

License to Convert in a Post-Modern World

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Preacher: Bob Morris

[0 : 00] Now I want to welcome on your behalf Bob Morris, the reverend Dr. Bob Morris, who is living and working in Toronto now, but grew up in Nigeria, and he and Felix had a conversation this morning, and has worked with InterServe, a mission organisation in Pakistan and India and Cyprus, is still with that organisation, but is now helping to head up the work of the Intercultural Ministry Centre at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto.

And Bob, I asked you this in the last service, perhaps of all people in Canada, you have a global grasp of what's happening in mission work. What is God doing in the world today?

In a paragraph or less. I think the single most startling development in the last 30 to 50 years, which is gaining momentum, is the growth of the Church in the South, if you will, the two-thirds world Church, which is interesting in its vigour, its understanding of the Holy Spirit, its increasing purity, but above all, its impulse to share the Gospel against all odds.

And certainly for people in Canada who seem to be drawing back from obedience to the Great Commission, this is just a great encouragement. Within Canada, I think one of the most interesting developments just in the last five or six years is a growing pool of people who understand that they seem to be chosen by God to fulfil the Great Commission.

And that is many of you here who are described as 50-plus, fit, and wanting to finish well. Early retirees, people who are looking for ministry, people who have been financially stable and can anticipate this, and it's a growing number of people that we're sending overseas to great effect.

[2 : 02] We don't have anybody in that category, of course. But are you saying that people who are not church workers, not ministers, have some form of advantage overseas?

In the interest of truth, I have to tell you, I have neither a doctorate nor am I ordained. He was joking when he called me the Reverend Doctor, but that's what the paper in your hand said. But I will give you one.

I accept all honorary gifts. I am a high school teacher, and I am, let's say, symbolic of the people of InterServe, over 600 people who use their professional skills.

Few or none ordained. But professional people, nurses, teachers, engineers, nutritionists, everything you can imagine, find access to countries which say, missionary, go home, but the rest of you, please come and help us.

And we just have great access to nations that are otherwise closed to the gospel, and these are people who know the Lord Jesus and know how to share him with others. Can you give us some illustrations? Yeah, there are people that have been associated with St. John's recently.

[3 : 08] Dr. Don Curry and his wife Nancy went to Pakistan as medical doctors. Another person who attended here on and off was Dr. Ken Foster and his wife Winfer, who are in Afghanistan today.

Again, Afghanistan says no missionaries, but we have people like the Fosters who are doing a great job teaching arthroscopic surgery and sharing Christ.

And what's the work of Overseas Council? This is another mission organization, isn't it? And there's a leaflet in the bulletin. Yes. If you will notice, I won't have to say too much about it, but it is a great model of how the, let's say, our church in the West can join with the church in the two-thirds world without either being paternalistic or dependent.

Overseas Council collects money, if you will, from Canada, the United States, and elsewhere, and sends it to evangelical seminaries and Bible colleges which are developing the national leadership of countries in Europe, Asia, and Latin America, Africa.

Well, Bob, we welcome you and look forward to hearing what God will say through you. Thank you. I do really count it an honor to be in the St. John's pulpit this morning and thank David for his welcome to this congregation.

[4 : 31] As I was looking for any right I might have to be here, I want to mention the one thing that wasn't mentioned as Rector and I were talking, and that is I have the privilege to be a member of a general synod committee called Partners in Mission.

Interestingly, this is 15 people from across Canada who determine the mission budget, if you will, of the Anglican Church and discuss issues. And constitutionally they have to have one non-Anglican on the committee, and I have the privilege of being that ecumenical partner.

So I enjoy a worm's eye view of the Anglican Church of Canada. And I should tell you that next February the entire committee is coming to New Westminster to check you all out.

And I'm looking forward to that, because God's people are on that committee and elsewhere in the Anglican Communion. And I just, I really sincerely believe that a moment of crisis in the history of the Anglican Church of Canada is going to be a tremendous opportunity to call God's people back to him.

And I just pray that that will be the case. Let's look at God's word as I understand him to have given it this morning. Peter, a colleague of mine in Karachi some years ago, came from the United Kingdom to Pakistan because of two passions he had to a great degree.

[6 : 03] His first passion was a love for Jesus Christ. His second passion was a love for Muslims. And he had come to Pakistan giving up everything he had in any human sense in England in order to introduce Muslims to the Lord Jesus Christ.

