

# On Authority

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Preacher: Harvey Guest

[ 0 : 00 ] Let's begin with prayer. Lord, we thank you that you have given us minds, created minds, to know you and to love you and to serve you in this world and in the next.

So keep us, Lord, on that path of learning the mystery and the glory and the wonder of the gospel. Our Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. How am I going to... There's no clock up there, I see. Do you want it? If somebody...

If you want to watch it. Yeah, that one. I got it. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much. Make sure you give it back. Yeah. He's got quite a collection.

On your authority, I'll give that back. On authority, as announced, on authority is... Is it not a vague title? I guess most titles are a bit vague, but many, especially on authority is a vague title.

[ 1 : 02 ] But I won't apologize for that because I think as I sort of make the point this morning, everything I say in front of this group I know you already know, but it's fun to go over things that we already know because we can know them better.

We need to be reminded more often than instructed, as Samuel Johnson said. Authority is about everything. What is authority? You can just multiply questions about authority, which just highlights that it's about everything.

What is it? What is authority? Who has authority? Why do they have it, this authority thing? How does it work, authority? How do we discern authority, good and bad?

Anarchists might ask, why have it at all? You know, they're delightful people, anarchists. They like to go around blowing things up because they think it represents authority. Authority. Authority, what is it exactly?

What justifies authority? Does authority serve us or does it serve some other end which is good for us? Who questions never, never cease about authority?

[ 2 : 06 ] How better a place? I don't know a better place to start in trying to deal with authority than to quote Romans chapter 13 verse 1. You'll know it. All authority, says the Lord's apostle, all authority is from God.

A point blank statement. Wow. All authority is from God. Paul tells the church at Rome.

You'll recall that passage. Paul is, probably Paul had been inquired of about these kind of issues.

But again, that passage speaks of revenue, that sort of indirect taxes owed to a government.

Revenue taxes. In Peter, even honor owed comes up for some Christians and Peter says to them, you give honor to whom honors do.

But Paul, again, to the Romans, he says, well, if these things are due, revenue and taxes, then the Christians in Rome, he instructs them, they are to comply.

[ 3 : 13 ] They may have had the idea that maybe they didn't have to comply. But Paul says, no, revenue and taxes are due to these authorities. And again, you should comply, pay the taxes.

Don't hold back the revenue. The scriptures, of course, the New Testament, like all the scriptures, is a very large canvas. So we want to look as deeply as we may, together and as individuals, a long life's way as Christians.

We look at all of scripture. Let one part speak to another. Listen to the Christian tradition as it informs us about scripture's meaning. And just ponder it.

So we'll do a bit of that this morning, a little bit of it, as we think about this issue of authority. I've always found this extremely short little moment in the Gospel of John startling.

The more you think about it, it's, which I'm going to put in front of you right now, just worthy of pondering all the time. Certainly, as you think about authority issues, from John's Gospel, chapter 19.

[ 4 : 29 ] Do you not know, says Pilate to Jesus? Jesus is on trial before this Roman authority figure.

Do you not know that I have authority to release you and I have authority to crucify you? Do you not know that, Mr. Jesus in front of me?

Do you not know? No. You would have, Jesus says in response, you would have no authority over me at all. This is from the New English Bible, or no, the New Church Bible.

You would have no authority over me at all. Unless it had been given you from above. What a little moment this is in Scripture.

Jesus acknowledges that Pilate has authority over him. You would have no authority over me unless it had been given you from above. All authority, again, Paul says, all authority is from God.

[ 5 : 36 ] Yes, Pilate's authority was given to him by God. It was a gift to him, as the Lord says, from above. From the God of Israel, indeed.

There you have it. I love that story. I have authority to crucify you or to release you, Jesus, Pilate tells him.

And the Lord responds, yes, yes, you have authority over me, but it's been given to you from above, Pilate. On the matter of authority, as I've tried to think about it inadequately, I'm sure, I have hopefully learned a little from the Christian theological ethicist, Oliver O'Donovan.

