards.

occasionally surpassing that of the high priest. Apart from the chief priests and members of patrician families, only scribes could enter the Sanhedrin. Commoners deferred to scribes as they walked the streets. The first seats in the synagogue were reserved for the scribes, and people rose to their feet when a scribe entered the room. Jesus’ teaching authority was greater than that of the best-known teachers of the time.

IV. Authority Greater than Demons. Look out! Right there in the synagogue is a demon-possessed man! The kingdom of God<sup>2</sup> goes toe-to-toe with its ultimate opponent – the whole power structure of evil. If you think Jesus was impressive as a teacher, watch Him in the supernatural realm. This is the first of several incidents Mark will relate depicting the conflict between the kingdom of God and the dominion of Satan – between the one anointed with God’s spirit and those held captive by unclean spirits. Vv. 23-26 could be a gospel sermon by themselves: God’s Spirit frees the captives (diminutive doctrine number two).

In the vernacular of the day: Is this amazing authority or what?!? The demons recognize the mission and authority of Jesus before – perhaps – any human fully does. “The demons become the second party in Mark’s presentation of Jesus, following the voice from heaven at the baptism, to announce Jesus’ divine Sonship.”<sup>3</sup>

Are you wondering about the “we/I” references to the demon[s]? Me too. Edwards offers two suggestions: “What have you to do with *us*?” might “reflect the subjective experience of the demon-possessed that a host of evil forces is at work within.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, in ch. 5, Jesus will drive out a “Legion” of demons. Second suggestion: The evil spirit might have known “that Jesus’ mission is not simply to defeat one demon, but to lay waste the entire demonic power structure.”<sup>5</sup> In any event, it’s no contest. Jesus wins.

V. Authority Greater than the People’s Experience. “The exorcism ends with the amazement of all present. ‘All’ is emphatic in Greek, meaning literally everyone.”<sup>6</sup> Vv. 27-28 tell of the depth of Christ’s impression on those present and of its geographic breadth. “His fame spread everywhere throughout all . . . Galilee.” It’s not just raw power parading His grandeur, but He uses His authority to redeem captives. Throughout Mark’s gospel we learn through a variety of encounters (calls, exorcisms, healings, and travels) who Jesus is by what he *does*.<sup>7</sup> This is not hollow. There is a difference between saying, “I can drive out demons” and driving out demons.

VI. In many ways, the most significant aspect of this passage is what it doesn’t say. Mark is silent on the content of Jesus’ teaching. Key phrases from the passage: “He was teaching . . . they were astonished at his teaching . . . a new teaching with authority.” But not a word about content. “In the Gospel of Mark the person of Jesus is more important

<sup>2</sup> The balance of this paragraph is substantially paraphrased from Edw., pp. 56-57.

<sup>3</sup> Edw. p. 57

<sup>4</sup> Edw. *loc. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Edw. *loc. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Edw. p. 58

<sup>7</sup> Edw. p. 52

than the subject of his teaching. If we want to know what the gospel or teaching of Jesus consists of, we are directed to its embodiment in Jesus the teacher.”<sup>8</sup>

From this we discover [STRANGEST DOCTRINE EVER?] that **Jesus is the “Who” in the age-old playground or tavern question: Sez who?** As in: Abbott – You shouldn’t do things like that! Costello: Sez who? [Laurel/Hardy – Rowan/Martin? Out of touch with culture – so much so that I don’t even know if there are “comedy teams” any more.]

VII. Does this question matter? If we say that it does, why does it matter? Well, we see that it matters in contemporary American politics. Shortly after his inauguration, President Obama famously replied to Republican critics of his so-called stimulus proposal with the two words “I won.” *“Who says we should spend so much public money?”* “I do. I won the election. ‘Elections have consequences’”

It matters on the school playground. *“Who says that the team that just scored gets to kick off from mid-field?”* “I do. It’s my football.”

