

“The Challenge and Blessing of Unauthorized Ministry”

Numbers 11:4–6, 10–16, 24–29; Mark 9:38–50

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

September 29, 2024

One thing I have learned while serving churches in three states is that there are different requirements for who can perform marriages. In some states, like Virginia, a minister must be licensed, which means you pay a fee, and they take a picture of your ordination certificate. This goes back to the colonial period when at first only Anglican clergy could perform marriages, and later others were allowed to be licensed. While Presbyterians and Methodists complied, Baptists refused, saying that to allow the state to license them was to acknowledge authority the state did not have over the church. Our ancestors were feisty folk!

In Kentucky, a minister must be ordained and bonded to perform a marriage, while in North Carolina we just have to be ordained. When I was doing research in advance of Ian and Brittany’s wedding in Memphis, I learned the quirky history of Tennessee law. It used to be that any ordained minister qualified, but then people questioned the substance of some ordination certificates. You can obtain them through the mail, which prompted a man to get one for his cat. In response to this reality, a law was passed requiring proof of education, but some people thought that was too rigid, so another law was passed saying no officer of the court could question the credentials of any clergyperson.

It may seem like much ado about nothing, but the state has a legitimate interest in the people to whom it entrusts authority, and so does the church. Unauthorized ministry can damage the church just as much as non-credentialed people acting in ways that affect legal matters like marriage can harm society. And yet, expectations and laws can be too rigid, and sometimes there are benefits to unauthorized ministry.

Two of our texts today illustrate this reality. In the reading from Numbers, Moses has had it, again, with the whining bunch of ingrates he is trying to lead to the Promised Land. He even says he’d rather die than

continue to put up with their endless demands. Instead of giving Moses what he asks for, however, God pours out the spirit on seventy elders to help Moses accomplish his work, which is great!

The problem is two additional people end up receiving the spirit too, apparently by accident, and they start prophesying like the others, whereupon Joshua goes to Moses and asks him to stop these unauthorized fellows. But Moses says, “Hold on a minute... Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put the spirit on them!”

Something similar happens in the reading from Mark. John says, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.” In other words, the person is unauthorized, he needs to be stopped! But Jesus says, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.”

In both stories, unauthorized ministry presents a challenge. Should it be done? Should it be allowed? But in both instances, the spiritual leader — first Moses, then Jesus — says, “Don’t stop them! We can use all the help we can get.” More than this, in both instances, while the assumption is that work outside the box of our approval is invalid, not of God, these two central leaders suggest otherwise. The two extras in Numbers, Eldad and Medad, have received God’s spirit, after all, and Jesus says explicitly, “If they are not against us, they are for us.” God’s realm is bigger than we think, they say, we have more partners in sacred work than we realize, and these partners are a blessing!

So, what is the message for us in these texts. We should first acknowledge the legitimacy of being concerned about unauthorized ministry. For ministry with our name attached to it but without our involvement in it can misrepresent us in ways that are damaging to our witness and the work of the Gospel.

I have known of individuals who pursued ministry on their own, visiting in hospitals and nursing homes, and claiming to represent a certain church they may have been a member of but without any formal blessing from that church, and without any education or training for

ministry. Freelance pastoral care offered without any preparation is not always a good thing. There are reasons why some hospitals require verification of clergy credentials for those visiting their patients. “Do no harm” is the first rule of care. We don’t want people doing things in our name without our awareness and blessing.

And there are other ways our name can be tarnished. Members of Westboro Baptist Church from Topeka, Kansas came with their ugly signs to protest during Elizabeth Edwards’ funeral at Edenton Street United Methodist Church on December 11, 2010. There were only a handful of them — the counter-protest group was much larger — but their sheer meanness attracts national attention, and the location they were given to hold their protest was at the corner of Salisbury and Edenton Streets, right in front of our church sign. We were not able to have them moved. So, we covered up our sign. We didn’t want their hostility attached to our name. We are the Baptist church that hosted Toy Joy that very same day, serving a thousand children and their families, not the spewers of hatred!

