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Authority and Pastoral Practice

Egil Grislis
Professor of Religion,
University of Manitoba, Winnipeg

The principle of authority in pastoral practice is clear. Since grace is the source of all Christian existence, and faith active in love the mode according to which Christian existence is expressed, ecclesial authority is the practical application of faith as the legitimately exercised power of redemption. As such it is applicable to all Christians who, by definition, share in the priesthood of all believers.

Martin Luther's own situation at the beginning of the reformation certainly played a significant role in the doctrinal reformulation which he undertook. While directly in opposition to the hierarchical administration of the Catholic Church—and eventually even persuaded that the pope is the Antichrist—Luther realized that the problem had its origins at the evil roots of the system, namely in the radical bifurcation between clergy and laity. Luther sought to address the situation by referring to "humility" rather than "superiority" as the principle of ecclesial ordering. In 1523 Luther wrote:

Among Christians there is no superior but Christ himself, and him alone. What kind of authority can there be where all are equal and have the same right, power, possession, and honor, and where no one desires to be the other's superior, but each the other's subordinate?¹

According to Luther, both clergy and laity, equally undervesting, are accepted by God in Jesus Christ on the grounds of a completely gratuitous and unmerited divine love. In this way all Christian existence is seen as built upon one foundation which is Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Hence, in the final analysis, there is only one authority, namely, that of Jesus Christ.

Such a theoretical definition of authority, as already noted in the preceding statements, was soon enough qualified and the
Consensus

role of the Lutheran pastor emerged as rather thoroughly fortified. Yet the initial theoretical egalitarianism has from time to time made its own impact. There have been various pietist movements within Lutheranism which have opposed the authority of the pastor. More recently there have been occasions when the charismatic movement has attempted to de-value the authority of the ordained pastor.²

Admittedly, it is not an easy matter to balance the common authority of the priesthood of all believers with the distinctive authority of the pastor. In theory, of course, Lutherans have rejected the medieval exaltation of the higher status of the clergy. But in pastoral practice the case has sometimes been quite different. With his usual insightfulness, Carl E. Braaten has observed: “The minister is like a cook serving up meals to customers. Ministers often feel they are the only ones doing ministry. The attitude among many laity is, they are paid for it, let them do it!”³ If so, then the fact of having more authority than appropriate does not necessarily attest to the hunger for power among pastors, but can be attributed to a measure of irresponsibility among the laity.

I

Therefore, in considering theory and practice as correlative, we shall begin by reflecting on the meaning of authority, particularly in regard to specific job descriptions in the church. Here we can distinguish between the authority of the pastor as well as the authority of the church organist, the authority of the Sunday School superintendent, authority of the church council, and so forth. Ordinarily the constitution of the church, both local and national, has taken a great deal of care to spell out these intricate interrelationships.

Of course, in this setting many tales have been told. Some of them are merely tall, while others are quite true, as they detail the various attempts, even schemes, to usurp authority. In the stories of the lay people, it is often the pastor who oversteps constitutional authority. If the stories are told by the pastors, we get to hear about lay people who have abused their legitimate authority by intruding in the pastor’s rightful sphere of responsibility. Some of those stories, regardless of
origin, are tales of conspiracy, high finance, plotting, planning, and a remarkable measure of intrigue. In our generation, one of the best such storytellers is Andrew Greeley, a best-selling author and Roman Catholic priest. Many more unpublished authors, however, reside in local congregations, almost as equitably distributed as original sin itself. If your congregation is an exception to this observation then you are very blessed indeed.

At the same time the situation is not without a remedy. The problems which might arise within a local Lutheran congregation have a higher court of appeal, namely the synodical office, which can sort out just what happened and what should be done about it. Here it is possible to obtain a clear interpretation of the authority structures in the local church and to receive appropriate guidance in regard to appropriate procedures and actions. In addition, the synodical office with the bishop at the helm has a clear place in the organizational structure of the church. Last but not least, the entire Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada in its bi-annual gatherings must draw, by free discussion and democratic vote, the final boundary lines for its doctrinal understanding and life. Yet in the final analysis the highest authority is not even a church convention. Gerhard O. Forde has stated it very well:

Individual subjectivism could not be overcome simply by appealing to the collective subjectivity of human institutions. For Luther subjectivism is overcome only when one is grasped by that which comes truly from without, the address of God in the gospel promise, in such fashion that one in turn gives sole authority and honor to that address, to its actual content.4

