



The Authority of the Church in the World
A Policy Statement of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA
Adopted by the NCC Governing Board, November 9, 2010, in New Orleans

The purpose of this policy statement is to address the following question: How can the churches bear effective—authoritative—witness to the gospel in a society filled with competing voices, in an era when authority itself is suspect, and at a time when the churches themselves are so obviously divided? In 1951, one year after its founding, the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC) adopted a policy statement on the implications of Christian faith for public life and the churches’ “corporate influence in the nation and in the world” (The National Council of Churches Views its Task in Christian Life and Work). The statement exudes a confidence that the churches, acting as council, would be taken seriously by the wider society, that statements issued by the NCC, while not determinative of public policy, could help shape the course of public debate on significant issues of the day. Sixty years later, the churches’ relationship to social-political life has dramatically changed! This statement explores the implications of that shift for contemporary churches in the United States, and it highlights the foundations for common action by the churches together as the NCC.

This policy statement is based on a longer study—also entitled “The Authority of the Church in the World”—completed by the NCC’s Faith and Order Commission in 2007. The full study, along with background papers written by representatives of various communions, addresses the question of authority in far greater depth and breadth—and deserves serious attention in the churches.

Engagement with the World

There is no single, normative ecclesiology in the NCC. In fact, “the Church” can mean different things to different communions: even with the accepted ecumenical distinction between the universal Church and particular churches, some take “the Church” as referring to their own communion, while others understand it as a broader family of communions. The member communions have also been shaped by different histories, contexts, and theological traditions, and thus have developed somewhat different perspectives on the relationship of church and world. The churches have, however, been influenced by one another as a result of their ecumenical interaction. For example, the “mainline” Protestant churches, having lost their favored place at the center of American culture, now express their prophetic witness more through confrontation with society—a position long associated with Anabaptist and Free

churches. Meanwhile, the Anabaptist and Free churches seem to have gained from their traditionally more mainstream partners a greater appreciation for the potentially transformative role of the Church as participant in the social-political order.

All of the churches, Faith and Order has found, can affirm that the Church is *in* the world though not *of* it (John 17:11, 16), that it has a mandate to bear witness publicly to the key values of the gospel. The churches agree that it is appropriate to make use of existing social-political structures in order to promote social transformation in ways consistent with the love Christians have known in Jesus Christ, but also that they should not refrain from challenging such structures when needed. The question, then, is not *whether* the Church should be engaged with the world but *how* it can do so most effectively and faithfully. How does the Church speak and act in the public arena with an authority consistent with the Gospel it proclaims?

Challenges to Authoritative Witness

This question is complicated by challenges, both external and internal, to the churches' capacity to speak and act with authority in the world. One external challenge—very familiar by now, especially to western Christians—stems from the Enlightenment. Modern science has helped call into question the traditional Christian narrative of creation-fall-redemption; and, as a result, Christian faith has been reduced for many to a private quest for meaning, irrelevant to public debates about the common good. The Enlightenment's affirmation of the individual has also led to a rampant individualism which locates authority only in the self, disparaging the idea of obedience, even if freely given, to that which comes from outside.

Another external challenge, relatively new to the United States, is an ever-more dynamic religious pluralism in which various religions increasingly claim the spiritual devotion of our neighbors. The multitude of voices now heard in public discourse has contributed to a "post-modern" suspicion of all overarching narratives, a questioning that undercuts any claim to speak with authority. There is much to celebrate in this, since those with power have often declared their view of the world to be "universal"—authoritative—and foisted it off on others. But the challenge such developments pose for the church is unmistakable.

Both of these developments have contributed to what is often called the "disestablishment" of the mainline Protestant churches. Of course, the separation of church and state means that all churches in the U.S. context have had to influence the social-political environment through persuasion rather than direct control; but, historically, some churches have had far greater influence than others, and their culturally-favored position has enabled them to speak with authority in this society. That era has now clearly ended. Indeed, while the majority of NCC member communions never experienced such status in this country, nevertheless the mainline

churches and all of the other member churches along with them are surely affected by the fact that American society no longer seemingly gives deference to Christian teaching.

Other challenges, more painful to recount, are internal to the Church itself. Individual Christians, nurtured in the churches, have made a mockery of the Gospel message through their participation in such horrors as slavery and the decimation of Native American communities. Perhaps more troubling, the corporate Church has, at times, used its influence to endorse policies and practices of racism, religious intolerance, gender inequality, environmental degradation, neglect of the poor, and aggressive violence. The effect of this on the churches' authority in the world is incalculable; and the churches' credibility is further eroded by the spectacle of Christian disunity. How can the Church be taken seriously when, for example, parts of it counsel non-violence while other parts support the government's call to arms? The ecumenical movement has always insisted that unity does not mean uniformity; the churches cannot be expected to agree on all matters. It is difficult, however, for the Church to act with authority, to proclaim the Gospel with credibility, when the churches speak with such conflicting voices on major issues of the day.

