

Authority for What?

Sermon by Arthur F. Kulah, bishop of the Liberia Area

May 5, 2000

Text: Matthew 28:16-20

Greetings and peace, perfect peace, from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I also bring you greetings from your brothers and sisters of The United Methodist Church in Liberia in particular and Africa in general.

We, Christians and non-Christians, old and young, rich and poor, home and homeless, adult and children, are guided, controlled, and directed by a system of authority. These systems are represented by symbols. For example, the police badge represents a symbol of authority to protect life and property.

For us Christians, United Methodists in particular, the Bible that is God's Word is a symbol. It is not only a symbol, but it is the source of our authority. And when we open Matthew 28:16-20, we read these words, "Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"

When the disciples listened to these words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they were inspired and challenged. They were motivated, and in some ways they were sanctified, for they heard our Lord not only speaking with authority, but in fact, he was giving authority to them. Jesus spoke with authority because he was the Source of life, the Author of faith, and the Beginning of all beginnings.

But what is authority? According to Webster's Encyclopedic, Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, authority is, "the power to determine, adjudicate, or otherwise settle issues or disputes; jurisdiction; the right to control, command or determine." Indeed, authority is the right to exercise power. It is the ability to control and influence people and events. In the case of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we read, witnessed, and experienced Him using authority as power to control and influence not only people, but also nature and the elements of the universe. Our tradition witnesses to the fact that the winds and the waves obeyed him. One touch from his hands brought healing and wholeness to those who were brokenhearted, broken in spirit

and in body. His words made the sinner to repent, reconciliation to take place, and forgiveness to be a reality.

It is this authority, church, that our Lord and our Savior has entrusted into our hands. This authority, as recorded in Matthew 28:16-20, has been described by church historians as the "Charter of the Church." Biblical theologians have called it the "Divine Imperative," and evangelists call it the "Great Commission." No matter what name you call it, it is our authority, indeed, our mandate.

Today, we've come as a church, as a people of God, to ask ourselves: What is the purpose of our authority?

We raise this question in light of the fact that The United Methodist Church is standing at the crossroad. As we enter the 21st century, there will be issues, challenges, and problems that will confront this church. There will be pains and agony, as our church becomes global in nature and in reality. There will be a need for cultural pluralism. Are we ready to accept the authority from our Lord and embrace our Lord's mandate to go forth and make disciples?

According to our Lord's mandate, we have the authority from him to do three things:

- To evangelize;
- To make disciples;
- To teach.

For our mediation, I shall reflect on these three aspects of the mandate. There is a difference between evangelism and discipleship; yet they are two sides of the same coin. Evangelism is the conversion of sinners, the winning of souls and bodies for Christ. Discipleship is the process by which the convert grows and matures into the likeness of Christ.

Evangelism marks the beginning of the Christian life. Discipleship is the process towards growth and maturity. The disciple is one who follows and obeys Jesus Christ. The disciple does not only follow Christ; he or she walks with Christ and learns so much from Christ that people cannot tell the difference between Christ and the disciple.

The disciple is a mature Christian who walks and talks the Christian faith; one whose entire existence is controlled and directed by the Holy Spirit. The convert is the milk-drinking Christian (Heb. 5:11-13). The disciple is the Christian who eats solid spiritual food (5:14). The convert may have a weak faith but the disciple has a faith rooted and grounded in Jesus Christ and the Word of God.

The challenge before our United Methodist Church is to cultivate and maintain Christian maturity so that we will truly be disciples, for we cannot make disciples when we ourselves are not disciples. We cannot call others to obey the Holy Spirit when we ourselves do not have the patience. In the words of the Council of Bishops, we must become mature enough "to be quiet, to be united, to listen for God's guiding voice, and to learn from one another." We cannot make disciples when we allow problems, even little problems, to distract the church from its focus.

Church, the question we need to raise is: When the early church was confronted by problems, what did they do? According to my own reading of the Bible, when Christ resurrected and ascended to your Father and my Father, it created a crisis among the disciples. But my Bible tells me that when that happened, the disciples got together, went in the upper room and closed the door, and together, they prayed persistently until the Holy Spirit came upon them. When the apostles were faced with the problem of choosing a successor to Judas, they prayed, prayed and prayed until Matthias was chosen. The coming of the Holy Spirit was seemingly a crisis. Dr. Luke described it as the rushing of a violent wind; tongues of fire appeared; the people spoke in different languages (Acts 2:1-4). In other words, the coming of the Holy Spirit was like a hurricane, but the disciples did not panic or run. Instead, they stayed put and prayed until they could hear the Lord speaking to them.