But I remember vividly the day he came to me, absolutely crestfallen, really discouraged. He had met for the first time a privilege few of us have, and that is of meeting a Sufi.

Sufis are the mystic Muslims. They use devotional language and they write poetry, which we could probably express to the Lord Jesus, because what drives them is this deep longing to be one with Allah, and to unite with him in devotion.

And Peter had met this Sufi and had become overwhelmed as he engaged in conversation with this man, whom Peter said knew more about God than I did. And Peter had come to me and said, what right do I have to say anything to this man about God?

What right indeed? Jesus didn't seem to have any such doubts when he gathered together with his disciples on an obscure mountaintop in Galilee and said the words that were read to us in Matthew 28, 18.

[7 : 35] All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. And when Jesus said that, he was touching on the central issue almost of human existence.

It's as fresh and new as today's newspapers. It's as current as New Westminster. It's interesting to me that the Globe and Mail, quoting an associate of St. John's, even got it right.

When Leslie Bentley was quoted as saying, the whole problem in New Westminster goes to the heart of where the church derives its authority.

In fact, what authority does the bishop have to act? The same question was the case in the war in Iraq, where people said, on what authority does the United States invade and bomb Iraq?

And Canadians went on record as saying, well, we think you have the authority if the United Nations agrees that you have the authority. Jacques Chirac and others in Europe say, under what circumstances ever does the United Nations, no matter how unified, have the authority to declare war on a member nation of the United Nations?

[8 : 56] What is your authority? And from where does it come? These are questions that were asked of Jesus in his day because this question of authority was equally relevant in Jesus' day.

One day while Jesus was teaching in the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him and said, by what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?

I've got a microphone and you've only got your voice, so I'm okay. He declined on this occasion to respond to the Pharisees and the leaders of the Jewish people.

But on other occasions, he was happy to talk about his authority. One day when he told a man that his sins were forgiven, the religious leaders responded, blasphemy. And Jesus said to them, which is easier to say, your sins are forgiven, or to say, get up and walk?

You can imagine their mental answer. But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, he turned and said to the paralytic, get up, take your mat and go home.

[10 : 07] And the man did exactly that, which by implication meant Jesus had authority also to forgive sins. On another occasion, when Jesus was talking to his disciples, he discussed this question of authority.

And he said to his disciples in John chapter 10, verses 17 and 18, The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.

I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. And it wasn't just religious authority that was current in Jesus' day.

All kinds of other authorities competed for people's allegiances. The supreme political authority obviously resided in Rome, who dominated the Middle East.

But there was Hellenistic culture, too, throughout the Middle East in Jesus' day. And Hellenistic culture formed the worldview, the mind map, of most of the people in the Middle East with their Greek analysis and values and virtues.

[11 : 17] Then there was Herod, more intimately related to the Jews in Palestine. Who set himself up as the king of the Jews. Who in some way tried to exercise ethnic authority and presented himself to the Jews as a buffer between them and their aspirations for the state of Israel in opposition to Rome and its ultimate political authority.

All these authorities are represented in that sign that Pilate had put over the cross. King of the Jews, written in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew.

And it's in this context of competing authorities, of many people demanding people's allegiances, that Jesus addressed this ragtag group of obscure Jews living in an obscure province called Galilee.

And he made this awesome claim. The purpose this morning is not to discuss or dispute that claim. How do you argue with someone who has risen from the dead?

What is there to say? You may doubt him, you may leave him, but there really is no discussion because someone who has risen from the dead needs not defend himself in any way.

[12 : 37] What was particularly striking about Christ rising from the dead is the fact that he had predicted it. There's a story told of Babe Ruth who was visiting a young boy who was dying in palliative care in a hospital in Boston.

And in order to encourage the young lad, he said, listen, young man, I promise that when I play in the game this afternoon, I will hit a home run for you. And incredibly, Babe Ruth, in his first at-bat, pointed his bat to the far right field wall and proceeded to hit a home run out of the park.

It's really impressive when you call your shot and then produce it. And shots in snooker or billiards are far more impressive when you describe them before you do them than gloat after the fact.

And Jesus did this to great effect. He had already said at least three times to his disciples and to the general Jewish population, the Son of Man must be killed, but after three days he will rise again.

And he had done it. There is no disputing his right or his claim to that authority. John in his gospel, though, talks about another authority which Jesus had, which was indisputable.

[13 : 51] And he says in the prologue to his gospel, Through him all things were made. Without him nothing was made that has been made. When you create something, you own it.

