

Preston Nelson

A NEW AUTHORITY

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Pastor, Oxford Presbyterian Church on February 2, 2003
Mark 1:21-28

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

We live in a wildly unpredictable world as the Space Shuttle Columbia tragedy reminds us. We never know what's going to happen, therefore we always need to be prepared. The Boy Scout motto is, "Be prepared!" and today is Boy Scout Sunday. Jesus, like a good scout, was always prepared. Our Scripture lesson gives an example of how prepared Jesus was for unpredictable events. Jesus had been teaching in a synagogue. Worshipers "were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.'" I don't think I'd be prepared to handle something like that in our worship service. But Jesus was prepared. Jesus "rebuked" the man, "saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!'" The "unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him." If anybody had managed to fall asleep, they were awake by now – and wild eyed.

Now something strange happens. Some people say, "What is this? A new teaching – with authority?" What an understatement! A man interrupts an ordinarily stayed, traditional, worship service, let's out a bone-chilling shriek, falls convulsing on the floor and people say, "What is this? A new teaching?" Tom Long says his congregation would be terrorized if something like that happened. They'd rush for the nearest exit or call out for God to save them. The last thing you'd expect anyone to say is, "What is this, a new teaching? An innovation in Christian Education?"

Yes, it was an innovation in Christian education. Jesus was an innovator in that, unlike previous teachers, he taught with authority. He wasn't seminary trained, he had no official credentials, but he knew how to keep people's attention. Jesus didn't just lecture about "unclean spirits", he cast them out. Jesus was different, unique – captivating. When we think of a teacher, we're apt to think of a professor in a herringbone suit with vest standing behind a podium and lecturing. Teachers obviously need a university degree and the correct credentials. But Jesus had no credentials – and yet he taught as if he had. He taught with authority. His teaching was Christian education that changed peoples' lives.

Over a hundred years ago, a man named Lord Baden Powell introduced the Boy Scout movement as an innovation in Christian education that has changed the lives of thousands of Boys. He cast out no demons, but he was able to reach many young men who'd never been in Sunday school. Baden Powell was the son of an Anglican clergyman. He was a liberal Christian -- and an outspoken critic of religious intolerance. He maintained that "duty to God" should be open to all different religions and carried out so not as to put down other religions. The Boy Scouts was not and is not a Christian organization, nevertheless, like public schools a hundred years ago, the Boy Scouts movement, *de facto*, became an outreach of the Church's Christian education ministry. Many local churches organized Scout troops in the early days of the Scouting movement. Of the 7,375 registered troops at the close of 1915, more than 4,000 were chartered to Protestant churches, and 1,645 Scoutmasters were ministers. The Presbyterian Church, in 1918, gave recognition to the values of Scouting as a resource for the churches in their youth ministries.

Lord Baden Powell dreamed up the Boy Scout movement as a Christian education innovation. He noticed that few young boys had any interest in Sunday school or Christian worship. There was a feeling that church was for women. Baden Powell wanted to change that perception. He advocated what was then known as "masculine Christianity." Scouting was a new teaching -- with authority. Baden Powell placed a special value on adventure, on children and young people working together and taking responsibility and developing self-sufficiency and on 'learning through doing'. Scouts camped, learned about Native American culture and religion, and became proficient in home repairs, canoeing, swimming and first aid within a quasi-Christian movement. For many boys, participating in a troop was, *and still is*, the first time they set foot in a church.

The Scout Law says that a Scout is reverent. He is faithful in his religious duties *and respects the convictions of others in matters of custom and religion.*" When I was in Scouting in the fifties, our troop would camp out for the weekend at Camp Rodney on the Chesapeake Bay. On Sunday morning, we always had church. Our Scoutmaster, Joe McGloughlin, was a pipe smoking Irish Roman Catholic. He roused all the Catholic boys early on Sunday morning and took them to Mass in Northeast. What impressed me about Joe (the first adult I ever addressed by his first name) was that he was lots of fun -- *but he was also reverent*. Reverence and fun don't always go together. Our assistant Scout Master, Mr. Myers, was an elder in my church. He led

the Sunday worship service for Protestant boys. We'd read scripture, sing hymns, pray, and Mr. Myers would give a short talk I found more understandable than my own minister's sermons. He wasn't a learned man but he spoke from his heart. He taught with the authority of Christian experience — sometimes he'd even weep as he told us about God and Jesus and right and wrong.

Lord Baden Powell, the founder of Boy Scouts, died on 8 January 1941. In his belongings was his last message to Scouts throughout the world: Dear Scouts, I want to send you a parting word of goodbye. Remember, it is the last time you will ever hear from me, so think it over. I have had a most happy life and I want each one of you to have a happy life too. I believe God put us in this jolly world to be happy and enjoy life. Happiness doesn't come from being *rich*, or merely from being *successful in your career*, or by *self-indulgence*. One step towards happiness is to make yourself healthy or strong while you are a boy, so that you can be useful and enjoy life when you are a man. Nature Study will show you how God has filled this world with so many beautiful and wonderful things for you to enjoy. Be content with what you have. Try to leave this world a little better than you found it when it comes to your turn to die. Don't waste your time. Do your best. *Be Prepared* in this way, to *live* happy and *die* happy — stick to your Scout Promise *always* — even after you have ceased to be a boy — and God help you to do it."

His last message is hardly a Christian sermon. He doesn't mention Jesus or salvation or the Bible. And the God he refers to is the God of nature rather than the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, his message echoes Christ's authoritative and innovative teaching. Our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy life. Wealth and worldly success don't bring happiness. Nature contains many signposts that can point us to the God, the Father of Jesus. With Saint Paul he says, "Be content with what you have." And be prepared, by God's help, for the unexpected.

Gracious God. We're thankful for the life of Lord Baden-Powell and his work in starting the Scouting movement. We're grateful for the opportunities to serve their god and country that Scouting has given millions of youth. Thank you for the adults who volunteer as Scout leaders. May no one who wishes to be a member of Scouting miss the opportunity to join. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.