

“I don’t know why I remember the episode so vividly,” writes author King Duncan. “I remember so few instances from my childhood. But this one stands out. I couldn’t have been more than five. We were members of a tiny rural church. Our hymns came from a small paperback hymnal of Gospel songs [the Upper Room hymnal].

“Worship was a bit emotional; the preacher a little loud. There was no formal liturgy. The pews were hard. There was no air conditioning. The windows were open. It was a hot summer morning. A couple of dogs lazed out on the front porch of the church. From time to time a portion of the message would be drowned out by a farm truck rattling by or a motorcycle.

“Then suddenly our worship was interrupted. A woman who lived near the church but was not a member of the church was standing at the door sobbing hysterically.

“‘Somebody, please help,’ she cried from just outside the door. ‘There’s been an accident,’ she said, ‘a man’s hurt bad. He’s layin’ in a ditch.’

“Some of the men rushed out to see what they could do. One of the women of the church rushed to this woman’s side and tried to console her. ‘Come inside,’ the woman said calmly.

“‘Oh, no,’ the distraught woman wailed, ‘I can’t come in. I can’t come in.’ And she rushed down the steps of the church and disappeared. And as far as I know, she never came in that church or any other church for the rest of her life.

“I don’t know what that woman’s story was,” says Duncan. “She was not a bad person as far as I know. But there was some reason she could not so much as place a foot inside a church.”

It’s fascinating some of the things we remember from our childhood.

One Sabbath day Jesus was teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority not as the teachers of the law. That’s an interesting phrase: “as one who had authority . . .”

Where does authority come from? If you’ve ever been in the military or in a highly structured business environment, you know where it comes from. It comes from rank or position in a hierarchy.

James Fixx published a book of games which he called, *More Games for the Super-Intelligent*. In that collection he offers this wonderfully challenging puzzle from a military setting:

You are a captain in charge of one sergeant and four men. Your task is to raise a 100-foot flagpole and slide it into a hole 10-feet deep. You have two ropes one 22-feet long and one 26-feet long two shovels, and two buckets. How do you accomplish your task?

The answer is this: Since you’re a captain, you turn to the sergeant and say, “Sergeant, get the flagpole up!” That’s positional authority. You command those who are under you, and they obey.

Walter Anderson tells how as a young Marine, his fingers were crushed in an accident. They were swollen and immobile for a few days. As the swelling went down, the doctor ran some tests to measure the extent of his injuries. The doctor said, “Try to move the first finger of your right hand.” Walter tried, but couldn’t move it. The doctor suggested that they wait another day and try again. But Walter’s platoon sergeant, who was standing nearby, stepped forward. He looked at

Walter and commanded loudly, “*move the first finger of your right hand now!*” And Walter moved that finger. (1)

Maybe you’ve had a sergeant or a boss like that at some time. Of course, this type of authority has its limits.

You’ve probably heard the story of a second lieutenant at Fort Bragg, N.C. who discovered that he had no change when he was about to buy a soft drink from a vending machine. He flagged down a passing private and asked him, “Soldier, do you have change for a dollar?”

“I think so,” the private said cheerfully. “Let me take a look.”

The second lieutenant drew himself up stiffly. “Soldier,” he said, “that’s no way to address an officer. We’ll start all over again. *Do you have change for a dollar?*”

The private saluted smartly, looked straight ahead, and said, “*No, sir!*”

In that situation, pulling rank backfired.

Some people have authority because of their rank or position. Others have authority because of their personality, or their knowledge or their extreme competence.

As a carpenter, Jesus had no positional authority in the community. His authority came from his wisdom and knowledge and his competence at interpreting God’s Word. Even as a boy Jesus wowed people with his wisdom and his grasp of scripture. Of course the people in Capernaum could not know that his authority came from a more important source. All they knew is that they had never heard an individual teach like Jesus taught. They said to one another, “He teaches as one who has authority, not as the teachers of the law.”

But even Jesus got interrupted from time to time. This time it wasn’t a woman standing outside the door pleading for help, but rather it was a man *in the synagogue* who disrupted Jesus’ teaching.

That’s significant. Don’t think that all the needy people in this world are on the outside of the church. There are many people on the inside of the church who have very deep needs. Indeed, sometimes needy people are attracted to the church.

Mark tells us this man was “possessed by an unclean spirit.” We don’t know what Mark meant by this. Most modern people dismiss the idea of demons and unclean spirits. We assume this is pre-scientific language for mental illness, but who knows? Whatever the origin of his problem, obviously the man was deeply distressed. He cried out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are the Holy One of God!”

It’s interesting. The unclean spirits recognized who Jesus was long before the people of Capernaum.

“Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!”

And then something remarkable happened. The unclean spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching and with authority! He even gives orders to unclean spirits and they obey him.” And Mark tells us, “News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.”

“What is this?” the people asked, “A new teaching and with authority! He even gives orders to unclean spirits and they obey him.”