And I'll talk about him a bit later, but he's leaning a lot on his thinking about authority in the Christian tradition and in Scripture.

Authority at its heart, to come right to his first major point, his thinker, this Christian theological ethicist. Authority at its heart, so teaches this authority, Mr. O'Donovan.

[ 6 : 53 ] Authority at its heart, when I first read this, found a bit surprising, but he convinces me along the way. Authority at its heart is, to begin with, it is disclosure.

Authority discloses something. That's what authority is in the world for, by God's act.

Authority is disclosure. I think that's a nice word to bring to bear on this little narrative in John's Gospel. It's a small little, one little moment in Scripture.

The Scriptures are a big story. They're, Richard Baucom says, I think quite rightly, that, that, whatever you think of post-modernism, I think it's sort of fading away from us now, it gave us the word metanarrative.

Do you think that's a good, that's a good word to have in your vocabulary? The Scriptures are a metanarrative. The Scriptures are the big story of the world, from start to finish.

[ 8 : 02 ] And the script, the metanarrative, is composed of these little narratives, these little micro-narratives, little stories. So, Pilate, this is, no, I should sit back and tell you, nowhere does Mr. O'Donovan bring, in his discussion of authority, at least that I can find, brings his discussion to bear on this particular story.

So, I'm doing that for him today, to sort of tighten up what he says. He writes big books, and a lot of them.

So, Pilate, you see, discloses, if you will, a little dose of reality to Jesus, doesn't he? He discloses something. Jesus, let me tell you something.

This is an authority speaking, and it discloses something to Jesus. Again, I have power to kill you, or to release you. Jesus then discloses, if you will, a bigger reality to Pilate.

This power, as we've heard, this power you possess, Pilate, is from above. So, we see from this, Mr. O'Donovan now, unfolds ideas about authority like this, formally.

[ 9 : 16 ] Again, not in relation to this particular story. But, I think I'm reading him correctly. Authority may take various forms.

I think that's kind of obvious. A lot of things I say to you today are kind of obvious. It's good to, a bit of, it's common sense, but common sense sometimes needs to be explicated.

I don't like the phrase common sense. Do you ever have somebody throw that at all? Come on, give me some common sense. Common sense often needs deep correction. Common sense can be the prevailing nonsense that we're all living under right now.

So, beware of common sense. Pilate discloses, if you will, we will, but we want a divine common sense, if you will. The world's common sense is often foolishness, that's all I'm saying.

Pilate discloses to Jesus an authority of, and Mr. O'Donovan calls it this, as he formally unfolds what authority is in other places.

[ 10 : 21 ] Pilate discloses to Jesus an authority of practical immediacy. Often authority takes that common sense, it takes that form. There's a kind of authority that comes into your life with practical immediacy.

It's just like getting from the government. It's tax time, fill out your tax form. That's an authority telling you some knowledge, here's some practical immediacy. You better get that in. Practical immediacy. Again, we've heard it from Pilate. What could be more practical? Your life, right now, is in my hands, Jesus. That's something you should know right now. And that's a practical word for you to take in. Your life's in my hands. In response, as we've seen, Jesus exercises a form, another form of authority, which this learned, and I use his title here for a reason, which you'll see. He's retired now from Oxford. The former Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Christ Church, Oxford. There's a title for you. Take a deep breath after that one.

[ 11 : 30 ] He somewhat grandly calls this authority that Jesus now exercises, he calls it, I think it's a good term, it's rather grand. He calls it cognitive plenitude.

Authority can take the form of cognitive plenitude. I like that little phrase. I have a little note here. Alexander, if people insist someday that this outfit needs to be renamed, you could call it the Society for Cognitive Plenitude.

I wouldn't go, I wouldn't like it, but, you know, it's a suggestion. I stick with learner's exchange. Pilate, it's as the Lord is saying. Pilate, let me broaden your knowledge. Here's some cognitive plenitude, Pilate. Something you don't know, which I'm now going to tell you. Let me broaden your knowledge about the source of your authority. Here's a bit, Pilate, of cognitive plenitude for your pondering. You need to know more about your authority. You've got authority, but you don't know enough about it.

