

All Authority in the Earth

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The words of Jesus to his disciples, when he appeared to them after his resurrection from the dead:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go 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 I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20 NIV).

In our passage Jesus claims all authority in heaven, and also on the earth. But, looking about in our culture, what do we think we see today? We can cite many examples not only of godlessness, but also irrationality — stuff that's just plain goofy, that makes no sense. A prominent sports figure is called "courageous" for claiming to be a woman. A white woman calls herself black, and even black celebrities support her. People of the same sex claim the right to be married, and the Supreme Court agrees. (Talk about goofy.) A mother who aborts her baby, even at the point of birth, is exercising her "rights." The U.S. Department of Agriculture proudly distributes food stamps to 46 million people, while the National Park Service says, "Don't feed the animals, or they'll become dependent on handouts." The Administration is preparing to make a nuclear agreement with a nation that can't be trusted to keep its word, and which is determined to destroy us.

The "news of the world" has become the "news of the weird," the unreasonable, the unnatural, that which doesn't make sense. Now, is irrational, goofy stuff *sinful*? God created an orderly universe that operates by predictable "laws" that can be expressed in mathematical equations, like Einstein's famous formula, $E=mc^2$. If so, things that go against nature, and make no reasonable sense — like homosexuality, for example — are a slap in the Creator's face.

So because of these things (and I chose only a few examples out of hundreds), it's hard for people to believe Jesus has "all authority in the earth." That's probably why your neighbors and friends are not worshipping today. They see no spiritual dimension to life. The Christian faith seems an unreal fantasy, worthy of scorn. (Just read some of the anti-Christian comments on the Internet.) Moreover, people *don't want Jesus to have authority*. They want to be their own authority. We're all infected with this tendency. When the Post Office clerk tells me to "have a nice day," I'm tempted to reply, "Don't tell *me* what kind of day to have!" It's hard for Christians, too, to believe that Jesus has all authority.

Perhaps, then, we long for the "simple" world of the New Testament, into which the gospel of Messiah Jesus was first proclaimed. But let's take a closer look at *that* world, the world of the Roman Empire. So-called "gods" were everywhere; the worship of idols, made by human hands, was considered a person's civic duty, and authorities persecuted anyone who refused to take part. Christians were regarded as weirdoes; in fact, Christians were called *atheists*, because they worshiped *only one God*, who is invisible. Slavery was an accepted institution; it has been called "the electricity of the ancient world," because without it the economies of ancient civilizations could not function. Homosexuality was common in the Graeco-Roman world, also. As for Judaism, a standard men's prayer in the synagogue was to thank God he hadn't made them a Gentile or a woman. The irrationality and goofiness of the ancient world reached to the highest levels; the Emperor Nero appointed *his horse* to an official government position. (That might not seem so unbelievable today. If the Supreme Court continues in the direction it's going, perhaps people will be able to *marry* their horse.)

Look about you — and welcome to world of the New Testament! The culture in which the apostle Paul operated was no more willing than ours to hear that Jesus has all authority. When the first Christians in the Roman Empire declared that *Jesus is Lord*, they were saying that Caesar is *not* Lord — because *Lord* was a title Caesar claimed for himself. It was like American Christians calling Jesus their "chief executive." And when the Christians spoke of Jesus as "Savior" they were using a title the Roman Emperor claimed for himself. Caesar understood this very well, which is why so many believers paid for their faith with their lives.

But Paul, when he visited Athens — the intellectual capital of the ancient world — had a response to the situation he found in that culture. His words are recorded in Acts 17: 30-31:

"The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead."

Paul has faced the issue right there, hasn't he? *The issue is the resurrection.* People have trouble believing Jesus was raised from the dead and lives today. If they believed that, they wouldn't be likely to ignore his authority, and heap scorn upon the Bible and the Christian faith. Since the philosophical movement of the eighteenth century that historians, ironically, call the "Enlightenment," the view has prevailed that there can be no miracles, no resurrection, no "supernatural." What's real to people is only what they can experience in the four-dimensional world of space-time, and perceive through their five senses. People think — wrongly — that science proves the universe is a closed system of material cause and effect, in which God — if he even exists — has no involvement.

My sister-in-law, who was brought up in a "liberal" church, told me about her Sunday school when she was a child. The teacher was having the class sing "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam." That's ridiculous, she thought, even as a child — "Jesus doesn't want me for anything; Jesus is dead!" That's how most people seem to think today. They have the idea that ancient people were gullible and would believe anything, even that someone could rise from the dead, so the resurrection of Jesus is a fable. We're sophisticated and "scientific," we can't believe such fantasies. But the fact is that people in the ancient world knew just as well as we do that people don't rise from the dead. That's why they laughed at the witness of the early Christians to the resurrection of Jesus, just as people do today.