In Chapter 15 of Acts, the early church was almost split over the issue of the Jewish custom of circumcision as a prerequisite for becoming a Christian. But the early church did not allow it, for they discussed the issue, listened to each other, listened to God and were led by the Holy Spirit to an amicable solution that glorified God, not man nor individual groups, and kept the church united.

Challenges to the Exercise of Christian Authority

As mentioned in the introduction of this sermon, in our effort to exercise Christian authority, The United Methodist Church has over the years been bombarded by numerous challenges. Many of those challenges have attempted to destroy us, for that is Satan's intent. But by the sovereign will of God, they will only serve to strengthen the church as we face greater challenges of the future.

Let me point out that these threatening challenges have always surfaced when the authority given to the church by Christ is abused. And this authority is abused when we fail to

realize that its source is Jesus Christ and that its effective exercise must glorify Christ and bring peace, reconciliation, healing and freedom to all of God's people. I shall appeal to Scripture as I lift up one of these threatening challenges to our church for your humble and prayerful consideration. And that is the issue of homosexuality.

Since 1976, the homosexual issue in our church has taken toll on us. Bishops, district superintendents, pastors and laity have all been affected one way or other. A homosexually oriented person is one whose sexual preference is for one of the same sex. Because nature itself abhors homosexuality, people of this indecent practice have often been subjected to resentment, hostility and ridicule by people within and outside the church. But this ought not to be the case, because the homosexuals too bear the image of God, and that the grace of God is available to and sufficient for them.

On this issue, our *Book of Discipline* defines the church's position:

Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggle for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and considered this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God's grace is available to all (§65G).

On the other hand, the gay advocacy movement within the ecclesiastical circles continues to press the view that "homosexuality... to be affirmed and rejoiced in, and that its expression in fully loving physical sexual embrace is well within the purpose and will of God" (David Atkinson, *Pastoral Ethics in Practice*, p. 73). Although this argument has no scriptural basis, yet our brother and sisters seem determined to press their case to the admiration of their counterpart outside the Christian church.

But the Scripture, our primary authority for belief and practice, is highly unequivocal on this subject of homosexuality. And if the global United Methodist Church must persist as the church of Jesus Christ, then we must pay heed.

In the Old Testament law, the practice of homosexuality was abhorred and condemned (Lev. 18:22; 20:3). In fact, it was one of the consequences for the destruction of Sodom (Gen.19:1-11). May we not suffer the wrath of God because of the quest to satisfy unpleasant desires that contravene the loving purpose of God for his church.

The New Testament also condemns the practice of homosexuality (Rom.1:26-27). The Apostle is very categorical in his teaching against this indecent practice: “Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the Kingdom of God... Neither the sexually immoral nor idolater nor adulterers nor male prostitute nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the Kingdom of God” (I Cor.6:9-10).

It is against the background of such biblical imperatives that we (the global United Methodist Church) “do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider it incompatible with Christian teaching” (*Book of Discipline*, ¶65G).

Therefore, as regards the ordained ministry, in obedience to God and his Word, “self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church” (*Book of Discipline*, ¶304.3). For to do so is to contravene the very faith we claim to live. For we cannot afford to ruin the hearts and lives of the church, and hence the world, by engaging into practices not even easily mentioned among unbelievers (Eph.5:3-5).

Beloved, the church has always had crises. As we enter the new millennium, we will have more crises. We may have diverse and complex crises. But we should never allow God’s church to be weakened or even divided over those crises. For if we do, we will be like a house our Master described as being built on sand, and when the wind came, it broke down. But instead, we should listen, watch, pray, pray, pray until we accept and use the crisis as a means to strengthen, to unite, and indeed give us a sense of Christian maturity in Jesus Christ.

My dearly beloved, I urge you to let us focus on Christ and move this church forward by a Christian witness exemplary of true believers.

But there is more. We must continue to win souls and bodies for Christ. We must continue to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We the church must continue to be involved in social services that bring healing and reconciliation among and to those who are marginalized. However, our primary responsibility, our primary mission, our primary focus must be and ought to be the proclamation of the gospel. We have no choice. We have no options.

In 1968, I came to this country as a Crusade Scholar and enrolled at the St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City. One evening, some friends of mine took me out for dinner. There, I was given the menu to choose among the several dishes. I just sat and looked at my friends. Finally, one of them said to me, “Aren’t you going to choose?” And I said to him, “You Americans are people of choices. In my country, whatever is available in the restaurant is what we eat. You go ahead and choose for me.”

Today, we, whether in America or Africa, have many choices as to what we eat, what we read and what we see. Our denominational system does not have the key as to what we read in our Sunday schools, in our meetings and other places. We have choices everywhere. But when it comes to evangelism, we have no choice but to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and him crucified and resurrected.