[ 12 : 38 ] You need a little dose of cognitive plenitude. Thank you for your practical immediacy, but I've got some cognitive plenitude for you. Again, authority discloses, and it does it in different ways, at different levels of life.

I mentioned that academic title just, again, as a reminder that authority is implied in a very broad range, someone has written, in a very broad range of social phenomena. Again, this is common sense. It's just good to note that. There it is. In teaching, there's obviously a kind of authority. Mr. O'Donovan will say that in learning, there is a kind of exercise of authority. You exercise the authority of weighing, of measuring, and thinking about it. In questioning, we exercise a bit of authority. In associating with people, we sort of exercise authority. In admiring something, we exercise a bit of authority. In loving, we decide to exercise a bit of our authority in the world. Governing and obeying tend to dominate discussions of authority, don't they?

[ 13 : 57 ] We tend to think, oh yeah, authority, that's about the government, and those of us who do what the government tells us to do. Well, that's an important aspect of authority.

That's why Paul tells the Romans some apostolic command and or advice, I think it's command, about how to relate at the level of money to the authorities around them. It's a wonderful thing to, what the Lord says to Pilate, again, deserves some real precise unfolding. I like this sentence from Mr. O'Donovan. Again, it's not, and he doesn't read, he's not thinking specifically about Pilate and Jesus in conversation, but he writes a sentence like this. There is an excess of divine action over human action, which can only be acknowledged and worshipped. I love that sentence.

[ 15 : 00 ] That's what a Pilate would not at all recognize. There is an excess of divine action over human action, which can only be acknowledged and worshipped.

You wonder, does the Parliament of Canada recognize that there's a divine action over its actions, which should be acknowledged and worshipped?

It seems to me that's where the big separation of church and state thing, in its own way, as good as that is, in some ways it goes very wrong. Over all authority, there's an excess of divine action. God is working out his purposes as governments work out their purposes, as all forms of authority do their thing. A footnote to the Pilate Jesus exchange, another footnote, if you will. Authority may disclose, again, this is common sense once you see it, but it's so good to see the obvious. Authority may disclose very unexpected or shocking or at times what seems to be unbelievable truth.

[ 16 : 20 ] Authority can suddenly speak to you and you go, really? Cognitive plenitude indeed. Really?

Am I really supposed to believe that? Sometimes it seems hard to believe. It's a frequent truth in Scripture, if these particular words do not repeat themselves in Scripture, but you did it for evil, but God meant it for good, is a shocking truth.

That human beings will do evil, but God is going to use that for good. He was using his authority in this strangely mediated way. How strange authority is, how many different forms it takes. And this is important. I move on to Mr. O'Donovan's next crucial idea about authority. They overlap, they have a resemblance. When we see authority in this expansive manner, this exercise of cognitive plenitude, then we see, you see a bit further.

As authority is disclosure, and this is the next formal point, if that's what it is from this theological emphasis, as authority is disclosure, so, Mr. O'Donovan will tell us, in terms of the broad sweep of Scripture and a Christian understanding of the world, authority is also approach.

[ 17 : 50 ] I think I'll put words into his mouth, but authority also is an exercise of God in which there is brought into our lives, into the life of the world, a divine approach.

Disclosure discloses a divine which is approaching us at all times, all the time. All authority is from God.

Paul says, you begin to feel more and more of the weightiness and the strangeness, perhaps, of the truth that all authority is from God.

And all of those many, many forms that you exercise, we all exercise, you think of authority, oh yeah, that thing that's over me, all of that authority, our little actions of authority, all of it comes from God and is held, we're held responsible for our use of authority by God, as we'll see, of course. Again, yes, Pilate's authority comes from God and the greater authority standing in his presence comes from God.

