

An Unused Tool at Our Disposal

I feel a certain hesitation writing about what I've come to call the gift of authority over unclean spirits. I couch my presentation in such words for the following two reasons. First I'm aware of a growth in understanding about something that had remained pretty much in the dark for a lot of us. Second, despite this I retained some hesitation as to moving forward with the article at hand. For a while I found myself held back by the same hesitation which I discovered among knowledgeable people. Most admitted albeit in confidence that they were pretty much in the same situation with authority presented in the New Testament.

For some time now I had associated my limited knowledge about authority within a religious context with evangelical denominations, not so much the Catholic tradition. Though it had no role to play in my upbringing nor among those I had associated, there was no reason to be hostile towards it. So for all practical purposes authority as used by Jesus and New Testament authors remained an obscure topic best left aside. Nevertheless I feel confident that more exploration will bring this unique gift to a wider audience.

When we hear the word "gift" almost unconsciously there comes to mind something not of our own doing but from a source independent of us. As for the word "almost," it means that somehow I had insight into the nature of what is freely given. By no means was this insight complete. An inkling might be more like it, having been garnered from reading books and articles as well as discussions with various people. By phrasing the situation as such, it makes me less hesitant to proceed with the document at hand.

Perhaps the obstacle foremost in my mind is that the very word authority is something we automatically shy away from unless we're the ones exercising it. Authority has a kind of built in I-versus-them air about it. That of course is a gross distortion but nevertheless has remained a

dominant perception. As applied to spiritual matters as those under discussion, there comes to mind a rigidity unfortunately associated with the Catholic Church. For all practical purposes, this isn't as prevalent as we're led to believe but nevertheless remains a popular perception.

So when undertaking a task of some unfamiliarity as the one at hand, my first impulse is to state my limited understanding. I feel as though I'm on firmer ground when doing this. Often I take this position to make sure the reader knows my limitations about the subject at hand. At the same time this position hasn't prevented me from writing oodles of articles about everything under the sun and then some. So once more anyone who peruses this article must know I'm operating from this fundamental stance of partial knowledge.

The authority I have in mind rests in the New Testament and to a far lesser degree in the Hebrew scriptures. Also I'm not sure how much the two dovetail with each other.¹ Without a doubt, the way the New Testament uses the word certainly is different and covers a lot more territory. In order to get a better grasp of the word, my first impulse is to head to a concordance which lists verses relative to the issue at hand. Not just that, I prefer to flesh out each reference along the lines of doing *lectio divina*. Personally speaking, when I look at a text from the scholarly point of view, no doubt it's helpful but fails to be a means of imparting life. And so I decided to take the *lectio* approach in order to get this article off the ground to see where it would fly and eventually land.

First, some words about *exousia* itself. It means authority or power usually in the sense of permission to do something. It's derived from the verb *exesti* rendered as "it is allowed" and even more basically, comes across literally as "it is from," *ex-* prefaced to *eimi* or the verb to be. Inferred is some power that lays upstream of everything else. So if you're

¹I looked up the English word authority in a concordance and found just ten verses in the Hebrew scriptures. Most referred to authority exercised by humans with a few vaguely associated with God.

upstream, you have everything flowing from beneath and thus subordinate to you. Usually we don't pause to think of authority as being a source from which something else flows, but it's helpful to think this way.

To witness *exousia* in action I picked out four New Testament verses with the intent of making comments on them. The first is Mt 10.1: "And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out and to heal every disease and every infirmity." The context is Jesus about to choose his twelve disciples, the verb *proskaleo* which has the preposition *pros-* prefaced to the verbal root. It infers directness as well as immediacy and applies to Jesus who's issuing this summons. To be the recipient of *proskaleo* means something important is about to be communicated, so better pay close attention.