The Meaning of Authority

Consideration of these challenges needs to begin with a definition of terms. Authority is often defined in terms of legality or power; but, properly understood, the authority of the church does not come from coercive power or legal sanction. Any power it claims to possess derives ultimately from its relationship, its communion, with God. Put more precisely, the Church is called to bear witness to the authority of *God and Jesus Christ* in the world.

It almost goes without saying that the Church has, at numerous points in its history, been vested with legal power through association with the state or other political entity. Such "authority," however, is extrinsic (dependent on historical conditions), whereas genuine authority is intrinsic. It has to do with the Church's essential nature and purpose as a community called forth by God. Indeed, the original meaning of the word "authority" has more to do with "the churches' ability to legitimately or rightfully influence opinion and actions" (Authority of the Church in the World, II.7). Ultimately an expression of knowledge, wisdom, and truth, "the Church's intrinsic authority derives from and witnesses to the authority of the triune God" (Authority of the Church in the World, II.8). It is the experience of God, through Jesus and the Spirit, that gives meaning to the authority possessed by the Church.

In 1950, the churches that together constitute the NCC surely had more worldly power than they do today, but it can be argued whether they had more authority. Many Christians may lament the loss of such a position, but this should not be confused with

the more foundational issue of the Church's authority in the world. The authority of the Church in the world is not an authority of worldly power, but one that reveals in holiness and truth the love of God through faithful acts of healing and forgiveness and reconciliation. "The Church finds its nature...as the body of Christ's disciples, seeking to fulfill the will of the Father by the power of the Spirit so as to embody and to further the redemption, reconciliation, and justice of the reign of God in the world" (Authority of the Church in the World, II.24).

Seen in biblical perspective (which is extensively examined in the study paper), all authority ultimately rests in God, who manifests it through the giving of creation and the calling of a people to be witnesses to what God has done. This authority, Christians confess, is uniquely present in Jesus, and then in the disciples as they are empowered by the Holy Spirit. The disciples have no authority on their own; they exercise authority in Jesus' name and as witnesses to his saving words and deeds. In this sense, they are Christ's "ambassadors" (2 Cor 5:20), authorized to be representatives of Christ that through them the world may perceive Christ's authority. The New Testament is clear that such authority is, paradoxically, the authority of servanthood, exercised through loving concern for others, not dominion over them.

The application of this to the life of the Church is obvious. The Church's authority is rooted in its identity as the People of God, the Body of Christ, the New Creation of the Holy Spirit—a community of human beings called to embody and enact the graciousness it has received. The authority of the Church does not *depend* on the holiness of its members and ministers or the quality of its fellowship; there is an authority to the Word and Sacraments that goes beyond those who proclaim and administer. But the Church can surely obscure God's authority by failing to reflect the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

Shared Affirmations

Through the work of Faith and Order, representatives of the churches have identified a number of shared affirmations stemming from the understanding of the Church's authority outlined above. For the sake of brevity, some of these affirmations are summarized below in ten points.

1. If the Church is to speak and act with authority, it must first and foremost be the Church—a community that worships God, nurtures its members in a way of life marked by Christ's compassion, and seeks to proclaim and live in such a manner that others will experience the truth of the Gospel. As noted above, this Good News certainly has implications for the life of any society; and for this reason, the Church will join with others in serving the poor, protecting the environment, promoting peace. But only the Church can be the Church. Its authority is wrapped up in the integrity of being what it is.

2. A primary way that the Church participates in the transformation of society is through the faithful vocation of individual Christians. This has always been so; but in an era distrustful of institutions, the personal witness of Christians takes on even greater importance. In this sense, careful attention to Christian education, to the formation of disciples of Christ, is central to the authority of the Church in the world.

3. If the Church's witness is to be authentic—and, thus, to have intrinsic authority—it must be based on the commonly-recognized sources of Christian proclamation: namely, Scripture, Tradition, and the revelatory experience of God as tested in the life of the community. The churches of the NCC do not fully agree on what weight should be given to these sources of authoritative teaching, but they can affirm that each church is accountable for explaining, in the dialogue of the community, how it has arrived at its theological and moral convictions. (This question of authority *in the Church* is dealt with more extensively in the study paper and related materials, which can be found on the NCC website, at www.nccusa.org/faithandorder/).

4. In order for the Church's witness in the world to have authority, the churches must address the internal challenges named above, including the glaring problem of Christian division. Faith and Order's stated mission—"to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ"—is, therefore, crucial to the entire NCC as it seeks to offer public witness on behalf of peace and justice.

