

Mission Anabaino
Annual Collaborative
May 17-19, 2022
Madison, WI
Rev. Jon Talley

**“Ecclesiastical Authority in Our Brave New
(Post-Covid, ‘Post-Racist’, Post-Christendom) World”**

“My body, my choice!” read the protestor’s sign. They had gathered with other like-minded protestors at city hall to publicly display their disdain for what they deemed a gross over-reach of government influence and power over their lives, their bodies, and ultimately what decisions they deemed best for themselves. The irony of what’s transpired in our country over the past 24 months is that the rallying cry of the pro-choice Left, has become the rallying cry of the anti-mask/anti-vax Right, thanks to Covid-19. The scene just described above could have played out in any city around America (or Canada, or Europe, for that matter), and without proper context, we would be none the wiser as to knowing which group was rallying for which cause. Such is the world we find ourselves living in today. As pastors, called to lead, shepherd and exercise ecclesiastical authority in and over the lives of a group of people, how can we even begin to make heads or tails of what’s developed in our larger culture over the past 24 months?¹ Added to this the larger conversation on race and its relationship with power and jurisdiction in both the Church and the culture that unfolded in the past year and a half (and obviously for much longer), and one can feel the words of David in an acute way, “O God...You have made the land quake; you have torn it open...You have made your people see hard things; you have given us wine to drink that made us stagger” (Psalm 60:2-3).

¹ Covid-19 is a recent phenomenon admittedly. I realize that in all reality, we may not be living (yet) in a post-Covid world, if we ever actually will be. But the “demise” of Christendom in the West has been prophesied and predicted for much longer, at least dating back 40-plus years (See Malcom Muggeridge’s *The End of Christendom* from 1980, for example.)

Consider what follows here a brief attempt, not at answering any particular questions, but simply bringing some important questions to the fore, particularly around the issue of Church (ecclesiastical) authority (jurisdiction) and how the shifting American landscape has impacted our efforts as pastors to speak into this moment that we find ourselves in. The larger question that is intended to frame this conversation is this: *How have the events of the past two years (Covid-19 & America's reckoning with issues of racism), along with the crumbling of Christendom, shaped how the Church – both her people and her leaders – understands, wields, and ultimately submits to ecclesiastical authority?*

Post-Covid Ecclesiastical Authority

The Resurrected Lord Jesus declared that “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18). This is one of the primary confessions of the Christian Church, that the Lord Jesus is the Sovereign Ruler over all spheres of life, and that we his people, as his representatives on earth, have a certain jurisdiction (authority) that is derived from Christ himself. As Andy Crouch reminds us, “Power is a gift” and “gifts are good...Gifts also require a giver.”² My assumption is that all who are reading this now would agree that our power and authority as shepherds and overseers in the Church comes from Christ the Lord, the Giver of the gift of power. From him we receive the “keys of the Kingdom” (Matt. 16:19) to bind and loose spiritual matters related to the souls of his people. This is a heavy task and a weighty burden. But what happens when those under our care didn't see things so transparently, or worse yet, understand the implications of Jesus' teaching, but chose to ignore or neglect them? What happens when the pastor of God's flock is seen as simply a spiritual version of Dr. Anthony Fauci, that much-maligned physician whose existence

² Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (IVP, 2013), p. 9.

and role in American government was a mere whisper until 24 months ago? Those opposed to all forms of governmental oversight have made him the target of their ire, as if he were single-handedly responsible for the spread Covid-19, as well as the containment of it. In a similar manner, many pastors have received the ire and irritation of many of our people's frustrations and anger regarding any number of issues that Covid has drawn out and brought to the surface of their lives. Our confusion regarding the pandemic has centered around the uncertainty of what's appropriate, and what's not; what's advisable, and what's not; what's allowable and what's not. We can summarize the entire past two years with this question: *"Who's in charge around here?"* Sadly, the example of what's unfolded regarding many Americans' distrust and frustration with Dr. Fauci, as well as the Centers for Disease and Control (CDC), provides a powerful and sobering metaphor of what's unfolded in the Church. Trust in authorities, institutions and the "powers that be" seem to be one of the many casualties of this pandemic. That's not to say that our collective trust in such things was stellar before the pandemic arrived. Our nation had several "pre-existing conditions" related to trust in institutional authority that only just recently came to the surface thanks to Covid-19.