Once assembled—the disciples could have been anywhere nearby—Jesus proceeds to give them *exousia* over spirits or *pneuma* which are unclean. The adjective *akathartos* also can be rendered as that not being capable of having contact with the divinity. The idea is that such spirits were as such from the beginning and are synonymous with demons. Their task is to foster wickedness, moral corruption, and spiritual defilement. As for the context, the previous verses in Chapter Nine deal with a number of physical healings.

The text says that Jesus gave (*didomai*) this *exousia* to the twelve without providing details as to how it had been handed over to them. Chances are some physical gesture was involved such as the laying on of hands. Once so imparted, the twelve could cast out demons and cure every disease and infirmity. We can almost feel their excitement at the prospect of doing this, something beyond their wildest dreams as essentially poor peasants. Right after this happened, we have the names of the twelve apostles who seem to have been designated as such before this impartation of *exousia*.

Once the apostles have been named, Jesus sends them out but makes a

specific distinction. The twelve are to go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. The verb for lost is *apollumi*, a strong word also as to destroy utterly. Those about to go were glad to hear that Jesus was sending them despite this rather horrendous description which may not have been familiar to them. On the other hand, “house” makes the mission less threatening, up close and personal because it includes the nation of Israel in its entirety. In other words, the twelve would be operating within familiar territory and best of all, would be the recipients of glory for their achievements. Jesus realized this and knew that sooner or later such an attitude would quickly evaporate. Once all this is squared away, Jesus tells the twelve to engage in curing as he had done in vs. 1.

For the rest of Chapter Ten Jesus instructs the twelve by giving them some strong warnings. However, we have no report as how their missionary work fared, for Chapter Eleven begins with Jesus having “finished instructing” them after which he went on to teach and preach.

The second reference with regard to *exousia* is Mk 3.14-15: “And he appointed twelve to be with him and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.” First note that this verse begins with the conjunctive *kai* or “and,” something very common with Mark. The verb *poieo* usually as to make, to do, here is rendered as appointed. “He made twelve to be with him” in a way sounds more intimate and direct.

Immediately following *poieo* is *hina* usually as “in order that” from which follow two functions. The first is to preach, *kerusso* or to make a public declaration, the object not being specified but inferred. The second is to cast out demons, *ekballo* and *daimon*. Compare *daimon* with unclean *pneuma* of Mt 10.1. As with the previous reference, the one at hand is with respect to Jesus naming the twelve apostles.

The third verse is Lk 4.36 which runs as follows: “And they were all amazed and said to one another, ‘What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out.’” Those speaking such are the inhabitants of Capernaum concerning a *daimon*

which is unclean, *akathartos*. “They were amazed” reads literally “amazement (*thambos*) was upon all” inferring a collective experience which had an effect upon everyone. The verb *sullaleo* suggests an intense back and forth resulting from this common *thambos*.

The people were at a loss but ventured to first ask a question as to “What is this word or *logos*?” To single out *logos* or word as expression means that as coming from Jesus it refers to his rebuke of the man with the unclean spirit in vs. 35. The verb is *epitimao* with the root *timao* to estimate, to value as well as to honor prefaced where the preposition *epi-* or upon gives it considerable force. Note that there’s a single man with the *pneuma* of an unclean *daimon* (vs. 33). Upon seeing Jesus, we have in vs. 34 the plural. Then Jesus rebukes the singular man. So there’s an interplay between one human, one spirit of an unclean demon and a plural (demon) addressing Jesus.

Immediately after everyone in Capernaum who witnessed this cure, they asked each other what this *logos* might be, having recognized at once that Jesus is endowed with authority and power (*exousia* and *dunamis*). The cure was simply undeniable. No small wonder that word spread far and wide when the inhabitants of Capernaum saw Jesus exercise his *exousia* as well as his *dunamis* with regard to the demon to come out of the man. Not only that, the man was left unharmed, *blapto* meaning to damage, to hinder. For them to respond as they did infers that they too have this *exousia* and *dunamis* albeit in latent fashion which needs to be awakened to function as it should.