In his autobiography, entitled *A Magnificent Obsession*, the late Bishop William B. Cannon had this to say about evangelism:

Indeed, in the New Testament Christian proclamation is emphasized, not discussion and dialogue. The apostles were not interested in what people thought. Their sole concern was divine truth as revealed in Jesus Christ. When the church loses this realization, it ceases to be the church. It is no longer the body of Christ, the continuance in time of his incarnation”.

He continues:

Evangelization is not just one among many functions of the church. It is not on a parity, for example, with charity, political and social programs, human rights, and even justice itself. Many, if not all, of these the church shares with other institutions of society. Evangelization is uniquely its own. Therefore, it is the very essence of Christianity, for Christian faith is not something given us to keep. It is given only to be given away.

Indeed, we have the authority to proclaim Christ and lift him up high. In the words of a little song in Liberia:

*Lift Him up higher, Lift Him up higher.
My Lord is good. I will lift Him up higher.
Everywhere I go I will lift Him up higher.*

During the civil crisis in Liberia, I met a lady in one of the refugee camps in Danane, the Ivory Coast: a woman who was rich by our standard but had lost everything during the war. I went there to comfort her and pray with her. But before I could open my mouth, she said to me, “Bishop Kulah, don’t feel sorry for me. I brought two things with me; I brought my body and I brought Jesus Christ.” From this we can clearly see that Jesus is the hope of the world.

Indeed, we have the authority to proclaim Jesus Christ as the hope of the world. We have the authority to proclaim Christ as the uniting force, as the bridge. In him, there is no east or west, no south or north, but one great fellowship divine throughout the whole wide world. Evangelism is the lifeline, the blood and the heart of the word. We have the authority from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to proclaim him on the mountaintop, to proclaim him in the air, to proclaim him

under the water, and, I dare say, to proclaim him in outer space.

Lastly, to make disciples implies that we watch, pray, and open our souls to the power, influence, and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

A few months ago, we had an opportunity, a privilege, of nominating several persons, one of whom will be elected as our bishop in December. To prepare us for this task, the United Methodists in Liberia debated, had seminars, fasted, tarried, and prayed.

At the close of this devotional emphasis, a layman stood up and said to me, "Bishop Kulah, we should continue to pray so that God will give us a spiritual, holy, and God-fearing person." And I said, "Yes, that is true. But in order to get a spiritual, holy, and God-fearing person, we ourselves should be spiritual, holy, and God-fearing people. For it is only holy and spiritual people who will be inspired to nominate spiritual and holy persons."

Church, to make disciples for Jesus Christ in this day and age, we must and should be spiritual. For it is only the disciples of Jesus Christ who can make disciples. It is only those who allow the church to be, in the words of Bishop Cannon, "a magnificent obsession" that can cause others to be a part of the church of Jesus Christ. It is only those who are willing to let the church be the center of their lives, that can cause others to commit their lives to Jesus Christ. It is only those who are willing to deny themselves and follow Jesus Christ, that can cause others to follow Christ. In short, only disciples make disciples.

Thirdly, we have the authority to teach. Teaching our parishioners to obey Christ seems to be one authority we are not utilizing fully. The church does not seek to destroy; rather, it seeks to restore and renew. We do not condemn; we counsel. But many times, when we see our church going astray, the tendency is to tear it apart instead of teaching people to observe all that Christ has taught the church.

If we were constantly teaching our people to trust and obey, there would be fewer problems. We teach them to obey the state, but they are not taught obey God on the same level.

Many Christians think they can replace obedience through good deeds. As Saul learned from Samuel in 2 Kings, "obedience is better than sacrifice." If the church insisted on obedience to God's Word, there would be more love and greater justice in the world.

When you obey God, you would love the unlovable. When you obey God, you would forgive the unforgivable. When you obey God, as King put it, you will not judge people on the color of their skin but by the content of their character. Obedience is a sign of faithfulness. It is a sign of love for God.

We have the authority to transform the lives of those around us by our teaching. We must teach the church of God's love. The greatest commandment is that we love one another. We must teach the church about honesty, about friendship, and about the thirst for righteousness that brings fullness in one's life. We must teach mercy and peacemaking. We must teach forgiveness and kindness.

Conclusion

In giving us this authority, Christ promised that we would not go alone. His presence would be with us to the end of the age. This is the blessed assurance we have. The source of our authority is always present.

Authority for what? We claim the authority to make disciples, to act in God's name and to teach.

Let us use this authority wisely. May God bless us forever. Amen.