Jesus and Apostolic Authority

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In his discussion of Romans chapter 13 in *The Politics of Jesus*, John Howard Yoder addressed the contrast that many people have seen between Paul's view of the state in that text and "the contrary duties which otherwise would seem to follow from Jesus' teaching and example."[1] Yoder raised the issue in order to argue that Romans 13, properly understood, is very much in line with the teachings and example of Jesus. But, if only to argue against the need for taking the step, Yoder also stated that, if there were such a contrast between the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of Paul, "there might well be some good reasons to stand with Jesus against Paul."[2]

I will attempt to present one such reason — namely that the historical Jesus seems to have reserved teaching authority for himself and thus seems not to have bestowed it upon any of his followers. I will also suggest some implications for the future of Anabaptist-Mennonite scholarship if Jesus did, as I will argue, retain for himself the authority to speak for God.

Historical study cannot tell us whether or not Jesus is Lord. However, by weighing sources and providing context, methodologically sound historical study can potentially clarify the content of Jesus' message and actions. In making my argument, I will use the methodological approach common to most current

Jesus scholars. I am an adherent of the methods of the school that includes scholars such as E. P. Sanders, John Meier, Geza Vermes, and Paula Fredriksen, and thus I am *not* in alliance with the methods of the Jesus Seminar where their methods differ.[3] And, of course, any historical argument, especially regarding an ancient figure for whom we have as few sources as we do for Jesus, involves degrees of probability rather than certainties. Now, on to the case for believing that Jesus probably did not see himself as delegating teaching authority to anyone.

First, we may be fairly confident that Jesus saw himself as having teaching authority as God's special spokesperson at a crucial moment in history — as the prophet of the God of Israel at the dawn of a new age.[4] As Sanders has put it, Jesus "regarded himself as having full authority to speak and act on behalf of God." As such, and in contrast to Jewish scribes, Jesus did not appeal to Scripture as the basis of his authority but rather presented his authority as unmediated.[5] We may also be confident that Jesus designated a group of twelve followers around himself.[6] That Jesus sent his twelve followers to spread his message is likely.[7] Each of those claims is worthy of extended discussion, but for purposes of this argument, I will simply assume them — referring those interested in them to my endnotes and to the secondary literature.

The question on which I want to focus is whether Jesus in some sense authorized the Twelve — or his followers more generally — to be, like him, spokespeople for God. Did Jesus grant at least some of his followers authority to be prophets, in a sense, themselves? I will argue that Jesus probably did not do so, and that only the Gospel of Matthew even implies any such authorization.

More than on anything else, the authority of the New Testament canon is based on apostolic authority, authority that many believe Jesus gave certain of his followers to speak decisively about him and his significance. At least some in the early church assumed that Jesus did pass his teaching authority, his prophetic office, to certain of his followers; that though Jesus himself wrote nothing, he commissioned the apostles as spokespeople for God in their own right, whose words others could receive as definitive.[8]

The word "apostle" implies one who has been sent on a mission. Even if Jesus really did call the Twelve an Aramaic equivalent of "apostles," while the title implies that those so designated *are* sent, it does not imply the authority their words are assumed to carry.[9] To explore the authority question, I will take the Synoptics one by one.

1. Mark described the naming of the Twelve in 3:14-15.[10] He then stated that Jesus chose them "in order that they might be with him and that he might send them out [*apostello autous*] to *proclaim* and to have *authority* to cast out demons."[11] When he later sends them on a mission, the Markan Jesus is again specifically said to give the Twelve "authority" — and again, it is specifically authority over unclean spirits (6:7). In describing what happened during their mission, Mark wrote that the apostles "proclaimed that all should repent," in addition to casting out "many demons" and anointing "with oil many who were sick and cur[ing] them" (6:13). In reviewing their mission after their return, Mark wrote that the apostles told Jesus "all that they had done and taught" (6:30). Thus, although Mark emphasized that the Twelve proclaimed and taught during their mission, and although he stated that Jesus explicitly gave them "authority" to cast out unclean spirits, Mark never used authority language to describe the *teaching* component of their mission.

Mark was familiar with the concept of teaching authority. He said that Jesus had it. At the opening of his Gospel he tells us that the crowds were amazed by the authority with which Jesus taught. In Capernaum, the people in the synagogue "were astounded at [Jesus'] teaching, for he taught as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (1:22). The scribes presumably understood themselves — and were understood by the people — as *interpreting* an authoritative teaching rather than teaching authoritatively themselves. A question is whether Mark understood the proclamation of the Twelve to correspond more closely either to Jesus' teaching "with authority" or to the teaching of the scribes, who did not claim to speak directly for God. From Mark's descriptions of Jesus and the Twelve teaching, the latter seems more likely.