Thus, while the Word of God is infallible, the church’s interpretation is not. While assuming that many faithful minds are wiser than one, the church is nevertheless liable to error.5 At the same time, it would be an act of faithless neglect for the church not to appreciate the Gospel truth which is already in its midst. Hence the authority which exists in the church though real, may nevertheless be best described as an authority in the process of maturing. In the meantime there should be no illusions about it: the biblical thrust is often enough counteracted by a bureaucratic twist, and a real tension emerges between truth and tradition, that is, between the Holy Spirit and humanity. To note this tension, however, must not be seen
as an expression of despair. The Holy Spirit and humanity are not equals! It is a reasonable hope in faith that the Holy Spirit will eventually set aright the human scene.

II

For our understanding of the authority of the pastoral office it is essential to reflect further on the progress of the work of the Holy Spirit and therefore to pay some attention to the meaning of sanctification. Ordinarily Lutherans have spent far more time and effort on the doctrine of justification. This is historically and personally well understandable. The acceptance of salvation by grace through faith freed Luther from being beholden to the sacramental mediatorship of the Roman Catholic Church. Likewise, justification freed Luther from the compulsive counting of his own religious accomplishments. Yet the way Luther understood justification did not close the doors to sanctification, but viewed the sinner to have been liberated for grace, and the growth in grace. In the Lutheran accounting of the process of sanctification it has been always viewed as essential to underscore that even sanctified people continue to be infected by sin. Hence “sinless saints” are a mere figment of perverse imagination, and, like square circles, lack reality.

Nevertheless, even though the process of sanctification is completed in heaven, it begins already on this earth and records authentic accomplishments of response to grace. Now according to the biblical witness, we know that God gives grace with remarkable generosity. In celebrating this divine generosity, the human role in accepting the gift of grace has been traditionally stated in a very cautious way, in order to avoid determinism on the one hand and synergism on the other. Luther’s own initial affirmation of the “bondage of the will” while sounding deterministic may nevertheless be recognized as an attempt to describe the power of grace in justification. Lutheran criticisms of “synergism” have had a point insofar as the communion between God and the sinner cannot be viewed as a transaction among equals. Nevertheless, it is also clear that in some sense the believer begins to respond to God. Even though the believer knows that the positive responses to grace were not autonomous, but rather were responses evoked and
sustained by the mercy of God—still they were personal, free and not forced!

Ordinarily Lutheran theology has at this point turned to the theology of the cross. We shall follow this route and observe that the experience of the cross ought not to be limited to the experiences of tribulations (the *Anfechtungen*). These do indeed visit every person at some time, and are unpredictable both as to the exact date and the severity of the experience. Hence it is not surprising that in Christian tradition a worthy role has been assigned to the mortification of the flesh by way of discipline and exercise in moral fortitude. Now if discipline is conceived primarily in negative terms, either as a long list of thorough prohibitions, or as assignments that exercise both body and soul, but fail to bring benefit to anyone else—then a kind of negative shadow is cast over the entire experience. Discipline then may evoke the suspicion that it is but a form of work-righteousness, undertaken as a means of appropriating grace, and therefore thoroughly unevangelical. At the same time, discipline can also be a creative undertaking. Persons who love music will exercise as a means of perfecting their gift. (Of course, the tone-deaf person may exercise from morning till night and yet never reach concert-level perfection; the gift of grace must be received prior to a valuable employment of discipline).

In this generation the Lutheran church may well take another look at the role of the *third use of the law*, and meditate on the applicability of the law as teacher for the Christian believer. In a climate of undue permissiveness the church cannot assume that its people know either manners or morals, but may require concrete rules to strengthen the character of its membership. In addition to body building, the exercises in character building must be recognized as remarkably useful! Of course, in order for the rules and regulations to be accepted, they would need to be worked out in a dialogue setting, with a careful avoidance of any authoritarian heavy-handedness.