Another threat to our reputation comes from the political platform some evangelicals have built, supporting racism, hostility to immigrants, and disdain to women and LGBT people, while turning a blind eye to every kind of indiscretion committed by favored politicians. We try to speak to public issues without being partisan, respecting the boundaries of the First Amendment. They don’t care about boundaries, they openly favor party and candidate, and they presume to speak for all evangelicals, indeed all Christians. We didn’t authorize their work, and thus they don’t speak for us, but most Americans think they do.

All of this is to say there are legitimate concerns with unauthorized ministry, with people claiming to speak and act on behalf of us as a church, Baptists, evangelicals, and Christians without our blessing. Damage can be done to our witness and the Gospel itself.

However, not all unauthorized ministry is problematic. Just because we didn’t commission and bless an endeavor doesn’t mean it isn’t helpful or holy. God works in many ways beyond our imagination, and it is always good to have help in this world of many needs.

Moses says, “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put the spirit on them!” Jesus says, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.”

I think of a bishop who participated in an interfaith prayer service at a baseball stadium in New York right after 9-11. A group in his diocese started a movement to depose him because by participating, they said, he was recognizing the legitimacy of the prayers of others (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, p.118, Harry B. Adams).

Who is authorized to pray? Only “us,” of course, whoever “we” are, Christians, and the right kind of Christians, at least according to some people. When Bailey Smith was president of the Southern Baptist Convention, he said God does not hear the prayers of Jews. It’s just one more reason we left the SBC long ago! Jesus was Jewish... and he said whoever is not against us is for us. It seems like he would be in favor of praying with all who want to offer prayers to God, especially after an event like 9-11.

I also think of a Christian preschool teacher who works with a Muslim preschool teacher in a part of sub-Saharan Africa where Christians and Muslims don’t often work together. This Muslim woman was mentored by a Catholic nun who, like her, was willing to work with people outside her faith to address common concerns. The Christian and Muslim teachers address the needs of hundreds of children every year, and when it comes to matters of faith, the children receive guidance in their tradition. One might say the Christian teacher is working with an unauthorized person; she would say whoever is not against us is for us.

The same principle applies to work that is done by churches of other traditions, and sometimes very loosely formed groups that don’t seem to connect with any tradition, groups that might feed hungry people or work on Habitat Houses. When they come alongside us and help to accomplish important work, it is possible to embrace their efforts without having to control them or place them in any box.

There may be a parallel to a big part of what is wrong with our political system right now. Rather than people of good faith and different convictions finding a way to address common problems like

gun violence and border security, usually each party wants to make sure the other does not get credit for anything good. Only if the idea comes from one of “us” can we embrace it.

We can see the folly in this thinking on the stage of politics, but can we see it in the spiritual world? Who cares who gets credit? It’s all ultimately God’s realm anyway. We don’t have to OK or bless every good deed or doer of the deed. Not every sacred servant needs to be authorized by us.

I remember the day a man in Richmond, Virginia came to talk to me about starting a church in a housing project near the church I served. He talked to a number of other pastors too and the associational director. He wasn’t asking for financial support, just prayers, and perhaps participation in some of his efforts over time.

Most people thought he was crazy. He had no endorsement or support. He was starting a church in the poorest and most violent part of our city. And he wanted to provide childcare, job training, security, everything the people needed to thrive. How could it be sustained? But he felt a calling, and there were 700 hundred children there. Well, he is retired now, but thirty years later, the ministry is thriving. He wasn’t authorized or blessed by any entity, but his ministry was transforming.

In the end, while there are good reasons to ask questions about ministry we know nothing about, we might want to remember that Jesus’ ministry was not authorized. He didn’t have the blessing of any of the established religious groups — Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, or zealots. As far as we know, he didn’t study with any of the known rabbis, the parallel to modern day theological education at seminaries and divinity schools. And he didn’t have a congregation; in fact, he was run out of town after he spoke briefly at his home synagogue in Nazareth!

Jesus was clearly unauthorized in terms of institutional faith. Yet he had the blessing of God, and that was what mattered most then, as it is to this day. Perhaps we should leave room for what God is doing in the world today that falls outside the boundaries of the traditional church and give thanks for it.