Mark in fact undermined any claim of the infallibility of the Twelve in his depictions of their frequent misinterpretation of Jesus' words and actions.[12] Mark describes these misunderstandings of Jesus as coming *after* the Twelve's preaching mission (6:7-13). Therefore, Mark in no way implied that, by the time he sent them out to preach his message, Jesus had ensured that the Twelve's understanding of the kingdom of God was dependable.

2. Luke generally followed Mark.[13] One difference is that Luke portrayed the disciples much more positively, omitting most of the negative Markan material. Thus Luke does not follow Mark in implying that the apostles would be likely to define the gospel incorrectly. [14] However, regarding the issue at hand, Luke also followed Mark by not presenting Jesus giving *teaching*

authority to the Twelve.

Luke also moved beyond Mark in having Jesus describe a future governing role for the Twelve. In an ambitious promise of future *governing* authority, the Lukan Jesus promises the disciples a ruling place in the coming kingdom. If the Lukan Jesus saw himself as ruling in God's stead, he seems to have envisioned the disciples as his future court of officials, saying, "I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (22:28-30). A future authority to govern under the direction of Jesus seems to have been in mind here.[15] However, this judging role is still not authority to define the gospel — to speak decisively for God. Therefore, we can say that the Gospels of Mark and Luke do not assert that Jesus passed his teaching authority to any of his followers.

3. The book of Matthew, however, is a different story, and the strongest claims that Jesus gave teaching authority to his followers rest on Matthean material alone.[16]

Matthew generally followed Mark on the points already covered,[17] portraying Jesus as having prophetic teaching authority while having Jesus give the Twelve authority to heal and exorcise and a commission to "proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near'" (Matt. 10:7). As in Mark and Luke, no *authority* is explicitly given to preach in a definitive way equivalent to Jesus' own style. Matthew also followed Mark in presenting the Twelve as having unreliable perceptions of Jesus' teachings and purposes. And with Luke, Matthew included the previously mentioned promise that "when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (19:28).[18] Again, this saying depicts the Twelve ruling under Jesus in the new age and is an expectation of great authority indeed, but it is governing authority for the future age — not teaching authority for the present.

We now turn to the Matthean passage that arguably presents Jesus bestowing teaching authority on his followers — or at least on one of them. In his account of Peter's confession of Jesus as messiah, Matthew followed Mark. But after Peter's confession, Matthew added three verses in which Jesus singles out Peter for a special role in the church:

> Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter [*Petros*], and on this rock [*petra*] I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will have been bound[19] in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven. (Matt. 16:17-19)

Because I think the evidence is strong that Jesus never actually said these things, I will assume, for the sake of argument, that Matthew understood this passage to say that Jesus gave some sort of binding teaching authority to Peter. In fact, I suspect that Matthew probably did intend the passage that way.

Does this saying of the Matthean Jesus, or any part of it, likely go back to Jesus himself? These words appear only in Matthew and yet are attached to a pericope Matthew received from Mark, so one immediately suspects them of being Matthean creations. Their single attestation is a major point against them. However, because Mark can be reasonably suspected of an anti-Twelve bias, that he suppressed such material is possible.[20] Luke could have simply depended on Mark's omission.

Some have detected Aramaic influences in this passage.[21] However, even if so, not only Jesus but most of his early followers spoke Aramaic, so an Aramaic background to the saying is not strong evidence that the saying goes back to Jesus.[22]

The use of the word *ekklesia* in 16:18 is a major red flag. It is almost certainly terminology from a later time. In all four Gospels, only this passage and an almost certainly anachronistic reference in 18:17 put the word "church" in the mouth of Jesus. Jesus could have used a word translated this way,[23] but it is very unlikely that he did so, because if he had used an equivalent of the favorite early Christian term for their communities, we would expect more than just these two Matthean examples. All things considered, that the future *kingdom* is the theme of this passage counts strongly against it going back to Jesus.[24]

Peter's leading role both in this passage and after the resurrection could cut either way. One can imagine that supporters of Peter in the early church might have created legends around him that emphasized his special role among the followers of Jesus. Even apart from this passage, the Gospel

of Matthew elevates Peter in a way the other Gospels do not.[25] On the other hand, Peter does seem to have taken the leading post-Easter role among the disciples.[26] That Jesus designated Peter as such before his crucifixion is not implausible. Somehow the early Christians, several of whom had also been followers of Jesus, got the idea that Peter should lead them.