It matters in the work place. *“Who says I hafta keep my shirt tucked in when I’m around that machine?”* “I do; I own the place.”

It matters on the college campus, in bar room banter . . . any place where morality is being discussed. “Sez who?” might be the underlying, “core” challenge to Christianity being issued by the unsaved everywhere and throughout the ages . . . even by that person the Holy Spirit has been asking you to invite to experience the means of grace.

“Sez who?” is a question about authority. Unbelievers engaged in conversation with us **must** ask this question: We believe in ultimate authority; they don’t. I offer a very thoughtful law teacher as proof that at least *honest* unbelievers engaged in conversation with us **must** ask this question.

VIII. Introducing Arthur Leff. In 1979, atheist/liberal Yale law professor Arthur Leff wrote an essay about the *source* of law. Tens of thousands have read it; thousands have commented on it. The question is similar to the question about the source of authority. At one point in a lengthy, complex analysis he finally made (without obviously “flinching,” I might add) the fundamental statement that something is either true or not true -- or it’s either right or wrong. Think about it: That exhausts all of the possibilities – true/not true; right/wrong. [Let’s peek in on him at his writing desk.]

Now Leff is in a bind of sorts. He’s admitted: True/not true. For simplicity (but without distortion, I trust): Morally, the universe is necessarily binary (a “Necessarily Binary Moral Universe”). It will turn out, before he’s finished writing, that he’ll admit that in an NBMU, “true” must come from outside of that universe. [It’s a complex argument, as I’ve said, but don’t get off the train because of that; I’m giving you what you need to know to follow. Remember: I’m not trying to **prove** a particular proposition/idea/argument. I’m trying to demonstrate that even the most convinced atheist has a deep

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<sup>8</sup> Edw. p. 56

need/desire for ultimate authority in his/her life.]

A statement in the form "you ought to do X," "it is right to do X," or "X is good" will establish oughtness, rightness, or goodness only if there is a set of rules that gives the speaker the power totally to determine the question. But there's more than a "set of rules." It is inherent in the very structure/nature of the created universe that God as the speaker has the power totally to determine the question.

To make his point about the externality of authority, Leff invoked what he called "the grand sez who" that is identified with both the playground and the barroom, depending upon the age of the combatants: no matter what one person says, the other person's retort is -- "Sez who?"

Leff concluded his Duke Law Review article with the absolute and the relative value systems in sharp contrast when he wrote: "Neither reason, nor love, nor even terror, seems to have worked to make us 'good,' and worse than that, there is no reason why anything should. KEY SENTENCE: Only if ethics were something unspeakable by us, could law be unnatural, and therefore unchallengeable. ["Unspeakable by us" in the sense of not being something which we have the capacity to speak . . . beyond our pay grade. "Unnatural law" in the sense that it emanates not from our nature but from the nature of a transcendent being.] As things now stand, everything is up for grabs. Nevertheless:

"Napalming babies is bad.

Starving the poor is wicked.

Buying and selling each other is depraved.

Those who stood up and died resisting Hitler, Stalin, Amin, and Pol Pot —and General Custer too— have earned salvation.

Those who acquiesced deserve to be damned.

There is in the world such a thing as evil.

"[All together now:] Sez who? God help us."

IX. Desire or Need for Authority. The demand to know who is the authority is not merely a sign of the rebellion of the human heart; it is also a recognition that someone must be in charge – that there must be an ultimate authority . . . even an ultimate "rationalizer" [[purpose/meaning explainer](#)] who can tell the story in a way that makes sense of it.

But much more than that, authority ultimately "enlarges" us. The English "root," of course, is "author." Look at where than comes from.

[author](#) comes ultimately from a verb, so it's an action word.

c.1300, \*\* *autor* "**father**," from Old French *auctor*, from Latin *auctorem* (nominative *auctor*) "enlarger, founder, master, leader," literally "**one who causes to grow**," agent noun from *auctus*, past participle of *augere* "to increase" (see [augment](#)). IT FEELS RESTRICTIVE BUT IS GREATLY EXPANSIVE. \*\* Only 200 years would pass until Tyndale's first English translation of

NT and only 300 years until KJV, which explicitly translates “*exousia*” as “authority.” In those days, it took more than 200 years to drain a word of its original connotations and give it opposite connotations – a phenomenon which can happen faster in this Internet age.