To say this is not in any way to distract from the significance of life itself as it teaches us to bear the cross. Luther was very wise indeed by claiming that a true theologian is not made by the reading of many books, but by suffering and dying! Over the years I have observed that a noticeable proportion of students heading for the ministry or the teaching of
religion have experienced some traumatic events in their lives. Encounters with suffering and even with death have served a spiritually deepening function. No doubt it is for this reason that Luther so highly valued his *Anfechtungen* and why every parish pastor knows something about the growth in grace far more through times of trial, personal and vicarious, than through highlights of success and holiday time. Daniel Day Williams has supplied a deep theological rationale for such a situation:

There is a magisterial power in the figure of Jesus. He spoke as one having authority and not as the scribes. He commanded the demons and went about healing. He called upon men who were weary and heavy laden to come and follow him, for his yoke is easy and his burden light. But when he came into conflict with the *auctoritas*, when he met the resistance of men to the message of the Kingdom, the Son of God did not brush aside the obstacles with a gesture of omnipotence. He had to go through them, and to share our human limitations and estrangement. And it is just this identification of the Son of man without condition that became the authentic seal of his revelation of God. It was not an authority apart from his ministry which he bore; but it was the authority of the very incarnation of the spirit of ministry, that is, of a caring and bearing love, which became the foundation of the New Testament faith. Therefore, we who minister in his name cannot participate in that decisive word of Truth which he brings on any other terms than to participate in his ministry.

Now when we do this, we learn to distinguish between “cheap” and “costly” grace. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s memorable definition of these terms still speaks to the issue at hand with clarity and power:

Instead of following Christ, let the Christian enjoy the consolations of his grace! That is what we mean by cheap grace, the grace which amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner who departs from sin and from whom sin departs. Cheap grace is not the kind of forgiveness of sin which frees us from the toils of sin. Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without Church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without contrition. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the Cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

The contrast to “cheap grace,” according to Bonhoeffer is “costly grace”: 
Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him. Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justified the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of His Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered Him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.13

This eloquent witness, striking in insight and information, continues to challenge the Christian church. There is much need for costly grace today as well! There is need for the acceptance of the cross and the faith of the resurrection. This is not only a hope but a distinct possibility, dependent on our faith and love.

Wherever the miracle of faith occurs we have the opportunity to begin appreciating the in-depth meaning of the authority of the Gospel. As an illustration, I have in mind a clergyperson of another denomination, who has spent many years serving small churches under rather difficult circumstances. This clergyperson was known as a poor speaker, not a very successful leader, and generally lacked in most of the qualities which characterize a good pastor. Then a change occurred, as this previously undistinguished servant shed the lackluster image and began to radiate both warmth and light. Then came the genuinely appreciative comments, that here was a wonderful pastor. Not only acceptance but even public praise followed. I am not certain whether the change had occurred in the pastor or in the parishioners, but I do want to underscore that growth in grace does bring forth rather spectacular results. I would not claim that these will immediately translate into votes at election times on the synod floor or otherwise bring about success in the public forum. I am only claiming that both clergy and lay people do at times "mellow" in remarkably saintly
ways—and suggest that the quality core membership of any church consists in such mellowed saints. I have heard it said more than once that if from a middle-sized congregation one would remove a dozen key members, then the entire congregation would soon enough collapse. These people, like God’s own glue, keep the church together and move it to serve the world. Such stalwart faith and genuine love, whether found among clergy or laity, necessarily project an unmistakable authority. It is almost like some of those pre-programmed scenes of television advertising: when they speak, others listen!

Such an observation is not intended to replace the earlier comments on the reality of sin and weakness. These, too, are experientially verifiable. Reinhold Niebuhr muses with deep insight: “The prophet speaks only when he is inspired. The parish preacher must speak whether he is inspired or not. I wonder whether it is possible to live on a high enough plane to do that without sinning against the Holy Spirit.” I suspect that he had “wondered” in a manner of speaking, that is, fully realizing the impossibility of sustaining a high spiritual intensity at all times. It may very well be on account of this realization that Niebuhr so vividly scorned the counterfeit presentations of saintliness. He wrote: “But think of sitting Sunday after Sunday under some professional holy man who is constantly asserting his egotism by criticizing yours. I would rebel if I were a layman.” The Lutheran understanding that the justus is also a peccator legitimizes such annoyance—and yet does not deny the specifically creative edge which belongs to the person who is successfully growing in grace. The recent Lutheran-Catholic dialogue in the United States has reflected on this issue and informs us as follows:

The Catholics in this dialogue understand that contemporary Lutheran thought, emphasizing the sinfulness of all human institutions and instruments, finds it difficult to recognize any episcopal see, church office, person, or officeholder as gifted with such unfailing assistance from the Spirit as to preclude error in teaching. Therefore, the Lutheran tradition does not tie to any institution the task of authentic reformulation of Christian doctrine, which Catholics assign preeminently to the episcopal college and the bishop of Rome.