How do we know the resurrection happened, and that the Gospel accounts weren't just made up? Consider just a few things. The witness to the resurrection got the disciples in trouble; would *you* make up such a story and give your life to tell it, knowing all the time that it wasn't true? Recent historical research has demonstrated that there's no other reasonable explanation for the Gospel accounts of the resurrection unless the event happened just as they testify. Otherwise it couldn't have been described the way the Gospels tell it. Sometimes we like to sing the song that says, "You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart." But *my heart has nothing to do with it.* As Jeremiah reminds us, the heart is deceitful. You ask me how I know he lives? *Because reliable witnesses saw Jesus and spoke with him, and their testimony is recorded in Scripture.*

The sign of the resurrection today is the body of the living Jesus, the church. The church needs to believe its own stuff, and to live out the new creation that began with resurrection of Jesus. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "If anyone is in the Messiah, there is a new creation." Whether people acknowledge it or not, this world is *headed for a Christ-shaped future*, and you and I are called to be like a signpost to that future. God's orderly creation longs for the restoration of God's order in the human community. As Paul stated in Romans 8:19, "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed."

So *how* does Jesus have all authority now? Let's remind ourselves that, because of the resurrection, what the early Christians could say about God the Creator they could also say of Jesus. Look at Paul, again, in Colossians 1:15-20:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Paul was in prison when he wrote that! The churches he had planted in Asia Minor and Greece had, at most, perhaps 3-4 dozen members each. Yet Paul took the long-range view; he saw where history was going. We need to do the same.

Years ago, Francis Schaeffer wrote a book called *The God Who Is There*. I suggest we need to quit talking about the god who *isn't* there, the one people can't believe in. Maybe we need to speak about God, and about Jesus, differently. Perhaps we shouldn't speak of God like he's a big angel up in the sky, whose main purpose is to bail us out of problems and get us to heaven. (There's little in the New Testament about our going to heaven, anyway, and much more about heaven coming to earth.) Maybe we shouldn't speak of a god who deals only with "spiritual" matters, and speak instead about the God behind the operation of this vast universe. In fact, let's speak of Jesus the way the New Testament speaks of him, as in Hebrews 1:1-3:

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. (RSV)

We need to speak about the God who created this universe of 200 billion galaxies; who engineered the precise tuning of some twenty forces, like gravity and electro-magnetism, that make this universe work and make life possible; who designed the DNA code that shapes the life of every living organism. We need to speak of the God who is present at every point in the universe, in dimensions beyond the four dimensions you and I normally experience, for "in him we live and move, and have our being." We need to worship the holy God, the God of mystery, who isn't to be approached casually — as though we could understand everything about him, and toss off hackneyed phrases about his qualities, and treat him as our personal errand boy. We need to testify to the God who has a plan for this universe, revealed in the resurrection of Messiah Jesus.

Does the Creator, the Upholder of the universe, have all authority today? Has gravity stopped working, or the formula for gravitational acceleration? Through instruments like the Hubble telescope, their effects are observable in the most distant galaxies. Does the sun not "rise" each morning, as the earth rotates? Has the moon stopped rotating exactly one time for every revolution around the earth? Has light quit moving at a speed of 186,000 miles per second? Has the speed of light ceased to function as the universal constant, in relation to the observer? Are the stars not still shining in the night sky, as they obey the laws of the transformation of mass into energy? Have birds stopped singing? Are living creatures no longer able to reproduce their own kind by passing on the DNA sequence encoded in their cell nuclei? Have the seasons quit following one another with regularity? Has the axis of the earth shifted from 23.5 degrees off the angle to the sun, so that seasonal change can no longer take place?

The forces of nature aren't rebelling against their Creator; they continue to operate just as he designed them to do. It's only *people* who are disobedient; it's only in human behavior and human culture — a tiny part of the creation — where we find opposition to the rule of the Word of God. Made in God's image, people have the ability to decide against his way as well as for it. The very capability of humans to disobey God is evidence of his authority; as Scripture says, "Surely the wrath of men shall praise thee" (Psalm 76:10).

Paul declared, God "has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead." Proverbs 4:4 states, "The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble." But judgment, in the Bible, doesn't mean punishment. Judgment means *doing justice*. Judgment means *making things right*. God's judgment means the appearance, in our midst, of his new creation of which the resurrection of Jesus is the first sign, the first beachhead.

The culture we live in has been called a "culture of death." But the first Christian preaching, Peter's message on the day of Pentecost, declares that death could not hold Jesus. Therefore "God has made him both Lord and Messiah" (Acts 2:36). And, says the apostle John, when he appears "we shall be like him" (1 John 3:2). We await a Savior *come to earth from heaven*, Paul reminds the Philippians, who will "bring everything under his control" and "transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 4:21). That's the judgment that's coming.