On the whole, however, I think the evidence against Matt. 16:17-19 going back to Jesus — a single attestation of a saying that would have been important to most early Christians, anachronistic language about the church, Matthew's general tendency to elevate Peter, a post-Easter concern for leadership roles after Jesus — these things outweigh the evidence in favor of authenticity. I therefore regard it as unlikely, though not impossible, that Jesus really said something along the lines of Matt. 16:17-19.

Because that passage is the only one in the Synoptic Gospels in which Jesus could be reasonably understood to bestow teaching authority on his followers, I therefore conclude that the answer to Did Jesus authorize the Twelve to be spokespeople for God? is, Probably not. Though he seems to have envisioned the Twelve ruling under him in the coming kingdom, is likely to have sent them out to preach, and may have explicitly authorized them to heal and cast out demons, Jesus is unlikely to have in some sense authorized them to be God's spokespeople — prophets, in a sense, themselves. The difference in teaching authority between a prophet's messenger and the prophet himself is a great one. Jesus seems likely to have reserved the latter role for himself.

Implications for Future Anabaptist-Mennonite Scholarship

If, as seems most likely, Jesus did not bestow teaching authority on any of his followers, historical Jesus research becomes even more important theologically. The differences between what Jesus actually did and said, and what his followers attributed to him and said about him, become differences between what should carry authority for Christians and what need not. That difference in authority should have some significant implications for doing theology and for priorities in biblical research.

In biblical study, an obvious priority should be that Mennonites pay close attention to and join the scholarly quest for the historical Jesus. Because a significant stream of Mennonites is inclined to locate theological authority in the teachings and actions of Jesus rather than necessarily in Scripture as a

whole, we may have the needed theological energy for a focus on historical Jesus research. I have tried to show how a focus on Jesus rather than Scripture is an approach more consistent with Jesus' own approach. In any case, I hope energetic research into the historical Jesus will be a high priority in future Anabaptist-Mennonite scholarship.

Regarding decisive theological authority as Jesus' alone should also encourage Mennonite scholars who work with the Bible to study New Testament authors as writers with distinct theological perspectives, rather than feeling the need to harmonize the whole New Testament to fit with our understanding of Jesus. Locating authority in Jesus alone may give us more permission, for example, to understand Paul as pointing in a different direction from Jesus on a certain point. That is, if Paul is not authoritative, we may be more likely to let Paul be Paul, with the possibility of just disagreeing with him rather than trying to get him to endorse our views.

Another implication of locating teaching authority in Jesus alone would regard how we base our systems of theology and ethics. It would mean going even further than John Howard Yoder went in *The Politics of Jesus*. For, in that book Yoder not only argued that the rest of the New Testament agreed with Jesus on the issues at hand but he also used the Gospel of Luke uncritically. Perhaps unintentionally, what Yoder wrote was in important ways less *The Politics of Jesus* than it was *The Politics of Luke*.[27] Truly Jesus-based ethics and theology will draw on the best of historical Jesus research to distinguish between Jesus and the Gospel writers, where that distinction is important. Perhaps such a theological approach will regard the Gospel of John, Paul's letters, the rest of the NT, and the rest of the Synoptic material as potentially illuminating commentary on the reign of God as made known in the teachings and actions of Jesus, but not as authoritative. And then it will use all the tools of theology and ethics to develop systems based on Jesus' teachings and actions as determined by methodologically sound Jesus research, recognizing always that historical work invariably deals with degrees of probability rather than certainty. I am not at all sure what theological such efforts will look like, but it would be exciting to see them.

In addition, taking historical Jesus research seriously and locating authority in Jesus alone should encourage all of us current and future scholars to give attention to our language about Jesus. For example, it should stop us from quoting the Jesus of the Gospel of John as though he were Jesus.

Sometimes, people talk as though only the fringe scholars of the Jesus Seminar discount John as a source for Jesus' sayings, when the fact is that almost no serious Jesus scholars regard the Gospel of John as a reliable source of Jesus' sayings. Taking historical Jesus scholarship seriously should also lead us to distinguish between the historical Jesus and the Jesuses of the Synoptic Gospels. Taking care to use adjectives like "the Matthean Jesus" and "the Johannine Jesus" might be a good discipline when we are not referring to the historical Jesus but to Jesus the literary character in a Gospel.

Alternatively, those who are not persuaded that Jesus retained for himself authority to define the reign of God may engage in this debate with their own arguments. But one thing we cannot do is operate on the unargued assumption that Jesus passed on his teaching authority, for he seems not to have done that.