[ 19 : 06 ] There it is. Amazing. Authority, says Mr. O'Donovan, you see, is an event which repeatedly and constantly occurs in the world.

That's a good sentence, too. He writes a lot of good sentences. I quote them. I won't quote any of his bad sentences. Authority is an event which repeatedly and continually occurs.

Wave after wave, he says, wave after wave of disclosure breaking over us. Here begins to come into view nothing less than a Christian, I think very convincingly.

We're not obligated to believe any one particular Christian thinker or the tradition he represents, perhaps. But here's the beginnings of a Christian, here's a Christian theology of history. History is a wave after wave of disclosure breaking over the world.

As the God who's really there makes himself known wave after wave of disclosure of his meaning and his purposes in history.

[ 20 : 14 ] Mr. O'Donovan is a, is a, I think, a thorough thinker. He's a remarkable guy. Note this, for instance, as Mr. O'Donovan points out, again, not specifically in regards to the pilot, but in regards to all authority.

pilot's authority, part of this wave after wave which breaks over us in history, pilot's authority asserts itself only to be apparently immediately discredited.

A lot of authority asserts itself in the world, but it immediately finds itself under judgment. Don't we know this? There's a lot of authority out there that is destructive and hurtful, to put it mildly.

It's given by God, but it's given in a certain sense in time to be discredited. Pilate's authority was given to him by the God and Father of Jesus, but it was an authority that was about to be judged by a greater authority who graciously and lovingly, I think, gave to Pilate.

Why did our Lord stop and give some truth to Pilate of all people? This bureaucrat, this little representative of the mighty Roman Empire in Palestine, just said, Pilate, your authority comes from above.

[ 21 : 49 ] But I think, why, why, why, we might ask, does God do it this way? Why does it have to be apparently on its surface so, of, so, so complex, apparently?

Well, one of the reasons is, again, in this scripture moment of Pilate, again, with Jesus, this scripture moment as Mr. O'Donovan would have it, of disclosure, and then disclosure which represents a divine approach, is revealed, this is a category that Mr. O'Donovan I think takes very, very seriously.

It seems obvious once you hear it, but remember how moved I was when I first read this in one of his, one of his books of ethics. Often, the disclosure which heaven gives us through the exercise of authority in history, in it is revealed what he calls a sad wisdom.

Isn't that an interesting thought? I find it so. Often in history, through the mediation of authority, through governments, through our own acts of authority, and all these different, the arts are a form of authority, Mr. O'Donovan insists somewhere in his writings.

They have a kind of, they command attention. What does authority do if not command attention? You listen to a piece of music by Bach. It commands attention. It has an inherent authority.

[ 23 : 25 ] Beauty has an inherent authority about it. The arts are a form of authority. So many forms of authority. But how often do they reveal to us, and this is God's purpose for us, a sad wisdom.

We need to learn sad wisdom sometimes along life's way. A lot of the way God organizes our lives, it seems, is to bring about a recognition of sad truths, sad wisdom.

But we need this sad wisdom. That's a very interesting thought from this ethicist. But these new moments of recognition become themselves moments of authority.

So we're reading today, I brought to our attention today, Pilate judging Jesus. A tragic moment in human history we tend to think.

But that story itself now has become a form of authority in the church's life. And it gives wisdom to the church, it gives wisdom to the Christian. Hopefully it's given much wisdom to a broader world outside the church.

[ 24 : 37 ] Mr. O'Donovan is a doubtful defender of Christendom. He thinks Christendom is over, but he thinks it did much good in the world.

These, the Christian story just being repeated begins to shape how minds work a bit. Begins to put a bit of a sanctifying power out there onto the world.

just comes to mind now, a little footnote. He loves to put something like this, around the year 100, let's go on a tour, a regent tour of the Roman Empire.

We're back about the year 100 together. We travel through the big centers, certainly, and some of the smaller centers. What do we find there? Rather sadly, we find places like the Colosseum, where if we go in for the afternoon's entertainment, we're going to watch slaves maybe having their throats lit.