In a culture where institutions and the authority they wield are more and more dismissed and ignored, how can the Church and her leaders work to rebuild trust with our people? Perhaps an answer lies in our understanding of what it means to be a pastor in the first place. No doubt, we've all heard by now about the issues surrounding pastoral authority, power, and the abuses of those gifts that plagued Mars Hill Church and its Pastor Mark Driscoll.³ In a recent episode of the podcast, "Everything Just Changed", Mike Cospers was asked about the impact of pastors' influence in the lives of others and his response was enlightening, to say the least:

³ I won't rehash the story here. It's been told in a thorough and detailed way through the Christianity Today podcast, "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill", written and hosted by Mike Cospers.

“What I would want to challenge people to think about is, who in your life spoke into your life in a meaningful way from a positional authority – purely positional – and not a relational authority?” For pastors, Cospser goes on to ask, “How are you earning relational authority through your loving presence, your sacrifice? How are you building confidence [in your people]?”⁴ In a post-Covid world where trust in authority and institutions is at an all-time low, perhaps the proper pastoral response is to demonstrate our power and jurisdiction via relational capital and not through our positional authority. Could it be that one of the primary reasons so many people struggled to trust their national leaders, and the various medical authorities over them telling them what to do during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, was simply that they didn’t *know* them or have any kind of relationship with them? In a post-Covid world, it will behoove us to return to an emphasis on relational authority to impact our people for good, versus relying upon our positional authority to effect change in them.

‘Post-Racist’ Ecclesiastical Authority

I’ve included a discussion on racism in America here, not because we actually live in a “post-racist” country, but because for those of us connected to the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) - a predominately white, Southern, middle-class, politically conservative denomination - the question of race remains a tender spot within our collective body. Since 2016, the ascendance of Donald Trump (and Trumpism more broadly) is a force within many white, Christian communities that has transcended merely politics and bled into religion, cultural, national identity and beyond. “White Christian Nationalism” is not only a current movement monitored by the FBI and Secret Service, but one that’s made its way into many of our churches and into the hearts and minds of our people. Many who cling this toxic combination of Christianity, nationalism, tribalism, and racism have been drawn to it precisely because

⁴ “Everything Just Changed” podcast. “Mike Cospser on Power and the Rise and Fall of Mars Hill. Episode from Jan. 25, 2022.

of how authority, power and jurisdiction are displayed by those who call the shots and form the talking points. Ironically, a number of adherents to this worldview would have us believe that they themselves are not racist, and that America is a “post-racist” country. After all, look at all that’s been done for minorities over the past 50 years!

Authoritarianism and Nationalism are on the rise the world over, as Anne Applebaum and others have told us and shown us.⁵ American Christians are not immune to its seductive pull. The fact of the matter is that it’s easier for someone to tell us how to think and what to think than to make those decisions for ourselves, or to have a so-called (pastoral) authority over us, who only gives “counsel” and “advice”, but rarely, if ever tells me what to do. Over the course of the past 24 months, it seems that more and more people simply want someone to tell them what to do. Yet, one of the main tenants of the Reformation was that the Church’s authority and power in the lives of her people was “ministerial and declarative” rather than “magisterial and legislative”. But still for many, the comfort lies in knowing that there are some in authority out there, who aren’t afraid to take charge and say what needs to be said about the declining state of our nation! I find it interesting that few, if any, of our Black brothers and sisters (as well as Asian American and Hispanic) have little to say about the decline of Christian influence and the positional authority it’s had in America...