Notes

[1] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 194-95.
[2] *Ibid*., 214.
[3] For a brief description of sound methodology for studying the historical Jesus, see E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), 301-34.
[4] Jesus seems likely to have understood himself as God's spokesperson — God's prophet. It seems to have been an implicit rather than explicit self claim (E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985], 239 and 333), but no less strong for that. "We may be certain about [Jesus]: he thought he had been especially commissioned to speak for God" (E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* [London: Penguin Books, 1993], 239).

Martin Hengel says Jesus' "sovereign attitude toward the Law of Moses" is best described as "charismatic authority" (Martin Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers*, trans. James C. G. Greig [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981], 67-70). Geza Vermes notes that "in Palestinian Jewish parlance . . . a person wielding such authority is known as a prophet," which Jesus is said to call himself in Mark 6:4 and par. (Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993], 73).
[5] Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 238.
[6] The Synoptic Gospels present Jesus as giving a special designation to twelve men from among his followers. Mark 3:13-14 and Luke 6:12-13 describe Jesus calling out twelve from among a larger group. Matt. 10:1 implies that Jesus had only twelve disciples in the first place. The Gospels thus do not agree on the precise events surrounding Jesus' designation of the Twelve, and the different contexts they offer imply different understandings of the symbolism Jesus intended. There are even slight variations in their lists of the Twelve. The tradition that Jesus had twelve followers goes back at least to the time of Paul. It has its earliest testimony

in Paul's recounting of those to whom the resurrected Jesus appeared (1 Cor. 15:5).

[7] "[W]e do not know Jesus' purpose in calling [the Twelve]," and he seems to doubt whether Jesus sent out the Twelve on a mission (Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 103). There is no evidence of a post-Easter mission of the Twelve to retroject into the life of Jesus, as they — as a recognizable Twelve — seem to have quickly faded from the scene after Easter (Meier, 158). This increases the likelihood that Jesus sent them on one. Meier (161) has also pointed to the phrase "fishers of men," which the Synoptic Jesus invited Simon and Andrew to become if they would follow him (Mark 1:17 and par.).

[8] Perhaps this understanding of "apostolic authority" is rooted especially in Paul's view of his own authority. At least, Paul's writings are the extant documents in which apostolic authority is first asserted — and asserted strongly. Paul made a point of identifying himself as "an apostle" sent by Jesus Christ. He was also willing to make explicit claim to the implied teaching authority that came with being regarded as an "apostle," acknowledging his tendency to "boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave . . ." (2 Cor. 10:8). Paul was not one of the Twelve. However, to identify himself as a person of authority in the church, the title he used was "apostle."

[9] The English word "apostle" is a transliteration of the Greek apostolos from the verb apostello, "to send out." To use the word as a title for those sent with a religious message and mission seems to have been a Christian innovation (Karl Heinrich Rengtorf, "Apostolos," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965], 408). More helpful than the etymology of the word may be the description in the Gospels of how Jesus sent them out. Only Matthew combined the naming of the Twelve, Jesus giving them some sort of authority, and Jesus sending them out on a mission (Matt. 10). Mark linked the naming of the Twelve with Jesus *commissioning* them to be sent out, but he then reserved their actual mission until after Jesus' rejection in Nazareth (Mark 3:13-19, 6:7-13). The Lukan Jesus named the Twelve before the Sermon on the Plain and he then gave them "power and authority" when he sent them out later (Luke 6:12-16, 9:1-6).

[10] Most ancient manuscripts have Mark adding that Jesus called them "apostles," but a variant reading with significant support omits that Jesus called them that. Imagining motives for omitting the title is sufficiently difficult to doubt the mention of "apostles."

[11] The Markan Jesus did not actually send them out at this point, but only later, after the people of Nazareth did not respond to him with faith (6:7-13).

[12] When Jesus tells them to "beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod," the Markan Twelve misunderstand his comments to relate to their own concern that they have forgotten to bring bread on their boat trip. This confusion led to an extended discussion about Jesus' ability to take care of their needs, in which an exasperated Jesus suggested that their "hearts [are] hardened," that they "have eyes, and fail to see," and that they simply "do . . . not yet understand" (Mark 8:17-21). In an even less flattering portrayal, Mark depicted Peter as "rebuking" Jesus for foretelling his (Jesus') imminent execution. Jesus is said to respond, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (Mark 8:32-33).

[13] Luke agreed with Mark in seeing Jesus as teaching with "authority." He also followed Mark in presenting Jesus as sharing with the Twelve his authority over demons and sickness, and in describing Jesus sending the Twelve "to proclaim the kingdom of God" (9:2).

