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# Authority: How Far Should I Follow?

Perhaps the only thing more difficult than being a good leader is being a good follower. Many books, like this one, have written thousands of lines defining Christian leadership. But few lines, in much fewer books, define *followership*.

From a leadership perspective, is that even a good question? In the sense of the New Testament, it seems it is. As has been stated, the True Leader of the Church is its Head—Christ. All men and women, under Him, are subject to Him. While we have noted that matters of leadership and authority are confused in the traditional church, in the New Testament the ultimate authority is with the Chief Shepherd, and leaders and believers alike are under Him. Therefore, in order to be a good leader we need to also understand how to follow . . . and keep following . . . in order to lead properly.

To this point we have suggested that pastors are not prophets—nor are they preachers. They are brothers who have taken on leadership responsibilities as player-coaches. They are both part of the brotherhood—called *sheep* in the New Testament, and they are elders who pastor and teach—called *pastor-teachers* in the same Testament. Further, their message is one of grace and freedom.

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Their goal and motivation is to establish the assembly in matters of obedience to God, and service to others—because of their own obligation and love of the Savior. But what about matters of authority, and accountability?

### **THINKING PROPERLY: CRITICAL MINDS, NOT CRITICAL HEARTS**

Just as everything we *do* is a reflection of what we *desire* or *expect*, so everything we *expect* is a result of what we *think*. Therefore, thinking leads to expecting which leads to doing. In that sense, authority in the Church is best understood by, first, how we are to think, and its relationship to our expectations.

To date, we have agreed with John Murray concerning the strategic place of eldership in the assembly:

*The only permanent institution for government is the eldership, the presbyterion. In some way or other, this institution is the means whereby corporate government is to be effected. We should keep in mind that the gifts Christ bestows are for the good, for the edification of the whole body.<sup>1</sup>*

While the apostles had unique, and foundational, roles for the Church, and while the Timothy's and the Titus's performed an intermediate role between the apostles and the elders, the New Testament affirms by its terms for leaders, and its texts about leaders, that church leaders are elders who pastor and teach the flock.

But what about authority? Authority is the strapping sibling to ambition—in its generally conceived sense. Authority is usually defined as “a power or right to direct others.” Ambition means, literally, “to canvas for promotion.” Power and promotion are the hand-in-glove partners-in-crime in command structures of the world.

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But, in a biblical sense, is authority the power or right of position—”my way, or the highway?” Historians may disagree:

*One of the outstanding ironies of history is the utter disregard of ranks and titles in the final judgments men pass on each other. The final estimate of men shows that history cares not an iota for the rank or title a man has born, or the office he has held, but only the quality of his deeds and the character of his heart and mind.<sup>2</sup>*

Is it deeds and character more than position or personality? We think so.

Elders are pastors and teachers *who serve*. They are servant-styled leaders. As servants, they have no ultimate authority in-and-of-themselves. This is illustrated by noting the three levels of authority we find evident in the New Testament:

1. *Ultimate Authority*: this is the authority of Christ as the Head of His Church. He is the Source of all authority. All secondary, and tertiary levels of authority must point back to Him.
2. *Derived Authority*: this is the authority of the elders, who serve the assembly as undershepherds of Christ. Based on their appointment by existing leadership and the congregation, and as a result of their lives and ministry abilities as known by the church, they serve as secondary in authority under Christ.
3. *Reflexive Authority*: this is the third, or tertiary, level of authority. It is the position of the congregation—including the elders—which, acting as representatives of Christ, are to live their lives voluntarily accountable to each other, and ultimately accountable to the Source of Life—their Savior and Lord.

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In all senses, all the believers of the assembly are to be equally obedient to Christ, and equally responsive to the need of others.

This raises an important, and related question. How, then, is the injunction “obey your leaders” to be understood?

*Obey your leaders, and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you (Heb 13:17).*

This extremely important text identifies three additional dimensions in understanding authority in the church. What does it mean to “obey”? How is it that leaders will give an account?

In relation to leadership and authority, this text provides *watershed marks* in matters of relationship and accountability. First, the word “obey” does not mean “to club into bloody submission!” It means, “to persuade or appeal.”<sup>3</sup> In the passive sense in which it appears in this text, it means “to be persuaded, or to be convinced.” This is equally apparent from the context (cf. Heb 13:1-7).<sup>4</sup> The point, then, is to instruct believers in an assembly to remain open to the instruction of leadership, and maintain a yielding disposition.<sup>5</sup> This is equally the sense of Peter’s instructions: “Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older” (1 Pet 5:5).