In the verse from Lk 4.36 we have in addition to *exousia* the other word like it, *dunamis* which automatically evokes action. As for the distinction, we could say that the former represents the legal right to operate whereas the latter represents the ability to carry through on *exousia*. This twofold operation leads to the fourth and final verse, Lk 10.19: “Behold, I give you the authority (*exousia*) to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power (*dunamis*) of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you.”

Exousia clearly is a delegation of divine power or *dunamis*. In addition to trampling upon serpents, Jesus bestows *dunamis* to the twelve over the enemy or *echthros* which according to a note in the NSV is Satan himself. He then adds almost by way of footnote that “nothing shall hurt you,” *adikeo* more along the lines of to treat unjustly.

The four excerpts deal with Jesus’ use of both *exousia* and *dunamis* with regard to spirits which are unclean. It makes for great spiritual reading...*lectio divina*...as well as providing information about the time and culture of that era. All well and good. However, the purpose for going through each of these four verses is to see if the exercise of *exousia* can be transferred or perhaps better, shared right now...not later...in our lives. The context wouldn’t be as dramatic as casting out a demon but would apply to how lesser forces (indeed we can call them unclean spirits) have direct effect upon us.

From my limited knowledge it seems that *exousia* as so presented does lay within our reach, a kind of unused limb that fortunately hasn’t atrophied but has gathered plenty of dust. For all practical purposes, that makes the *exousia* at hand pretty much useless. In addition to the above mentioned examples taken from scripture, I add distractions with regard to prayer. That may sound a bit presumptuous, but consider the following. If you look at literature going way-back-when with regard to prayer, distractions are at the head of the list when it comes to what bothers us in the spiritual life. Really, it pervades everything. Therefore why not give it top priority where we can exercise *exousia*?

Once we’ve become aware of this, the next stage is to look where our *exousia* resides. Again, the answer is quite simple, in our baptism. We have it by reason of having become incorporated with Jesus Christ and his church. Baptism is spoken of as an indelible mark. That means we can’t get rid of it even if we tried our very best. And so baptism is a Christian sacrament or rite of initiation that uses water to symbolize

spiritual cleansing, rebirth, and union with the Christian church. It acts as an outward expression of an inward transformation, representing the forgiveness of sins and the beginning of a new life of faith.

Enough with regard to the definition, important as it may be. We want hands-on application with regard to *exousia* in the sense of applying it to unclean spirits and distractions. It's both easy and difficult to describe the process at hand. Easy in that we can pick out with little hesitation the elements involved and how they work. Difficult in that we have considerable reluctance and fear to use it or better, invoke the Lord for permission to use it. Perhaps we're not bold or persistent as we should be but are too wishy-washy in our request. Also we're not familiar with *exousia* despite it being part and parcel of our baptism. To be sure, one can say that God expects us to use it.

Once we recognize that *exousia* is not just a divine gift but part of the sacrament of baptism, we're endowed with greater freedom and mobility. Because it's unlike anything else we've experienced, it takes time getting used to. As for the distractions just noted, one way of view them is that when they assail us...and indeed they will...we can recognize them not as persistent but as bounded and chaffing against these bounds. They've become bothersome entities which love to make plenty of clatter which is their only way of saying goodbye. They like throwing a tantrum when pushed to the door and before they are shoved out into the darkness which the Gospel alludes in several parables.

Practically speaking these distractions persist chiefly as residue even though they've been defanged. Should we consider them as such, we'd give them far less attention. Keep in mind that this is a huge step forward. Another reason why this residue hangs around is that while Jesus Christ has a major role to play in the defanging process, it is secondary. Indeed, our very redemption may be termed secondary which sounds like a statement way out of place because...and this is the real reason...we're chiefly occupied with salvation.

