

## **Popes, Prophets, Priests, Pastors and People: Where Does the Church Get Its Authority on Earth and Why Does It Matter?"**

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IN my presentation, I am going to go from the general, broad perspective, to the specific and practical.

In general, authority can be defined as, "The power or right to control, judge, or prohibit the actions of others." The church certainly does do that! So, where does it get its authority?

The Lutheran church agrees that authority belongs to God alone, with all other authority being subordinate to God's authority and derived from God's authority. This view even applies to civil authority, as stated by the apostle Paul in Romans 13:1: *For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God.*

Now, in making that statement, I am already moving to the next point about authority, which is this:

We only know what we know about God because God has revealed it to us and, for Lutherans, that revelation comes through God's WORD.

God's WORD created everything that exists, so we can learn something about God through God's creation. God's WORD became flesh in Jesus Christ and so we learn about God by studying the words and

actions of Jesus. God's WORD is present with us and in us by the Holy Spirit through faith, and so we are able to perceive a word from God in our own Spirits.

But ALL of this is communicated to us through the WORD of God that has been written and passed down to us in the words of the Holy Bible. Which is not only words on paper, but still is God's living word for us today.

Lutherans confess that, "This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life."

But where did the Bible come from, as we know it today? Who decided what writings would make it into the Bible? The Church did. And where did the church get its authority? From Jesus. And how do we know that? From the Bible.

So, in a general sense, we would say that authority in the church comes from God, through the person of Jesus Christ, as transmitted by the Holy Spirit and revealed in the Bible.

When the church gets into a dispute of any kind, we are going to turn to the Bible to seek answers and guidance. But, of course, not everyone understands and interprets the Bible the same way.

This is how the Lutheran Church got its start in the first place. Martin Luther stood against the authority of the Pope back in the 1500s because he believed that the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church was no longer being faithful in proclaiming the gospel as he understood it from studying the Scriptures.

Luther could not tolerate teachings that he felt added requirements to salvation beyond having faith in Christ. He would not recant his positions. So he was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic church in 1521 and eventually the Lutheran church was formed with its various structures. It didn't take long for others to break away as well, as disagreements arose about various teachings.

As these issues were debated, confessional documents were developed to explain the Lutheran position. These documents include the Augsburg Confession and other writings in what we call the Book of Concord. So, today, we say that we hold to the confessions of faith in the Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian creeds, as well as the confessional writings. These do not hold the authority of Scripture, but they are authoritative in explaining how we interpret scripture.

Within denominations, authority in the church serves the purpose of bringing order and preserving the teachings of the Scripture and the practices of the Sacraments, and holding people accountable.

One statement from the Augsburg Confession says, for example, that “the power of the Keys, or the power of the bishops, according to the Gospel, is a power or commandment of God, to preach the Gospel, to remit and retain sins, and to administer Sacraments. ... When Bishops teach or ordain anything against the Gospel, then the congregations have a commandment of God prohibiting obedience.”

Another says, “It is lawful for bishops or pastors to make ordinances that things be done orderly in the Church, not that thereby we should merit grace or make satisfaction for sins, or that consciences be bound to judge them necessary services, and to think that it is a sin to break them .. It is proper that the churches should keep such ordinances for the sake of love and tranquility.”

So those are some general perspectives on authority. Now to get more specific. The denomination I belong to is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. This denomination was formed in 1988 when predecessor Lutheran bodies merged. There are other Lutheran bodies in the United States and in the World.

We have a *Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions* which, according to our executive secretary,

*“reflect both the underlying theology of this church as well as its organizational principles and governance structures. They are both ecclesial and legal documents. Thus, they commit this church in each of its expressions—congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization—to the centrality of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, carrying out Christ’s Great Commission, serving the neighbor in response to God’s love, worshiping God, nurturing members in the Word of God, and manifesting the unity given to God’s people in living together in Christ. At the same time, these governing documents also provide necessary organizational principles, structures and policies for good order and to meet legal requirements.*

Our constitution states our confessional beliefs and says, “All power in the Church belongs to our Lord Jesus Christ, its head. All actions of this church are to be carried out under his rule and authority.” It delineates the role of the churchwide, synodical and congregational expressions of the church. It establishes how pastors are called and qualified.

In our system, congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization are said to be “interdependent partners sharing responsibly in God’s mission.” Each expression has specific roles and responsibilities.

Each congregation and synod in its governing documents shall include the Confession of Faith and Statement of Purpose and such structural components as are required in this constitution. Beyond these

common elements, congregations and synods shall be free to organize in such manner as each deems appropriate for its jurisdiction.

When it comes to deciding things on a churchwide level, we have an assembly every other year where delegates are elected by Synods to vote on matters. Our Synod has an assembly every year where we elect a Bishop and council members.

Sometimes there are questions the church debates about our practices. We do ordain women, for example, where other Lutheran denominations don't believe that is Scriptural. Another example is happening in our church right now over questions related to homosexuality. These matters are discussed and decisions made at the various assemblies.

We have a series of what we call "social statements" that help our leaders to publicly address significant social issues that affect the common good. The social statements of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are social policy documents, adopted by the churchwide assembly in accordance with our policies and procedures. Topics in social statements include abortion, church in society, death penalty, economic life, education, environment, health and healthcare, peace; race, ethnicity and culture. And we just adopted one on human sexuality last summer.

On the congregation level, we have authority to make decisions about how we carry out our mission. My congregation called me to serve as its pastor, but I came at the recommendation of the Bishop and certified by the church's candidacy process. My congregation could end my call by a two-thirds vote. I could decide that God was calling me to move somewhere else and put in what we call "mobility papers" and initiate a process of being open to a call somewhere else.

Lots of people get disgusted with the church and with churches because we are all full of sinners and we do some dumb and wrong things. But thank God that He uses us broken vessels and fills us with his power and wisdom and we sometimes do some things well.