At the same time, while the pastor and any other ecclesial office holder in the Lutheran perspective is not able to claim
an *ex officio* holiness, the fact remains that there is at least an *ex officio* expectation! Thus while the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers expresses the egalitarianism imbedded in the doctrine of justification which all of us receive as being equally unworthy—there is also a place for a humble elitism which is nurtured by the doctrine of sanctification. I call it “humble elitism” because no good Lutheran is supposed to measure one’s own success in the growth of grace. Yet while unmeasured, the reality of saintliness in some individuals is never denied. And this is not a peculiarly Lutheran observation; other denominations also have some people with good eyesight. Thus the Anglican archbishop of York, F.D. Coggan, has noted:

... there is an authority attaching to personal holiness which can be found nowhere else. It is the *sine qua non* of any ministry worthy of the name. He alone can exercise an authoritative ministry who often has recourse to the secret place of the Most High, who has learned to listen to God, who speaks, who knows the meaning of obedience, who can say not merely, “I hold this view”, but “I am held by this God”. There is something self-authenticating about the authority of a man of whom it can be said by the man of the street as it was said of Elisha by the woman of Shunem: “I perceive that this is a holy man of God who is continually passing our way” (II Kings 4:9).17

Max Weber in his well known statements on authority has identified this kind of authority as charismatic.18 According to Weber the emphasis is placed on the insight that here a religious personality, without any special status in the community, and apart from a designated office, draws attention and invites following by the content and style of the message. Of course, the Lutheran pastor, by definition, has an office. At the same time, also by definition, this office in a Lutheran understanding bestows no holiness *ex officio*. Yet the hope that holiness and the authority that flows from such a humble holiness would nevertheless follow is a matter which is reflected upon both individually and corporately.

Individually the reality of growth in grace is attended to by the means of grace and through prayer. Without even as much as summarizing this wide subject matter, let me turn more narrowly to the supportive role of prayer and illustrate the case by an observation. Three weeks ago on my return from Australia, my wife and I stopped for two days in Hawaii.
There on Waikiki beach I observed what at first looked like a parachute, slowly descending toward the ocean. It was, however, a parasail; expertly guided it soon enough ascended again. So it continued, up and down, except for a few occasions when without any gusts of wind, the parasailist landed in the ocean. Is not our Christian ministry likewise supported by the intercessory prayers of many as well as our own prayers? May we not, in the last analysis, want to say that we have accomplished no more than we were enabled through the uplifting power of faithful prayer? Now since even personal prayer is neither a totally subjective nor a completely independent act, but draws on grace for sustenance and life, we will not want to say that this route to growth in grace is exclusively individualistic.

At the same time, undeniably, there are more explicitly visible corporate settings where the nurture in grace can occur. Here, again, I shall not seek to be all inclusive, but refer only to the specific role of ordination. In a jointly published ecumenical statement, *The Ministry in the Church,* Roman Catholics and Lutherans have contributed some comparisons on the meaning of ordination which are very useful for our concern. On the one hand it is observed: “The Catholic tradition speaks of this act of the church, in which the Holy Spirit works through word and signs, as a sacrament. In the Catholic church this sacramental understanding of ordination is binding.” On the other hand, reflecting on the Lutheran position, an equally careful, but a somewhat more vague statement is offered, namely: “The Lutheran tradition uses a more restricted concept of sacrament and therefore does not speak of the sacrament of ordination. Yet in principle a sacramental understanding of the ministry is not rejected.” The next sentence then seeks to offer this insight in a more positive formulation: “Wherever it is taught that through the act of ordination the Holy Spirit gives grace strengthening the ordained person for the life-time ministry of word and sacrament, it must be asked whether differences which previously divided the churches on this question have not been overcome.” To those who continue to fear and suspect Catholicism at every step it may be easy to discard this observation by claiming that here you see Lutheran ecumeniacs heading for a Catholic definition of ordination. If, however, we approach the text without undue suspicion, we may argue that what we have before us is an attempt to discover the implications of ordination—when the latter is seen
as distinct from mere installation. The document calls explicit attention to this difference between ordination and installation:

In the Lutheran view, the renewed distinction between ordination and installation expresses the conviction that the ministry of proclaiming the gospel is not in principle restricted to time and space, but is for the whole church. In the same way, the individual local congregation cannot be thought of as isolated and autonomous when it comes to the conferring of the ministerial office. The call to the ministry of preaching and administering the sacraments, which takes place in the name of Christ, can only occur in the context of the ministry as instituted for the whole church. For the same reason, the repetition of ordination is opposed. In the Lutheran understanding also, ordination to the ministry of the church on behalf of Christ, conferred in the power of the Holy Spirit, is for life and is not subject to temporal limitations. Thus even if one avoids the use of the concept of the character indelibilis because of its ontological implications, the act of ordination is characterized by a uniqueness which cannot be given up. It remains valid even if the service of a specific congregation is abandoned.20

Indeed, if the Holy Spirit is perceived as acting consistently as well as seeking to establish permanence, then His sanctifying presence in the ordained minister must be seen as ongoing and continuous. Still, personal experience of the reality of sin admitted, we may want to acknowledge the ups and the downs in the spiritual growth of the person in question.

At the same time, in reflecting on the reality of sanctification by a variety of paradigms, we have not rejected the professional level of the ministerial authority, but assumed that on this first level other levels of grace and authority may be built. To state it in a scholastic manner, what we then have before us are at least two levels—natural and supernatural. On the first, natural level we observe the institutional functioning of the pastor. Here the constitution of the church allots a specific measure of authority. It is distributed according to a carefully crafted plan. In addition, on this level several sociological and personal differences may be recognizable. Thus the pastor of a large church with more years in the ministry and participation in the work of important committees and projects will have a somewhat enhanced authority. As a district dean or a synod bishop the range of authority will be significantly enlarged. On this level careful sociological and psychological measurements can be obtained. Here at least the experts will be able
to measure the “significance” (or “size”) of a particular pastor’s authority. But even the non-experts will be aware of the “influence” and “power” which a certain pastor possesses.

But, as already noted, above this so-called “natural” level there is a “supernatural” level on which the growth in grace takes place. Here authority is further developed as faith and love grow in depth and power. Instead of all the worldly qualifications, what counts here is the size of the cross carried and the measure of resurrection grace received. Obviously, these are somewhat intangible realities which can at times be felt, but not all that precisely measured. Only a saint would recognize another saint. And only one who is not aware of his or her own sainthood has a chance of being one! Hence in abstract ways a theoretical measuring is very difficult and inaccurate. Jesus put this insight in a positive formulation and taught: “…if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move hence to yonder place,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you” (Matthew 17:20). And in Luke’s version this reads: “If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamine tree, ‘Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you” (17:6). Now I understand, one, that the Mediterranean mustard seed is of a very, very small size, and, two, that as of recent reporting, mountains are staying where they have been! The hyperbolic side of the statement notwithstanding, it is certainly fair to expect from a small faith some very large and impressive results. What it says about sanctification is that this is a very major undertaking, with major results. Many who undertake to measure the exact size of their progress often seem to mistake centimeters for kilometers. It is just as well that we have allowed Martin Luther to bury the ruler with which to do the measuring! Yet the reality of sanctification is thereby not denied. God’s grace does not remain powerless, but most certainly begins and continues to work with authentic success.

In such a situation, we begin by placing the pastor quite clearly and visibly on the first level, on the so-called “natural” level, where we can note his or her position and sphere of authority. At the same time, however, we very quickly observe that the pastor’s authority is enhanced as he or she grows in grace and becomes spiritually enriched on the second, that is, on the so-called “supernatural” level of authority. In virtue of
ordination the access to it is established, and thus the entrance made possible. Insofar as the Holy Spirit does not forsake the church, we may trust that the Spirit is present in every pastoral ministry. But how much, and in what intensity we may speak about the presence of the Holy Spirit, remains a deep mystery.

We cannot measure anyone’s sincerity. In the Latin this word is graphically unforgettable, as it means “without wax” i.e. without an artificial smoothness and shine. To be truly sincere is to be without pretense and skin-deep appearance. But on the surface of things, how are we to distinguish between true piety and real piosity? As you know, the word piosity is not in the Oxford English Dictionary, but is a creation by the late Professor Wilhelm Pauck, which he vividly contrasted with piety. In this sense piosity along with pomposity designates the religious hypocrite who has developed his or her craft to the level of high perfection. Of course, there is in the Oxford English Dictionary a word called pioscope. Do you know what it means? The correct answer is close to what we need: pioscope is an instrument invented to test the purity of milk! Unfortunately, there is no pioscope with which to test piety. But there is a source, a standard, to which all reflections on the meaning of piety and its authority must point—and that is the Holy Bible. With such an observation we have returned to the very beginning of our reflections: ultimately all authority belongs to God who speaks to us through Christ (solus Christus), normatively documented in the Holy Bible (sola Scriptura), and brought into our lives by grace through faith (sola fides).