Excuse me for saying that. Slaves put to death in all sorts of creative ways. It was a good form of entertainment. Gladiators famously fighting, we've seen the movies. Brutal stuff, common, everyday stuff in the Roman Empire.

[ 25 : 54 ] Let's go back to about the year 400. Visit the same places. You know what? They've all disappeared. Why? Mr. John will insist the gospel of Jesus Christ is beginning to impact these cultures.

Not much, you might say, imperfectly, for sure, but the gospel, wherever it goes, begins to have some shaping power. So this story of Pilate and Jesus, maybe it's been heard by prime ministers and presidents and those in high places of authority, and it's warned them, boy, can you ever get it wrong.

Where does your authority come from, prime ministers and presidents and kings and queens and princes and all who have high places of authority?

Just telling this story is wise. Where does your authority come from, do you think? Yeah. It's a wonderful, powerful thing.

There is a kind of, obviously, therefore, there's an irony in authority. Sometimes it's there, it's given by God, but it's kind of ironic because it might be getting it wrong.

[ 27 : 08 ] It might become part of the sad wisdom of the world at some point, under God's gracious providence. There's authority that has its moment and then it's surpassed, and God wants it to be surpassed.

There it is. How much cognitive plenitude, therefore, must move on from the pilot stuff for a while. How much cognitive plenitude can we, if I hope, legitimately squeeze out of this Jesus-pilot moment? I would think, I hope, I mean, I'm over-reading this particular moment in scripture, if not the whole Christian tradition as it thinks about authority.

I would think there's a lot of wisdom to be gained just from this story and from what it represents.

Let me read you, just once I'll do this, since I mention his name so often. Let me read, it's one sentence, it's a bit long, but thank you for your patience. But this kind of sentence kind of captures, sort of captures, I hope, with some clarity, what Mr.

[ 28 : 24 ] O'Donnellman is doing with the idea of authority, and how expansive he believes a study of it is, how much cognitive plenitude it has for our wisdom.

Last couple, I don't know about you, I bet you've had this experience, last six months, last year or so, maybe longer than that, in just casual conversations with people outside the church, young with Christians, because of the unsettled times in which we're living, and I think we've all agreed we've

entered into an unsettled time in the world's history right now.

People feel that the foundations are shaking a bit out there. Big nations are being governed by people who are sort of new kinds of figures on the scene.

We haven't seen them in a while, no mention of names. But these words from Mr. O'Donnellman I think help me to understand how there might very well be a very real, concrete, helpful, blessed, good for us to know, Christian idea of what history is about.

One big sentence, let me read it for you. As these scattered moments of enlightenment, there's echoes of what I've tried to say about Mr.

[ 29 : 37 ] O'Donnellman's teaching here, as these scattered moments of enlightenment supersede one another and interpret one another.

Divine authority shapes the course of history as a whole, effecting a disclosure of the wisdom of God as a whole in which each moment has its proper place.

Maybe not the most exciting sentence you've ever heard, but it's summarizing what he's saying. If you ponder authority and the way it works, its appearance, its disappearance, its overcoming, its efficient authority, but then it's overcome by a greater authority, begin to see what our God is doing in the whole sweep of human history.

What he's doing, certainly in concentrated form, we see it most clearly in Holy Scripture, from the mystery of Adam and Eve to the whole story of Israel, the fulfillment of the whole story and the mystery of Jesus Christ.

To understand authority is to see what God is doing in this. We Christians are not left totally staring at a blank wall when it comes to things like, hey, what's going on in the world right now?

[ 30 : 51 ] Well, our God establishes authority, then he shakes them up. And this is the way he's bringing about his purposes in the world. Maybe that's not in any way a controversial thing for a Christian to believe, but it might be we need some more clarity about that kind of thing.

I would think that that much truth is as expressed in that one rich weighty sentence, at least I find it so.