[14] It is probably a conscious contrast to Mark. Luke omitted the confusion about yeast and bread — and Peter's rebuke of Jesus and Jesus' scolding reply.
[15] The Matthean parallel is discussed below.
[16] Since neither Mark nor Luke made the claim that Jesus did any such thing, there is no need to test the historical value of their versions — unless one suspects that they would conceal it. One can imagine that Mark was capable of doing just that as part of his agenda of portraying the disciples negatively. Less clear would be the motives of Luke, who so favorably described the preaching of Peter and "the apostles' teaching" in the early Jerusalem church (Acts 2:14-42).
[17] Matthew placed the reaction of the crowd at the end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:28-29). Thus the Matthean crowds contrasted the teaching of Jesus with the that the scribes, the difference being that Jesus taught with authority. For the Matthean Jesus, however, lack of authority on the part of the scribes did not seem to invalidate their teaching. In a passage with no parallel in Mark or Luke, the Matthean Jesus refers to scribes in a positive way and implied that the best scribes are also followers of Jesus (Mat. 13:52-53).
[18] This saying, a slight variation of the one in Luke 22:30, is likely — for reasons of the criteria of embarrassment and discontinuity — to go back to Jesus (Meier, 137).
[19] This verb and the parallel verb later in the sentence are in the perfect tense but traditionally translated as futures. Since the future tense implies a different meaning, I alter the NRSV here to use an English perfect.
[20] Bultmann suspected Mark of suppressing traditions that were more Jewish and pro-Peter in order to favor Pauline Hellenistic Christianity (Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh [Oxford: Blackwell, 1963], 258.)
[21] Simon was certainly known as "Cephas"/ "Peter." The play on Peter's name works a bit better in Aramaic, in which "kepha" would be both the name "Cephas" and "rock," whereas in Greek, the words are not identical: petros/petra. That the play on words works better in Aramaic may suggest the tradition is, at least, pre-Matthean (Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfield, and John Reumann, eds., *Peter in the New Testament* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1973], 90-91). Some suggest that the reference to "binding" and "loosing" is a Semitic parallelism, suggesting a pre-Matthean history (Brown, et al. 95-96).
[22] See Sanders and Davies, 333-34.
[23] The LXX used it over a hundred times, almost always to translate the Hebrew qahal — "assembly." There are Aramaic equivalents Jesus could have used (K. Schmidt, "Ekklesia," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965], 525-27). A word translated as ekklesia might simply refer to a group of followers and need not imply a more structured community life (F. V. Filson, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* [London: A. & C. Black, 1960], 201). Ekklesia was a sufficiently commonplace word that Jesus certainly *could* have used a word translated that way. If he had a distinctive word for the community of his followers, we should not be surprised if that word — or its Greek equivalent — would endure in their vocabulary.
[24] What counts overwhelmingly against Jesus' use of a special word to designate the community of his followers is that no other records of his teaching attribute it to him. Ekklesia was how post-Easter Christians often labeled their communities. By my count, the word was used more than 100 times in the NT. It was *the* Greek word first-century Christians used as the label for

their communities of faith in Jesus. Yet only two verses in Matthew (16:18 and 18:17) put the word in Jesus' mouth, and both those sayings seem anachronistically to bring later issues of Christian churches into his earthly ministry. If the early Christians could have traced a word so important to them back to Jesus, we would expect them to have done so. That only Matthew did, and only in these two verses, is strong evidence that Jesus did not use a term easily translated as church.

[25] It is notable that 16:17-19 is not the only place in which Matthew added stories that single out Peter. To Mark's account of Jesus walking on water, Matthew added a story of Peter walking on water a bit himself (14:28-31). Matthew's pericope of the Temple Tax also features Peter prominently (17:24-27). Peter, in Matthew, is also the disciple who pushes Jesus to clarify the limits of forgiveness (18:21). Not necessarily favorable depictions, they do raise Peter to a prominence beyond his role in the other Gospels. Paul referred to some Christians who said of themselves, "I belong to Cephas" (1 Cor. 1:12). Early Christians who saw themselves as particularly Petrine would have had a clear motive to embellish Peter's role among the Twelve.

[26] In Gal. 1:18, Paul referred to his earliest meeting with Peter in a way that suggests that Peter was the most important Christian in Jerusalem in the early years (Luz, 358). According to Acts, Peter played the leading role among the Twelve — preaching publicly, healing handicapped people, being targeted by the Jerusalem priests, challenging disobedient church members, etc. Acts even reports the statements of the Twelve by saying, "Peter and the apostles answered . . ." (Acts 5:29).

[27] See Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, vol. 1 (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1985), 284-88.