Finally, only three concluding comments remain. First, in all our reflections we have been aware that we live in an age where for many people religious authority is non-existent. Recently, attending a Jazz liturgy, I heard and jotted down the following characteristic definition: “This is jazz: there are no such things as mistakes. There are only varying degrees of creative interpretation.”21 Time magazine published an essay by Roger Rosenblatt, entitled “The Freedom of the Damned”. The essay was about the so-called “privileged children”. A characteristic statement described the situation as follows:

Breezy, noisy, they lope about the fashionable streets like flocks of orphans in Brazil or Beirut, like the earth’s poorest children—hanging out, swooping into saloons where no one looks twice at
the doctored ID cards; the kids’ money is good. Don’t blame the saloonkeepers, say the sociologists. Blame the moral carelessness that parents pass off as the gift of freedom as they cut their children loose like colorful kites and wish them an exciting flight...The only thing missing are the essentials: authority, responsibility, attention and love.22

Obviously such is not only the plight of the privileged children. Such is the experience of all too many growing up in this age.

The second observation has to do with the paradigmatically characteristic reaction to such a situation. The Newsweek magazine printed the following cartoon: One nun to another, commenting on a very well trained dog: “He sits, he heels, he rolls over! He never gives you any trouble!” The other nun utters in response: “The perfect theologian!”23 In the case of the recent Charles Curran situation I heard a comment that “he is in hot holy water because he did not have the license to think.”24 Let this not be understood as an anti-Catholic comment! In the Lutheran community of faith we are also familiar with the antediluvian tendencies to declare a moratorium on thinking, and to cling to the past precedent with unwavering tenaciousness. However sincere, well-meaning and dedicated, the conserving of past certainties will not be a sufficient antidote to the future’s uncertainties.

Rather, and this is the third comment, in each generation it is necessary to re-discover the meaning of authority. This is not something to be lamented. Brevard S. Childs has noted that “When we come [to the Bible] with new questions, then we begin to discover a fresh set of answers.”25 Clearly enough, over the centuries the resourcefulness of the Word of God has not disappointed those who were prepared to risk and to search therein for answers. Professor Childs attests: “The authority of the Bible emerges only when it is used, and the simplicity and power of its self-authenticating truth is experienced by each person, individually and corporately.”26 At the same time, as this search continues, it becomes clear that the depths of the Holy Bible cannot ever be exhausted. The late Kent S. Knutson formulated this insight with clarity and power:

The authority is both hidden and revealed. The Scripture is both clear and mysterious, both simple and profound. The Word is revealed to babes and hidden from the wise, it is foolishness to the
Greek and the power of salvation to the believer. Every time one reaches out to grasp this written Word, every time one tries to summarize its thousand pages into three sentences in some constitution, one discovers, if he has his ears and eyes open, that it is always beyond his grasp, it is always beyond his ability to capture. And yet when he is not trying to define it, when he's not trying to catalog it, when he's not worrying about what the constitution says, the hiddenness in it reveals itself, and God speaks.²⁷

Here, then, we see both the problem and the solution. The problem is that we are often tempted to have God's eternal wisdom while remaining distant and different from God in Christ. Within our hearts there dwells this sinful preference for codification, which, once undertaken, would free us from the daily responsibility of an ongoing obedience and quest! The solution cannot be ours, but must be obtained only by grace, as we live and move and have our being in Christ Jesus our Lord. Living ever more fully under His authority, we learn the meaning of authority as we grow in grace.

Notes

1 Luther's Works, 45:117.
4 Paul C. Empie, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess, eds., Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue, VI (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978) 118.
5 Ibid. 118.
7 Cf. Psalm 23:5, “my cup overflows”.


12 “Authority and Ministry,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 14/1, Nov., 1958, 19.


15 Ibid. 112.

16 Empie, *Teaching Authority*, 40.


20 Ibid. 17.

21 Stated by David R. Hunter after the performance of *Hosanna—The Jazz Liturgy* at Sherwood Park Lutheran Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba, on January 4, 1987.


26 Ibid. 205.