That much truth might be found in just pondering a moment like Pilate judging with his authority, the judge of all things, Jesus of Nazareth.

I think there's lots there. I also realize, just in passing, I tried to take this story serious for the last couple weeks.

I really do realize that some of my sad wisdom, that when it comes to this Pilate Jesus story, I realize, without dramatizing myself, I realize I'm much more like Pilate than Jesus when I hear this kind of story.

[ 32 : 01 ] I find, if I was Pilate, I'd say, that is so unreal, just another Jewish fanatic that I have to deal with. He thinks my authority is from above. No, my authority is from Rome, the mighty empire.

And Pilate had all the common sense in the world on his side. And this witness of this Jewish religious guy seems so unreal. Often I think of our God's ruling over history as rather abstract and a bit unreal.

I'm a bit more like Pilate, maybe, when I think about these things instinctively than I'm able to hear the divine voice saying that no, Pilate, your authority is from above.

And that the Lord's apostle made that more formally. All authority, he tells the Roman Christians, is from God. All of it.

Were they worried about paying taxes? Maybe to these nasty Roman Nero or whoever was the guy in charge at that moment. Paul says his authority is from God.

[ 33 : 10 ] God will judge him. The order of the world is a gift from God. It has to be honored, but not too much. It may just serve sad wisdom.

Almost the kind of humor in the way God works in history. Do we dare say that? He seems to give power to the wrong people frequently. Almost as if he's making fun of authority by allowing such weird folks to exercise.

All authority is from God, and this mediated authority again discloses a divine wisdom, again, perhaps a sad wisdom.

I must move right along here. Authority is, it seems to me, therefore, this idea of wave after wave unfolding the ways of God to us in our lives and in history.

Authority is the equivalent of providence, I think, in Mr. O'Donnell's mind. It doesn't say this in so many clear words. Authority seems to be a picture of the authority of God's providential rule over all

things.

[ 34 : 21 ] Providence is heaven's authority always speaking. Puritans were really strong on this point, at least I find the Puritans really good on this.

John Flavel, that's F-L-A-V-E-L, John Flavel, a 17th century Puritan Congregationalist pastor, says this in his wonderful little tract about his book about providence.

He says this, imagine him preaching this to his congregation, I think it's wonderful. If you will, here is the key to understanding Flavel says to his congregation, here is how you begin to understand the mystery of providence as it works out in your own life.

We can say by extension how God's providence works itself out through mediated authorities in human history and in our own lives. First off he says, I'm shortening him down, the Puritans could be prolix, couldn't they?

God, he says, is infinitely wise. You know, well, we all sort of check off that box pretty easily, don't we? Who else could unfold in Mr.

[ 35 : 37 ] O'Donovan's terms, this wave after wave of authority moving through history? Only a God who's infinitely wise could work out this plan of how he's going to reveal, disclose himself to people and to the world.

Remember that God is infinitely wise, says Mr. Flavel. He emphasizes this, and I think he's making a good point here. He says things like weave that, pray that, work that truth into your mind, into your soul.

He's aware that it's easy to say, oh yeah, who wouldn't believe in God's infinite wisdom? But he's saying, do you really believe it, do you think? Do you really think that every event in your life is a sign of God's infinite wisdom?

Think again. That's not exactly an easy truth to believe at times. And then B follows on from A quite easily. He says to his congregation, you on the other hand are not wise.

In fact, you are quite ignorant about your own life. Right? You got it? God is infinitely wise. We are not. And you'll never really take the idea of providence seriously unless you really believe those two propositions.

[ 36 : 58 ] I go to God often with complaint and bitterness at times. But God is saying, well, I'm infinitely wise.

You're not. That's the foundational answer. that God gives me. He gives it to me gently and wisely. He gives me permission to lament, to be sad, to learn some sad wisdom.

But God is infinitely wise and I am not. And trying to understand the ways of God, you don't get started unless those two ideas are simply present to your mind.

God is infinitely wise and I am not. I am in fact ignorant of the ways of God almost all the time. What he's doing in my life.