People need to be fit to live in a Christ-shaped future. Like Paul and Peter and John, we're missionaries in a New Testament world of unreasonableness, slavery to false values, and ignorance of the purposes of God and the order of things he has established in his universe. Our response to the godlessness around us is *not to gloat but to grieve*, as Paul grieved when his fellow Jews refused their Messiah. If irrationality and goofy disregard for God's order seem to be on the increase, perhaps it's because the measure of sin is not yet filled up (1 Thessalonians 2:15). God is holding off judgment, to give people a chance to come home to him and rejoin his family.

Are we willing to be called a weirdo, a bigot, a hater because we believe the Word of God and proclaim Jesus is our Lord, our "chief executive"? Are we willing to mean what we say when we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"? Are we *willing to see our churches revived*, making it clear that Jesus has all authority not only in heaven but also in the earth?

What do I mean by revival? *I don't mean* putting up tents and bringing in a special evangelist and holding extra meetings. I mean God's people worshiping with fervor and enthusiasm — not coming to church to ask, "How can I be entertained today?" but to ask, "How can I present my body, and my voice, as a sacrifice of praise to the God who made all things, and whom I serve?" (Passive, lackluster "worship" doesn't bring honor to God.) By revival I mean churches becoming sanctuaries of praise, and healing, and intercession; congregations praying regularly for the rescue, the deliverance of the 80% of people around us who don't know the Lord or care about his plan for this world. By revival I mean Christians living out the principles of the

kingdom of God, enjoying the blessings of the life of the new creation that Jesus describes in the Gospels: prospering, being healed, provoking unbelievers to jealousy because of our success in life — but acknowledging that the gospel isn't about us and our needs, it's about *God's purpose for this world* and the ministry of reconciliation he has given us to carry out.

By revival I mean the church speaking out against the craziness of our times, not with nasty condemnation but applying the voice of reason as it comes forth from Scripture. Against the distortions and deceptions of our culture we have one response: "It is written." Use whatever media are appropriate: the Internet, letters to the editor, or just neighborly conversation. By revival I mean Christians making it plain that Jesus, not some figure in national government, is their "chief executive" — even if that puts them at odds with so-called "public policy." Finally, by revival I mean the churches working together, and coming together, *in unity*. There is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." Any church that regards itself as the only true church in town, and holds back from working with other Bible-believing churches, is *compromising the gospel* and nullifying the prayer of Jesus, "that they all may be one."

We can't wait for revival to start somewhere else, and then filter down to us. We need to pray for it here in Hamilton.

The Bible begins, in Genesis, with the creation of heaven and earth. It ends, in the Revelation, with the creation of a new heaven and a new earth, as the city of God comes down from heaven and God dwells with his people on a renewed earth. We live in the *tension between the now and the not yet*, between the resurrection of Jesus and his coming to bring the new creation in its fullness, "to deliver the kingdom to God the Father." As the apostle Paul says, "The form of this world is passing away"; this world is headed for a Christ-shaped future. The arms of the cross are the intersection of heaven and earth; in the new creation, earth and heaven become one. A person, or a whole culture, that lives in a way that's not fit for the new, Christ-shaped future is in for a shock. There is no hell like having to live in heaven-come-to-earth, when you hate it and aren't prepared for it.

Paul, near the end of Romans, urges his readers to understand the present time: "The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here" (Romans 13:11-12). As followers of Messiah Jesus, we are *daytime people* in a world that has yet to emerge from the dark night of ignorance and decay. But God's invitation is to everyone, to come into his new-creation family through the one way he has provided, the death and resurrection of Messiah Jesus. There is no other name by which people must be rescued from enslavement to a false worldview that blinds them to the possibilities of new creation, or renders them unfit to live in the Christ-shaped future. For no one other than Messiah Jesus has been raised from the dead and given all authority in heaven and earth.

We must be careful not to stand in the way of God's invitation through our own lack of faith, or by indifference to the dismal destiny of those who face an eternity at cross purposes with God. Let's not block the call of God by holding back from the full witness of Scripture to the purposes of the Creator of all things. May we never be satisfied with a half-gospel that talks only about escaping the world, instead of living enthusiastically and victoriously in a world God called "good" when he made it, and which he still loves so much that he sent his Son to bring it back to himself. And let us not frustrate the call of God by disunity in the churches, denying the prayer of Jesus "that they may all be one, as you, Father, and I are one."

*Thy mercy will not fail us,
Nor leave thy work undone.
With thy right hand to help us,
The victory shall be won.
And then, by men and angels,
Thy name shall be adored.
And this shall be our anthem:
One Church, one Faith, one Lord.* (E. H. Plumtre)