So, Jesus had authority because of his teachings. But he also had authority because of his power over what Mark calls “unclean spirits.” In other places we see his authority over disease, and over nature, and even over death.

This brings us to something obvious we need to affirm about Jesus: he was unique. There was no one quite like him.

There were other fine teachers in Galilee, but they could not cast out unclean spirits, or turn water into wine or heal the leper or multiply the fishes and the loaves or forgive sins. There was something about Jesus which could not be said about his contemporaries. He had authority—physical authority, spiritual authority, moral authority. Even after his death and resurrection, he had authority. When confronted by someone who was demon-possessed or who was blind or physically-challenged, all the disciples had to do was evoke Jesus’ name and demons were cast out and the physically-challenged were made whole and the blind could see. That’s authority.

Jesus was a wonderful teacher, but no mere teacher has the authority to raise the dead. Jesus was a leader, a prophet, a moral visionary but none of these explain his impact on civilization. As some unknown writer expressed it a generation ago:

“Socrates taught for 40 years, Plato for 50, Aristotle for 40 and Jesus for only 3 ½ years. Yet the influence of Christ’s ministry infinitely transcends the impact left by the combined years of teaching from these greatest of philosophers.

“Jesus painted no pictures, yet some of the finest artists such as Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci received their inspiration from Him.

“Jesus wrote no poetry, but Dante, Milton and scores of the world’s greatest poets were inspired by Him.

“Jesus composed no music; still Haydn, Handel, Beethoven, Bach and Mendelssohn reached their highest perfection of melody in the music they composed in His praise.

“Every sphere of human greatness has been enriched by this humble Carpenter of Nazareth.”

It took a Roman centurion, stationed at the foot of the cross who watched him die, to sum it all up, “Surely this man,” the centurion testified, “was the Son of God!” (Mt. 27-54)

No one else who has ever lived spoke with the authority with which Christ spoke. He was unique. There has never been another like him. This brings us to an obvious question: **If Jesus is the son of God, shouldn’t we reflect his influence more in our lives?** If he is the Son of the most high God and if his teachings are the foundation upon which our lives are built, shouldn’t that fact be reflected in how we live?

Donald Grey Barnhouse tells a story of something that happened to him many years ago during the Korean War. Barnhouse was aboard a flight from New York to Los Angeles. The flight attendant seated a girl in her early twenties beside him.

Obviously this girl had never flown before. Over the loudspeaker, the flight attendant said, "Fasten your seatbelts." The girl didn't even know what a seatbelt was.

Pastor Barnhouse helped her and asked, "You've never flown before?"

She said, "No, this is my first time." As he spoke to her, she opened her pocketbook, and there was a picture of a handsome young GI.

Barnhouse said, "You're going out to see him?"

"Yes," she said, "he's coming home. I'm going to see him."

She went on to explain that they had gotten married a year and a half before. They had a honeymoon of just a few days, then he had gone to the coast and left for Korea. Now he was coming back home; she was going to see him.

Barnhouse could tell that going to see her husband meant more to this young woman than anything else. He was her bridegroom; she was his bride and she was going to see him.

Then Donald Grey Barnhouse says something important. He says, "You wonder sometimes why Christians live as they do and make the choices they make. They are on their way to see their bridegroom, yet they go right out and live in the world as though it made no effect in their life at all . . ." (4)

And that's true, isn't it? One day we are going to see the Bridegroom, our Lord and Master, and it doesn't seem to matter in how we live our lives. Do you believe Jesus is who he says he is? If so, does his influence show on your life, or does your life more accurately reflect simply the community in which you live and the people with which you associate? He spoke with authority.

And this brings us to a final question: **If Jesus is who he says he is, shouldn't we tell the good news to others?**

A young boy from a non-Christian family named Palmer Ofuoku was placed in a mission school by his Nigerian parents because they knew he would receive a good education there. He attended the school for years, yet he did not convert to Christianity. He remained an adherent of a traditional African religion.

One year a new missionary came to the school who began to develop close relationships with the students, including Palmer. Eventually the missionary led this young Nigerian to Christ. Palmer Ofuoku explained the missionary's influence like this: "He built a bridge of friendship to me, and Jesus walked across." (5)

That is the best definition of evangelism that I have ever heard. "He built a bridge of friendship to me, and Jesus walked across." That's what you and I should be doing each day of our lives building bridges of friendship to the people around us so that Jesus may walk across.

Jesus spoke with authority. There has never been another like him. He is the Son of God. That ought to make a difference in how we live our lives. We ought to be telling others about him. We ought to be building bridges to others so that Christ may walk across.

1. Walter Anderson, *The Confidence Course* (New York: HarperPerennial).
2. Mike Trout, *Off the Air* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), pp. 177-178.
3. *Jesus Rediscovered* (Doubleday, 1969).
4. *Timeless Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004), pp.214-215.
5. Brian Harbour, *2 Corinthians*.