Do we take that in? Get that into your mind. Here is, if you will, there's a bit of sad wisdom of sorts.

[ 37 : 57 ] At least on an immediate level, it's kind of sad. I've got to be told by someone that I don't know as much as God knows. There you go. There's sad wisdom.

I do not know it's idle speculation. I've got to watch the time here. It's fun speculation. I do not know if Pilate ever heard rumors of the resurrection witness.

It's fun if I wrote a bad novel. Maybe that would be my bad novel idea. Pilate hearing from someone. Remember that guy you sent to his death a week or two ago? You wouldn't believe what they're saying about him now, Pilate.

So sad wisdom may in a measure become a joyful wisdom. God doesn't leave us just in sad wisdom. He wants to finally give us joyful wisdom because he loves us.

The sad wisdom is just one step along this disclosure road. He's going to give us joyful wisdom, a deeply joyful wisdom.

[ 39 : 00 ] There it is. But providence remains. John Webster helps me a bit when he says that providence is a contrary doctrine.

I think that's a good simple sentence. The doctrine of providence when we really take it seriously it will contradict you. You'll find resistance to it. Oh, is that really the case?

Is that why that bad thing came in my life? This problem, this unexpected thing? We tend to forget the unexpected blessings easily. But we easily find the idea that God is infinitely wise in what he's doing.

in my life right now. We want to push back against that. Can that really be? Can it really be the action of the infinite wisdom of God to put his son Jesus under the authority of Pilate? It was his wisdom. It was his perfect wisdom to put his son Jesus under the authority of that strange lesser authority who sent Jesus to his death.

[ 39 : 59 ] authority to do it. As we see here in my brilliant message board, authority and power and providence may be distinguished, but they surely do have a very strong family resemblance.

authority, power and providence go together. I wanted to share as a head towards the end here. I want to give a good time for conversations. I gave you a gift this morning.

I hope you have it in front of you. It was handed out to you. This is underneath the Roman numeral five there.

This is the last paragraph from an essay entitled On the Theology of Providence by the late Professor John Webster.

He died at the age of 60 of a heart attack. One member of our congregation, one of our clergy who is now off to a parish near Los Angeles, he was on his way to do, he's finished his doctoral work now at St.

[ 41 : 22 ] Andrews. He was on his way, literally on his way to St. Andrews when he got the word that Mr. Webster had passed away of a heart attack at the age of 60. Very sad.

John Webster is a theologian who seems to have immense learnedness and wisdom, a lover of the gospel. Dan studied with Professor Webster at Wycliffe for a while.

Mr. Webster followed on from Rowan Williams as the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford. I don't know, I'm tempted to read it all, but I wonder if I should just highlight a couple of things.

You can read it at your leisure. Four lines down, about four lines down, Mr. Webster says, to embrace and trust ourselves to divine government is not resignation, but hopeful action towards the ends secured for us by a loving creator.

There's a sentence about providence that I think is just beautiful. I bore you by saying it one more time. To embrace and trust ourselves to divine government, may I say to divine authority, is not resignation.

[ 42 : 50 ] I tend to think of provinces, okay, I give up, that's God's way. No, it's not resignation at all, says our theologian, but hopeful action towards the end secured for us by a loving creator.

There is, it seems to me, a perfect gloss describing, not maybe explaining, our Lord as he stands before Pilate. It was his action to submit to Pilate's authority.

It was not resignation. He said, I'll embrace this moment that my father gives me, when this Roman governor has authority over me, I'll embrace it. I'll say amen.

This is the authority given him from above. But he trusted his father, his father with his glorious divine government was working some good out of this.

Oh, did he ever, as we know. There, that is, there's where the mystery of providence is at work. You can embrace it without resignation.

[ 43 : 58 ] It's God's will for me and I stand with it. It is, it may give me sad wisdom. It may give me a furtherance in knowing his approach in my life.