5. Experience demonstrates the power of the Gospel, proclaimed in and by the Church, to transform lives and to engender a hunger for justice that can, ultimately, transform societies. Churches, acting together, have effectively promoted such things as civil rights and universal public education, and have effectively opposed child labor and capital punishment. They have acted with authority in responding to natural disasters and in founding hospitals and schools. Christians, nurtured in the church, have displayed habits of generosity and volunteerism that are a strength of American society. Experience also shows, however, that the churches can be co-opted by governments—becoming complicit in such things as colonialism, conquest, and the slave trade—and that authority can be exercised in abusive ways. For this reason, leaders in the churches must be attentive to reform movements that periodically arise to challenge the corruption that undermines the Church's witness. Such movements are almost by definition minority efforts, as when the Society of Friends stood boldly against slavery in eighteenth century America. All of this means that the Church, if it would speak and act with authority in the world, must be open to re-examining and, if need be, modifying past positions. To use only one example, churches historically associated with a "just war" position are reconsidering whether war can ever be justifiable in an era of weapons of massive destruction, while historically pacifist churches seem to be rethinking their traditional disengagement from the sphere of politics.

6. The Church needs leaders in the community of faith; but the Church generally speaks with authority when the people of the Church say “Amen” to decisions about its witness, and embody these decisions in the way they live. The Church’s authority is also surely enhanced when the face it shows to the world reflects the diversity of all God’s people.

7. Having mentioned the significance of community, it is important to add that, throughout Christian history, the Spirit has empowered prophetic individuals to speak God’s word to the world. These individuals often challenge as well the institutional structures of the Church, calling both church and society to conform more closely to the Gospel. Yet their witness, however prickly it may sometimes seem, is an indispensable dimension of the authority of the Church in the world.

8. Paradoxically, the Church’s authority in the world is likely enhanced when it not only speaks to the surrounding society, but listens humbly and carefully to it. As a human community, the Church has much to learn from others; and God may even use them to chastise the Church, summoning it back to its own role as participant in God’s mission of reconciliation and liberation. It follows that the Church may at times best exercise its authority through partnership with other religious communities. It does not compromise the proclamation of the Gospel to enact the love of Christ through common cause with Jewish or Muslim or other neighbors who also care for creation, seek to protect society’s most vulnerable members, and advocate for peace.

9. For the Church to have authority, its proclamation must, of course, be matched by action. Authority, as noted above, is grounded in theological discernment and communion among the parts of Christ’s body. But the authority of the Church arises from *koinonia* (communion) that is channeled to the world in the form of *kerygma* (proclamation) and *diakonia* (service). These classic elements of the church are inseparable in any adequate understanding of it.

10. The Church’s witness is authoritative to the extent that it witnesses to the hope not just of another world, but of this world made other. This is not to minimize the importance of personal salvation in the teaching of the church; but it is to say that, seen in biblical perspective, hope is incomplete if it does not include the vision of God’s reign on earth as it is in heaven. Whatever role the Church plays in the world’s transformation, God will fulfill the promises of that time when no infant lives but a few days, when no one labors in vain, and when even the wolf and lamb feed together (Isaiah 65). The Church has authority in the world when it lifts up such a vision, refusing to accept what is as the way things ought to be.

The Authority of a Council of Churches

The English word “council” can refer to the governing body of a particular communion

or to a gathering of the ancient Church which spoke with authority on matters of faith and practice. In the present context, however, “council of churches” refers to a voluntary association of separate and autonomous communions through which the members seek to manifest their fellowship with one another, to engage in common witness and service, and to advance toward the goal of full visible unity. Properly understood, there is no external entity called “council” that speaks for or to the churches, because the essence of any council is the commitment of the churches to speak and act together to the extent possible. The Constitution of the NCC refers to this commitment as a “covenant.” It is a way of affirming that the members are mutually accountable to one another because they recognize that they are commonly accountable to Christ. It is a way of expressing their intention, to echo the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, “to stay together.”

It is worth repeating that the governing bodies of councils do not make decisions that are binding on the members. By entering into the covenant, however, a church says, in effect, that it will seek, whenever possible, to join with other member churches in offering shared witness to the Gospel in the world. Behind this is the assumption that when the churches speak and act together their words and actions may well carry more authority and credibility than that of churches speaking and acting in isolation. The fellowship of a council is not an adequate expression of the unity for which Christ prayed (John 17:21) or about which Paul repeatedly wrote; but it is an attempt, however partial, to overcome the scandal of division and, thus, strengthen the credibility of the churches.

It follows that councils should be that space where churches together address the most divisive issues of the day in order to learn from one another, to challenge one another, and, through this process of shared study and dialogue, to discern God’s will together as a basis for more authoritative proclamation. A council actually lessens the authority of its witness in the world to the extent that it acts solely like another social justice coalition or identifies itself with partisan political positions. Its authority is that of churches acting and speaking, in harmony, as participants in the mission of God—to whom be glory forever.