In that sense, elders have a greater authority than believers in the assembly. Hence, we have called this derived authority. The younger men are to submit to the elders in a way similar to wives to husbands, men to Christ, and Christ to God (cf. Eph 5:22-24; 1 Cor 11:3). Mistakes in matters of *congregational-rule* here—an aspect of church government that we find impossible to biblically defend<sup>6</sup>—are as detrimental to the church as a wife ruling over her husband in a marriage relationship! *Elder-rule*, in the biblical sense,<sup>7</sup> is essential for proper church life.<sup>8</sup>

The second important observation, from this text in Hebrews 13, is the issue of accountability. The text says “as men

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who must give an account.” This is the most serious sense of accountability. *This text requires—even demands—a knowing and being known relationship between leadership and believer in the church.* While levels of relationship differ within an assembly, the total numbers of an assembly must reflect the necessary logistics of elders who can work together as a group, and who individually *and* corporately, essentially know the sheep given to their care.

Can you imagine a pastor standing before Christ, and being asked about a family in his congregation-of-thousands? It is not sufficient that this shepherd gave excellent sermons, or that he preached occasional messages on the Christian home, or giving, or sin. He will give an account for the individual lives of the saints in the assembly—individually.

In this light, it is easier to see the value of the principle occurrence of local churches in the New Testament—namely, house churches. With assemblies this size, the leaders and believers could maintain the accountability, and relationships, that are reflected by the Scriptures. In this sense, smaller is better—not worse.

Of course, other texts indicate the mutual submission and accountability of brothers and sisters to each other in the assembly. That is good and fitting within the appropriate aspects of dependence and love and responsibilities shared in the church. But those texts, and observations, do not rule out the hierarchy of authority indicated in Hebrews 13:17 and 1 Peter 5:5. It is, rather, both being true at the same time. That is, we are mutually dependent and accountable to each others, and at the same time the shepherds are accountable for, and thus in authority over, the believers whom they serve.<sup>9</sup>

The third obvious observation from Hebrews 13:17 is the “their work will be a joy” tied to “that would be of no advantage.” The observation from the leadership perspective is that ministry is work—and this can be a joy, or it can be less joy—or a burden. Either way, it is sacred work, and needs to be done. But the congregation of believers can help by offering thinking and discerning “willing to be persuaded” kind of obedience.

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Further, the individual believers are to be subject to their leaders. They are to be watched over in ways similar to a hen caring for her chicks. Depending on the nature of the relationship, this can be more or less of an advantage to the believers. The point is that there is to be the quality of relationship between leaders and believers that allows things to progress with joy and advantage, and with a minimum of burden or lack of advantage, for the sake of all the saints, and the work of the church in the world.

As the saints continue to evaluate the teaching—the oral (instructing) and the moral (modeling)—of their leaders, they are doing two things at once, and all the time: first, they are studying what they hear, and coming to personal convictions concerning doctrine and truth—like the Bereans (cf Acts 17:10-12). Secondly, they are living in voluntary submission to the leadership—understanding the mutual benefits of this relationship for leaders and believers alike.

The result: leaders and believers alike who think before they act. The needed skill is a critical mind—developing wise ways of thinking without a critical heart—disruptive or rebellious life in the assembly, or in relation to the leadership of the church.

### **DOING RIGHTLY: INTERDEPENDENCE MORE THAN INDEPENDENCE**

Coming to this point, we have seen the need for distinguishing between a word from God, and a word from man. Words from God come only from the Scriptures—contextually determined. Words from men—even leaders—are to be carefully heard, studied, and used as possible considerations in formulating personal convictions. Wisdom here dictates learning to use a concordance more than a Christian bookstore!

Co-terminus with this is the equally important need for believers to voluntarily obey—or maintain a yielding disposition—to their elders as leaders who will give an account. As such, a good leader is a good follower of Christ, and His Word—for the sake of

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the assembly. Additionally, a good follower is a wise believer who looks to his leaders as well as the Scriptures for teaching that is both spoken, and lived out.

Recently, in a meeting of the Northwest Association of the Evangelical Theological Society—where John is on the executive committee—a paper was read on the phenomena of the sociopath. This is an individual who publically comes across as the leaders leader. He lights up in public. He is Mr. Dynamic—Dr. Charisma.

Of the problems associated with the sociopath—particularly in matters of developing quality relationships—six characteristics were noted: first, impulsivity; second, extreme self-centeredness; third, low empathy; fourth, low guilt; fifth, doesn't learn from experiences; and sixth, a strong external (or position) concept of power. Then came the question: why is it that these are also the regular characteristics we see in many of the most notable of America's Christian leaders? You could have used a knife to cut through the *deafening silence* in the room!