But it will be for my good. God is always good in what he does for us. A strong doctrine of providence embraces this.

It's very important. And perhaps as you stand, if I may be a bit pastoral to myself, if not for other people, perhaps today in your life you stand before some power that you don't know how to deal with.

But can you think God has given this moment of power, he's given it that power over me, but he has good purposes for me in it.

We've all heard this, all things work together for good. All things. It may be disease, it may be futility of some kind in your life, it may be just getting old and frail, it may be that I'm learning a lot of sad wisdom these days about myself.

[ 45 : 04 ] But belief in providence is to be a gospel form of hopeful action. It isn't just resignation, Mr. Webster is saying here. It will strengthen you to believe strongly in a doctrine of providence.

Weave it into your soul, as Mr. Flavel would say, with his amen to that truth. Here is, and now one more just a reference to these words in front of you.

Alma, down near the end, here is comfort to be learned, says Mr. Webster. I find this man wise. Here is comfort to be learned, he says, at the right pace, not too fast.

Maybe we try to learn the doctrine of providence too fast, lest we treat it lightly, if we learn it too fast. But we don't want to learn it, he says, too slowly, lest we be overtaken by melancholy. See the wisdom of God in providence, and in his use of authority. He comes along into our lives at just the right pace, even, and teaches us as we're able to learn this mystery of God's providence, in our lives.

[ 46 : 30 ] That seems to me deep, deep wisdom from Mr. Webster. Because of time, I really would commend you, just even though it's just a fragment, this last paragraph of a wonderful piece of meditation by a first-rate theological mind about the doctrine of providence.

Don't let the doctrine of providence sit idly. Embrace it. Think it through. Pray it through. Think about how God's authority and power are at work in your life through his providential action now.

There is a contrariness about it. We will fight with it, but it's wisdom. Sad wisdom at times, but it leads on to a joyful wisdom.

providence. This is a doctrine he quotes here. You see providence, he begins this, he loves to quote Calvin, providence is gospel consolation, ignorance of which is, Calvin tells us, the ultimate of all miseries.

That's a strong word from Calvin. Don't be a miserable Christian because you haven't thought about providence, Calvin is saying. Work that through and it will be good for you.

[ 47 : 48 ] there's a lot of words for you as we must move on to conversation time. There's a lot of words for you this morning. I apologize for so many words this morning, but that's part of how Learner's Exchange works.

Leaning much, as I've told you, on a demanding theological ethicist, Mr. O'Donovan, and a very demanding theologian. Mr. Webster is challenging.

He makes you work hard. Let me give the last word to Mr. Webster from our paragraph. No, he writes this, no small part of the office of dogma, what a theologian's office is, Mr. Webster tells you in other places in his writings, no small part of the office of dogma is to assist in learning the promises of God, describing them well, and letting them fill our sails.

Yes. Get the dogma of the Christian church on regarding providence and authority and power.

Work at it. It will fill your life's sails. Yes, God is at work in my troubles, my problems, my blessings.

He gives me sad wisdom, but He's going to lead me on to a joyful wisdom.

[ 49 : 20 ] So, may we learn about authority and power and providence under the authority and power and providence of the gospel as it works itself out in our lives.

And it does lead to a joyful wisdom. He gives us taste of joyful wisdom along life's way, doesn't He? Our God is good. He knows when that melancholy is not good for us and when we need encouragement.

He's good. God is a God of comfort. He's working these things out in history and in our own lives.

That's a lot of words from me today. But that's just how Learners Exchange works.

Alexander says, get up there and talk for 45 minutes. I'm going to say a word of prayer again and then please, please, questions, conversations, corrections, the whole thing.

Lord, we thank you for the gospel and its unfathomable richness. All wisdom and richness is in Jesus Christ.

[ 50 : 20 ] And Lord, we look to Him. What has been said here today, Lord, that's not helpful, just remove it from our hearts and minds. And if anything has been of value regarding the gospel, may it find a place in our lives.

Our God, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.