As pastors living in a country where racism is still very much alive and well, how can we begin to reshape and reform our people’s imaginations, away from a version of Christianity that insist on being interlinked with nationalism, and towards a version of the faith that insist on seeing authority and power practiced through humble, mutual submission to one another; to move from nationalism to the type of Kingdom-mindedness that we all desire for ourselves and our people? While our individual churches (and even our denomination) may not be as diverse as we’d like, the Church

⁵ Applebaum is a tremendous resource on this topic. Cf. with her book, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (Doubleday, 2020). For a briefer exploration of the subject, see her piece in the Nov. 2021 edition of *The Atlantic*, titled, “The Bad Guys are Winning”.

more broadly certainly is, and we can rejoice in that reality. What would it take to help tear down White Christian Nationalism and its twisted understanding of ecclesiastical authority, and replace it with a biblical model of ecclesiastical authority that demonstrates in real time to the watching world the words of our Lord, that “it shall not be so among you” (Mark 10:43)?

Post-Christendom Ecclesiastical Authority

More and more Christians in the West are coming around to the notion that Christendom is dying or is already deceased. Lee Beach points out that many “studies confirm what many of us already know to be true, that Christianity has been gradually losing its status as the *lingua franc* in Western culture for some time and has increasingly tended to become a local language used only by those who are professing Christians, not understood by others.”⁶ But what happens when those professing Christians no longer what to speak their own native tongue? Case in point: the term *evangelical* is so fraught with political, cultural, and racial baggage, that in many instances, its desirable avoid using the term at all to describe oneself, rather than have to go into a lengthy explanation of what it *doesn't* mean. The language we use (or don't use) to describe ourselves reveals our place in a post-Christendom world. But so does how we speak of and exercise power and authority.

In what ways have the abuse of power and authority in the church (ecclesiastical jurisdiction) led to the demise of Christendom in the West? To be sure, the downfall of Christendom is not an entirely bad thing. But it's also not necessarily something to be cheered either. Living in a post-Christendom world means having an opportunity to reconstruct a healthy understanding of ecclesiastical authority and jurisdiction. But not before the debris and wreckage caused by 1,700 years of the abuse of that power is cleared away. The past 10 years have given the world a lifetime

⁶ Lee Beach, *The Church in Exile: Living in Hope After Christendom*. (IVP, 2015), p. 33.

of material to consider when it comes to the Church's abuse of power, position, authority, and oversight. That's simply the past decade, to say nothing of what transpired across the centuries leading up to this moment! It's not a stretch in any form to say that the abuse of ecclesiastical authority and power has been a contributing, if not the contributing factor in the downfall of Christendom in the West. Is there a way forward?

Conclusion

If the Church in the West is to regain a voice and presence in our culture, we must address the issue of power/authority/jurisdiction and its abuses in our midst, by us. If we wish to reach our neighbors with the Good News of the Kingdom of God and its King, Jesus Christ, we need to be able to take a realistic view of where we are as a society (post-Covid, 'post-racist' but Christian Nationalistic, post-Christendom) and recognize how each of these issues has impacted our approach to "doing church". Can a healthy use and understanding of ecclesiastical authority be reached and maintained in this current cultural moment? What questions do we need to be asking in order to effect the change needed? Are we listening to the questions that our neighbors are asking us about "who's in charge"? A church filled with men and women who wish to call their own shots for themselves and not submit to a higher ecclesiastical authority will not be long for this current world. Yet, a church filled with authoritarian leaders who insist on working from their positional authority, rather than their pastoral relationships, won't make it far either. Perhaps the answer lies with a recapturing of our Lord's posture and attitude towards us, who "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should

bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:5b-11). All authority in the Church comes down as a gift from the exalted and ascended Lord Jesus. May he grant his church here below wisdom, humility, and grace to wield it in such a way that all will want to bow to him in reverence and awe as to the only one who deserves that honor and distinction. May the Lord make it so, Amen.