X. The Place of Authority in Mark. Let’s take all of this apart a bit more: Today’s story is the second of 13 or 14 vignettes (Edwards says 13; I see 14) Mark relates in the first three chapters. We have already seen that he wants us to know more about Jesus as a person than about His words. The first vignette was about the call to live in community. It was a “direction-setter” of sorts.

Now comes this vignette about authority. Can we learn anything fundamental – anything about what I often refer to as the **facts of the faith** – from Holy Spirit’s turning so promptly (thru Mark) to this matter of authority, “immediately” after displaying Jesus in His call to community?

I have already talked about the significance of what Mark didn’t write (didn’t give content of Jesus’ teaching). Now look at what the people *didn’t* say: They didn’t say, “He’s really smart; a great orator; wonderful baritone voice; tickled my ears (highly likely he did the opposite).” The list of compliments they could have paid is long, but what was the sole comment Holy Spirit saw fit to include through Mark’s pen? “A new teaching with authority!”

Let’s be careful not to draw doctrinal inferences from silence. But with that caution in mind, aren’t you still intrigued by what “authority” might have meant to Jesus’ listeners?

Fast forward to chapter 2, where Mark next uses the word *exousia* – authority – and provides at least an example of the kind of authority the Jews might have had in mind.

**Mark 2.6** Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, <sup>7</sup> “Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” <sup>8</sup> And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, “**Why do you question these things in your hearts?** <sup>9</sup> **Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk?’** <sup>10</sup> **But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins**” [HAS ABILITY ON EARTH TO INCREASE YOUR LIFE . . . TO AUGMENT IT]—he said to the paralytic— <sup>11</sup> **“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.”** <sup>12</sup> And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We never saw anything like this!”

XI (and FINAL). “All that are taken in the net do make some struggle to get free” (from Boston). Let me speak to any who may be struggling to get free because they’ve heard something about the biblical doctrine of election. Maybe your struggle is at another point but have an eye on the principle: **You need Jesus**. Are you wondering if God has exercised His authority on your behalf to *elect you*? In the closing portion of

this sermon, I am greatly aided by the "Prince of Preachers," Charles Haddon Spurgeon, and a meditation he wrote at least 118 years ago on 1 Thessalonians 1.4: "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, . . ."

Many people want to know their election before they look to Christ, but they cannot learn it in that order. It is to be discovered only by "looking unto Jesus." If you want to know your own election, here is how to gain assurance before God. Do you feel yourself to be a lost, guilty sinner? Go directly to the cross of Christ, and tell Jesus so, and tell him that you have read in the Bible, ". . . whoever comes to me I will never cast out." <sup>John 6.37</sup> Tell him that he has said, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." <sup>1 Tim. 1.15</sup> Look to Jesus and believe on him, and you shall make proof of your election directly, for as surely as you believe, you are elect. If you will give yourself wholly up to Christ and trust him, then you are one of God's chosen ones; but if you stop and say, "I want to know *first* whether I am elect," you ask you know not what. Go to Jesus, be you ever so guilty, just as you are. Leave all curious inquiry about election alone. Go straight to Christ and hide in his wounds, and you shall know your election. The assurance of the Holy Spirit shall be given to you, so that you shall be able to say, "I know whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed to him." <sup>2 Tim. 1.12</sup> Christ was at the everlasting council: He has authority to tell you whether you were chosen or not; but you cannot find it out in any other way. Go and put your trust in him, and his answer will be – "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you." <sup>Jer. 31.3</sup>

By His amazing authority, He will increase your eternal happiness. Seek with all your being to come under that authority. Amen