What if our redemption were secondary to the incarnation of Jesus Christ? We've grown so accustomed to Jesus-as-Savior (essentially true) that we've forgotten why he became incarnate. Christ came primarily to confront Satan. Look at the synoptic accounts of Jesus being whisked off into the desert in order to confront Satan. Note the importance of his baptism before doing so. His ministry is chock full of encounters with Satan and other evil entities that culminated with his crucifixion.

Once raised above the earth on the cross, Jesus was able to at last claim victory. We've heard such language often enough but perhaps haven't sounded it as we should. Being in this unique position both not in heaven and not upon earth made Jesus strangely untouchable from things above and things below. All the "stuff" that followed down to the present day follows the same pattern. Evil finds itself at the foot of the cross parallel to Jesus' mother completely at its wits end because it's confronted with a reality it never had encounter. At this point it reaches an extreme which may catch us off guard, but in reality it lasts a short time.

When you come right down to it, what a relief to know that our redemption is secondary. It's a bit odd to grasp at first but once we do, we're opened to a world of difference. We can sit back and let Jesus do the real work of combating Satan. We've activated that *exousia* by reason of our baptism so now we can employ it for other things besides those mentioned earlier.

One important application through our baptism is an important but little appreciated word, *parresia* in Greek. It means a particular use of speech that conceals nothing and passes over nothing while inferring outspokenness, frankness and plainness. Such freedom of speech implies that yes, we are in a secondary position with regard to the larger scheme of things. When you know that, you have a certain boldness not from being special but from the opposite, of being nothing that has been raised on high.

Consider the following two examples of *parresia*: “I have said this to you in figures; the hour is coming when I shall no longer speak to you in figures but tell you plainly (or with *parresia*) of the Father” [Jn 16.25]. The other example is a bit different though captures the sense of the word. “He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him” [Col 2.15]. Here “made a public example” reads literally “he made a show in *parresia*,” the verb being *deiknumi* or to exhibit something that can be apprehended. This showing takes the form of staging a triumphal march, if you will, *thriambeuo* with the phrase *en auto* or “in it” meaning the cross.

I’ve introduced *parresia* as a kind of way to jump start how we use *exousia*. It’s not something we leave to collect dust on the shelf but first to be activated and then applied. One recent example was when I had attended Mass. I knew some of the people present and recalled their patterns of behavior, some of which I found irritating...not in a major way but in small instances. However, these instances have a way snowballing and if not recognized as such, can lead to a less than desirable confrontation where I’d end up as a loser.

When I became aware not so much of a particular irritation but of it’s tendency to rapidly grow out of all proportion, I was faced with two choices which is always the case in these situations: go along for the ride or stop and watch the process without passing judgment. The latter, of course, is the way to go. What’s crucial is that you have to make the choice then-and-there, no dilly-dallying. As just noted, such decisiveness has to be implemented in a split second. It turns out that the act of beholding both choices (going along for the ride or refusing to do so) is the only escape while your right in between both.

Here is the place where you can introduce *exousia*, the particular manifestation at hand being the power to say no to something that’d get you in trouble. It seems to be a small gesture (and in fact, is as such) but

stands at the point where you can step in and see the very root of all that is both not good as well as good in what we encounter. In sum, it's a kind of distillation process. As you gradually reduce the distinct flavors, you get a concentrate which has no taste except something as highly potent. Right here you don't make the decision to choose one way and reject the other. Strange to say, at this juncture it's already made for you.

With some practice, *parresia* expressed through *exouia* and *dunamis* (again, the latter as its operation) has a way of entering one's life as a gentle yet powerful ocean swell that lifts all upon it. You don't develop this on your own initiative. Instead, the three come to you as gift but as gift which requires that you have to ask. Here indeed is a practical application of *parresia* which originally meant the ability to express one's mind as a citizen of a *polis*, a city state. Nowadays it's a kind of lost art or ability but one that's remarkably easy to recover. *Parresia* puts aside all limitations and goes about asking in a perfectly natural, unpretentious way. You can always try it out right now. Don't forget. It was given to you through the sacrament of baptism.

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