You have authority over it. And when for some reason or other you lose that thing you have created and you buy it back with full price, you doubly have authority over it.

So we don't dispute Jesus' claim to ultimate authority. The challenge I want us to think about this morning is what does that authority look like when he passes it on to you and me?

That's where the problem starts. And Jesus does it in at least two ways. The first way is less of a problem than the second way. And the first way is this marvelous claim by John in John chapter 1 verse 12 that Jesus gives us the authority to become children of God.

to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right or the authority to become children of God.

[15 : 07] And this word authority is the same word he uses in Matthew chapter 28. Absolute authority. What an incredible gift God has given to us. And I'm reminded again of the verses in John chapter 17.

When he talks about our being children of God, he uses language that before this he is only used of himself and the Father and the Spirit. The intimacy of the triune God within themselves.

Self-sufficient. And yet, listen to these words as he talks to the Father in John 17 verse 20. My prayer is that all of them may be one Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.

May they also be in us. He's describing a level of intimacy and unity which we don't experience with each other on earth.

Because we have the right to be called the children of God, we are welcomed into the family of God. And when you know who you are in Christ Jesus, your sense of self-worth, your sense of security in your identity is absolutely unassailable.

[16 : 29] When you know you are known by God, when you know you are loved by God, when you know you are owned by God, you need do nothing out of fear or self-doubt.

Jesus knew this in a particular way as he approached the cross. And there are two verses juxtaposed in John chapter 13, which are really instructive for us as we consider what it means not only to have this first kind of authority but also the second.

John chapter 13 verse 3 says this about Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God.

Jesus knew before the cross even that he was the Son of God. That was his essential identity. And what did that allow him to do?

Become a king? The next verse says, Because he knew he was the Son of God, he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing and wrapped a towel around his waist.

[17 : 45] It's only when you know you are a child of God that you have the freedom to look like a servant. Without fear of becoming enslaved or obsequious. No shame, no fear of embarrassment, no fear of enslavement, no need for affirmation, no need to appear superior, no fear of being caught somehow in a matrix of not your doing and out of your control.

No need to fear even matrix reloaded or matrix revolutions. You know who you are, you are a child of the true and the living God.

and it brings us tremendous liberty then because we know who we are. It gives us freedom to serve other people without needing to compete or ask for attention or any need to be affirmed.

We're free to serve others and that is the authority which God in Christ Jesus gives to us this morning. Where do you stand?

have you received him? Have you believed in his name? If you have, rejoice in the knowledge that you are a child of God.

[19 : 08] If you have not, do not leave this place until you accept that authority freely given to you to be a child of God. God. It's one thing though to be given the authority to be something.

Particularly this marvelous gift of being a child of God. It's quite another thing then to be given the authority to do something. And here's where sometimes we get into trouble.

Here's where it gets tricky. Because Jesus said to the disciples after he claimed this authority, wherever you go, make disciples. Invite people to be an apprentice of me.

Invite people to be learners of me. And he challenges God's people to make disciples in contexts which are not conducive to it.

And maybe one of the least conducive contexts to making disciples is post-modern Canada. I've been around the world. In many places where the gospel is shunned, missionaries are forbidden.

[20 : 13] People have a hatred of everything Christian. But I sometimes wonder if it isn't harder to obey this command and accept this authority Jesus gives us to make disciples in Vancouver as it is in Saudi Arabia.

Canada has been called the first post-modern country in the world. I can't verify or dispute that, but what I see is a country which has values and attitudes which are clearly post-modern.

ever since the Trudeau era, in the 1960s, when we officially adopted a policy of multiculturalism, when our schools across Canada have systematically inculcated the value of tolerance and acceptance of people who look different from ourselves, as a result of an activist judiciary which has absolutized tolerance as defined by the Charter of Rights and freedoms.

And they define tolerance differently than you or I do. They are beginning to define tolerance as embrace, not just acceptance. And all those things combined with Canada's terminal niceness as people means we have become a very post-modern culture and country.

And in that context, it's difficult to make disciples. it's not all bad and I find personally so many of these things are liberating for people who want to talk about the love of God in Christ Jesus and invite people to follow him.

[21 : 48] Because spirituality has come to the fore and many are willing to discuss where once they didn't. We've reduced the rationalistic approach to life which was so deadening to the gospel.