The essential point of this paper was that, all too often, Christian leadership is tantamount to sociopathic behavior. That is, these men view their place and responsibility as the singular answer to the maladies of the Kingdom—with the attendant problems of inflated egos and relational bruises. Whatever the truth of this paper, Christ's warning was similar. The disciples were in danger of related to each other like the Gentiles—by lording it over, and exerting authority. But, rather, they were to lead by example—waiting for those under them<sup>10</sup> to voluntarily give of themselves to the Shepherding of Christ, and to the undershepherding of elders—who were to lead by serving.

Two further points follow: first, this leading by example should be based more on the private walk and personal ministry than public performance. If a man is not spiritual before God, he has not authority before men:

*The pastors of the churches therefore are not to exercise their*

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*authority as bosses but as examples. When they themselves obey the word others will be motivated to follow, but if the... pastors do not practice what they preach they have no other authority. Their authority derives from their spirituality and if they lose their spirituality they also lose their authority. It is not the office that give the pastor the right to rule—it is the man and his gift before God.*<sup>11</sup>

This is authority couched in the context of spirituality. If we grant any kind of continuing authority to the office of elder *without* genuine spirituality, we have independent church leaders as authorities apart from the Scriptures, and have transferred ownership of the Church from God to man!

Second, this leading by example is for the purpose of proclaiming Christ, not promoting self. How is your church known in your community? Are you known for denominational distinctions more than Christlikeness? Are you resting on the credentials of a leader—or the criteria of physical structures? If so, you are looking at the church instead of the Church.

We have found that *if* we resist a spirit of cooperation and interdependence, or *if* we single-mindedly use our resources for ministry efforts aimed at exclusive participation and membership in our church, or *if* we do not join hands in our communities in matters of doctrine or discipline of believers, then *we are denying the reality of the body and Headship of Christ!*

This calls for courage and conviction. It means we need to walk past the temptation to measure or soak a ministry project for its public relations value. It means using our church's resources of time, money, people, and possessions in ministry efforts that have community—or overseas—value in eternity regardless of whether or not our part becomes known or appreciated.

This means we as believers are to both appreciate our leaders while at the same time understanding their frailties. The Scriptures will say two things at the same time: “Anyone who



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receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor” (Gal 6:6) coupled with James’ statement, in the context of teaching and leadership: “We all stumble in many ways” (cf. Jam 3:1-2). We need them, and they need members of the body. Together we can mature and benefit, but no one ever avoids stumbling or sin. Consequently, relationships couple together features of dependence and independence—which results in interdependence.

### **AUTHORITY: DIFFICULT TO DO, NOT TO UNDERSTAND**

Tom Landry, coach of the Dallas Cowboys, was recently quoted as follows:

*I have a job to do that is not very complicated, but it is often difficult: to get a group of men to do what they don't want to do so they can achieve the one thing they have wanted all their lives.*<sup>12</sup>

That makes sense. The obstacles are personal discipline and physical fitness, and the goal is winning. As Red Auerbach likes to say, “Show me a good loser, and I’ll show you a loser!”

The game of life, so-to-speak, and the church, is similar but different. The hurdle is still personal discipline. Obstacles include laziness and sin. The goal is success—in the spiritual sense. It is corporate maturity—with glory going to the Head of the Body.

But it isn’t very complicated. It calls for a relatively objective reading of the biblical texts and facts, and possibly some help—like this book—in showing relationship and implication of texts to each other—but it is not hard to understand.

But it is hard to do. Christian leaders are accountable to God—hence, they have authority from Him, and over the flock to which they have assumed the responsibility of service. They have one hand in the heavens, and the other among the earth-dwellers. They

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are to obey God, serve others, and bring the two together. They are waiters—serving the Word to hungry believers—with a minimum of spilling!

What work do we do that looks eternity in the eye? What labor lasts into heaven or hell? What kinds of burdens-carried reflect a commitment to real meaning in life—and can call Death an enemy from the winning side? The answer: the work of the church.

Make no mistake. It's hard work. It is hard because it is the best of work—work which will last for eternity. And, as a rule, good things are always hardest. It is good, and it is hard, and it is the work of the church. Authority is like that. Reward does not come without responsibility. And responsibility does not come without authority.

Good churches, like good marriages, come with time. They are built on the foundation of Christ and His Word. They are built up by believers willing to obey Christ and follow godly leadership. And they are led by leaders who both lead and follow—according to the needs of the assembly, and the will of the One Leader who knows the most about leading and following—and hard work on earth with eternal reward in heaven.