But make disciples of all nations, all religions, and perhaps we with Peter this morning might say what right, what authority do I have to tell a Muslim or a Buddhist or a Hindu that in some way their faith, their religion is deficient and they should change their allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ.

What I told Peter that day off the top of my head, and I've run into trouble talking off the top of my head because there's not much left there. But I told Peter just in a sort of a burst of peace, Peter, you're a child of God, he has commanded you to share the gospel and make disciples, so get on with it even with the Sufi saint.

Peter wasn't impressed with that answer. I don't know if you aren't either. It smacks just a little bit of arbitrariness. witness. And you see, even knowing we have that authority, we have images and pictures of Christians over history and even currently around the world who run roughshod over people's sensibilities, who exercise some sort of cultural imperialism as we just, with all the confidence in the world and sort of a triumphalist attitude, seek to tell people about Jesus Christ.

A Brahmin in India once said to me, as a Canadian, he said, Bob, I am a priest of the highest caste in Hinduism.

[23 : 36] I am part of a religion that goes back 10,000 years whose origins are not even known. I live in a country with a history of 7 or 8,000 years of recorded history.

How do you a Canadian with no history at all, part of a religion at the most 2,000 years old? How do you presume to tell me anything about God?

What presumption indeed? And I'm just thankful that the man who said that in fact had been led to Christ by someone else and he was in fact a brother in Christ trying to communicate to me the feeling of people as we try to share Christ with them in other contexts.

Who indeed has the right unless we have been given that authority by the Son of God himself? Still, those unhappy images persist.

I'm reminded of the fact that when I first took over the reins from Dr. Daganji as director of InterServant Canada, he had written a booklet which I was responsible to get published. published. And I did so, proofed it, sent it to the printers, 5,000 copies were distributed across Canada.

[24 : 53] Unfortunately, I missed one typographical error in the opening line. And so this booklet said, God has called InterServ to discipline the nations. Now, that wasn't so bad except nobody even noticed it except one friend of mine, Russell Self, who phoned and said, Bob, I want to congratulate you on becoming a scourge of the nations.

But I don't think that's what was intended, and certainly that isn't what Christ wants. And I think we find the clue of how we are to exercise the authority which Jesus has in himself and which he transfers to us by his grace in his commissioning of the disciples that first resurrection Sunday afternoon or evening when he came to them and said, peace be to you.

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And the clue is in the whole concept of being sent.

Because anybody who is sent has two characteristics in common. And you think of the people who are sent. An ambassador is sent from one country to another to represent the government of that country.

General Tommy Franks was sent to Qatar to lead the troops in response to the sending by George W. Bush. Couriers who take messages and letters and packages are sent.

[26 : 22] And little boys who go to the country store to pick up a liter of milk for the family are sent. All those people, as different as they are, share two characteristics in common. Number one, they go with the authority of the sender.

number two, they go under the sender's authority. And those two qualities are what will save us as we seek to make disciples of all nations.

Think about it. First of all, when we go with authority, Peter says, who am I to share with this Sufi my understanding of the Lord Jesus Christ and his demand for exclusive obedience?

You are a child of God. And when you go in Jesus' name to the nations, you have with you all the authority in heaven and in earth that has been given to Jesus Christ.

And so you go fearlessly. And it's a challenge sometimes in some context to realize that I will never encounter any authority unseen or seen, wicked or good, which will exceed the authority that Jesus Christ claims.

[27 : 29] The disciples understood this. In Jerusalem, when the Sanhedrin called them to account for what they were doing, and Peter and John said to them, judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God.

You see, clashes are inevitable when authorities from God himself meet the authorities of this earth. But having the authority of Christ to make disciples is not authority to be stupid, stupid or obnoxious.

And we learn how to exercise that authority in a way that is effective, as powerful as it is. I'm reminded of our experience in Bhutan.

I don't know if you know where Bhutan is. It's with Afghanistan, my favorite country in all the world. It's living in the 17th century. It's a Tibetan Buddhist, the only Tibetan Buddhist country in the world.

About a million people nestled in the Himalayas between China and India, downrange from Nepal, just to locate it. It is exclusively Tibetan Buddhist, but they want to move into the 21st century.

[28 : 38] They don't want to become westernized or democratized. It's run by a king. But they do want an educational system, a medical system that serves their people's needs. So they invited in to serve on the leprosy mission and the Danish Santal mission to be part of this renewal of their national values and superstructure.

But they were smart. Most of the leaders in the government of Bhutan had been trained in missionary schools in India, so they knew exactly what our agenda was. And they said, if you want to serve, he even used the evangelical language, if you want to serve the Lord in Bhutan, you jolly well obey our rules or you won't be here to obey the word of the Lord.

So we said, okay, what are the rules? And we will follow them. We acknowledge their right to set rules for their country. First rule, you shall not proselytize.

And each person coming to Bhutan must sign personally that statement, I promise I will not proselytize. Of course, you learn over the years to make them define proselytize.

In Nepal, they said, thou shalt not proselytize. We had them define it. And they said, it's offering material incentives to change one's religion. So we promise not to pay any Nepalis to become Christians.

[29 : 56] In Bhutan, they're a little more clever because these guys knew Christianity. And Jigmeet Tinley, the young 33 year old man that was negotiating with us, said, number one, you will not preach publicly.

Number two, you will not build churches. Number three, you will not distribute any Christian literature. Would you sign the document? Oh, yes.

No mention of the Holy Spirit. No mention of private conversations. No mention even of Bible studies in your home. And I asked them specifically because we wanted to know how much freedom we had.

I said, you know why we're coming to Bhutan, whatever your agenda is. Do I have the right to explain to Bhutanese people why I've come to Bhutan from our Holy Scriptures? And he paused because he knew where that was going.

And he said, yes, yes, just don't tell me about it. And the marvelous thing was by acknowledging the authority of the government of Bhutan and obeying ourselves, and yet also speaking with the authority we had in Jesus Christ, the church grew from zero known believers in Bhutan in 1974 to 2,000 believers 13 years later.

[31 : 12] That church continues to grow. And it's a persecuted church. But the authority of Christ has given us the right and the privilege of making disciples in Bhutan.

You have authority to make disciples wherever you go. Whether it's Bhutan or Saudi Arabia or Mongolia or Africa or Latin America or even Vancouver.

which is a tough one. The others are easy by comparison. Is this arrogant? In a postmodern world, should anybody make absolute truth claims or worse, absolute authority claims?

Perhaps this is where the gospel of Christ confronts postmodernism most. But isn't there a danger that we go into the world with superiority complex? Knowing who has sent us and what authority we have?

Not really. Because not only do we go with Jesus' authority, we go under his authority. His agenda is our agenda. Even more, his modus operandi is ours.

[32 : 23] We go as he went. As the Father sent him, so we go. James and John tried to do it differently. Do you remember that incident where Jesus asked them to go ahead into a village in Samaria and prepare the way for Jesus' disciples to come and preach the gospel?

Well, unfortunately, the village in Samaria would have none of it. And so, James and John came back to Jesus and said, Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?

They were feeling a little bit of moxie with all that authority Jesus had given to them. They wanted to obliterate the enemy. You can imagine what went through Jesus' mind.

But all Luke says is Jesus turned and rebuked them and then went on. That is not the way to exercise the authority that God has given to us.

We come under his authority. We work the way he did. On another occasion, the disciples, at least the mother of James and John, came to Jesus and asked him to give them a prominent place when he came into his kingdom.

[33 : 31] Jesus, again, must have been heartbroken to see this kind of value system operating, the value system of the world. And so he called them together, and this is what he said. You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lorded over them.

Their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. When you leave here this morning, promise me you will write those four letters out and put them somewhere prominent in your home.

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The license to convert, the authority to make disciples wherever we go, is not an authority to be obnoxious or insensitive.

The best definition I've heard ever comes from an Indian theologian with whom I disagree on most of his theology. But he defined mission. D.T. Niles defined mission this way.

[34 : 44] Mission is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. That's the job, and that's the attitude with which we go into the world. So what do you say to Peter in Karachi in relation to the Sufi?

You say to Peter, keep telling him about Jesus, because you've been with Jesus, and he's told you to do that. But do it humbly.

You approach this man under the authority of Jesus. You talk to him as Jesus would have talked to him, and yet you do it fearlessly, because you go with his authority.

And what does Jesus say to St. John's this morning? As the Father has sent Jesus, so Jesus sends you to make disciples wherever you go.

Do not fear Canada's secularism, or political correctness, or mockery of virtue, or just disinterest.

[35 : 50] You have been an authority to speak, and you go into the streets of Vancouver with his authority. But you go humbly.

And you seek only the best of those to whom you talk. Because you go under his authority. And my prayer is that will be the case as you leave this place this morning.

Amen.