

A PASTOR'S AUTHORITY

by Ray C. Stedman

"Those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them [Jesus said to his disciples]. But it shall not be so among you!" {Mark 10:42b-43a RSV}

Rather than being lords, he went on to say, disciples are to be servants of one another and the greatest is the one who is servant of all.

By these words Jesus indicates that an entirely different system of government than that employed by the world should prevail among Christians. Authority among Christians is not derived from the same source as worldly authority, nor is it to be exercised in the same manner. The world's view of authority places men over one another, as in a military command structure, a business executive hierarchy, or a governmental system. This is as it should be. Urged by the competitiveness created by the Fall, and faced with the rebelliousness and ruthlessness of sinful human nature, the world could not function without the use of command structures and executive decision.

But as Jesus carefully stated, "...it shall not be so among you." Disciples are always in a different relationship to one another than worldlings are. Christians are brothers and sisters, children of one Father, and members one of another. Jesus put it clearly in Matthew 23:8 {RSV}: "One is your Master, and all you are brethren."

Throughout twenty centuries the church has virtually ignored these words. Probably with the best of intentions, it has nevertheless repeatedly borrowed in toto the authority structures of the world, changed the names of executives from kings, generals, captains, presidents, governors, secretaries, heads, and chiefs to popes, patriarchs, bishops, stewards, deacons, pastors, and elders, and gone merrily on its way, lording it over the brethren and thus destroying the model of servanthood which our Lord intended. Christians have so totally forgotten Jesus' words that they frequently have set up the world's pattern of government without bothering to change the names, and have operated churches, mission organizations, youth organizations, schools, colleges, and seminaries, all in the name of Jesus Christ, but with presidents, directors, managers, heads and chiefs in no way different from corresponding secular structures.

It is probably too late to do much about altering the many structures that are commonly called "para-church" or "quasichurch" organizations, but certainly Jesus' words must not be ignored in the worship and training functions of the church itself. Somewhere, surely, the words of Jesus, "...it shall not be so among you," must find some effect. Yet in most churches today an unthinking acceptance has been given to the idea that the pastor is the final voice of authority in both doctrine and practice, and that he is the executive officer of the church with respect to administration. But surely, if a pope over the whole church is bad, a pope in every church is no better!

It is clear from the Scriptures that the apostles were concerned about the danger of developing ecclesiastical bosses. In Second Corinthians 1:24a {RSV}, Paul reminds the Corinthians concerning his own apostolic authority: "Not that we lord it over your faith; we work with you for your joy, ..." In the same letter he describes, with apparent disapproval, how the Corinthians reacted to certain leaders among themselves: "For you bear it if a man makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face," (2 Cor 11:20 {RSV}). Peter, too, is careful to warn the elders (and he includes himself among them) not to govern by being "domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock," {1 Pet 5:3 RSV}. And John speaks strongly against Diotrephes "who likes to put himself first, and takes it on himself to put some out of the church," {cf, 3 Jn 1:9-10}. These first-century examples of church bosses indicate how easily churches then, as in the 20th century, ignored the words of Jesus, "it shall not be

so among you."

But if the church is not to imitate the world in this matter, what is it to do? Leadership must certainly be exercised within the church, and there must be some form of authority. What is it to be? The question is answered in Jesus' words: "One is your Master," {Matt 23:8b KJV}. All too long churches have behaved as if Jesus were far away in heaven, and he has left it up to church leaders to make their own decisions, and run their own affairs. But Jesus himself had assured them in giving the Great Commission, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age," {cf, Matt 28:20b}. And in Matthew 18:20 {RSV} he reiterated, "... where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Clearly this indicates that he is present not only in the church as a whole but in every local church as well. It is Jesus himself, therefore, who is the ultimate authority within every body of Christians, and he is quite prepared to exercise his authority through the instrument he himself has ordained -- the elderhood.

The task of the elders is not to run the church themselves, but to determine how the Lord in their midst wishes to run his church. Much of this he has already made known through the Scriptures, which describe the impartation and exercise of spiritual gifts, the availability of resurrection power, and the responsibility of believers to bear one another's burdens, confess sins to one another, teach, admonish, and reprove one another, and witness to and serve the needs of a hurting world.

In the day-to-day decisions which every church faces, elders are to seek and find the mind of the Lord through an uncoerced unanimity, reached after thorough and biblically-related discussion. Thus, ultimate authority, even in practical matters, is vested in the Lord and in no one else. This is what the book of Acts reveals in its description of the initiative actions of the Holy Spirit, who obviously planned and ordered the evangelizing strategy of the early church (Acts 8, 13, etc.). The elders sought the mind of the Spirit, and, when it was made clear to them, they acted with unity of thought and purpose. ("For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden ..." Acts 15:28a {RSV}.) The authority, therefore, was not the authority of men, but of God, and it was expressed not through men, acting as individuals, but through the collective, united agreement of men whom the Spirit had led to eldership ({see} Acts 20:28).

The point is: no one man is the sole expression of the mind of the Spirit: No individual has authority from God to direct the affairs of the church. A plurality of elders is necessary as a safeguard to the all-too-human tendency to play God over other people. Even then, the authority exercised is not one of domination and arbitrary decree over anyone. The ability of a servant to influence anyone else does not lie in ordering someone around, but by obtaining their voluntary consent. This is the nature of all authority among Christians, even that of the Lord himself! He does not force our obedience, but obtains it by love, expressed either in circumstantial discipline or by awakening gratitude through the meeting of our desperate needs.

The true authority of elders and other leaders in the church, then, is that of respect, aroused by their own loving and godly example. This is the force of two verses which are often cited by those who claim a unique authority of pastors over church members. The first is found in First Thessalonians 5:12-13a {RSV}, "But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work." The key phrase is "and are over you in the Lord." The Greek word in question is *prohistamenous*. Though this is translated "over you" in both the Revised Standard and King James versions, the word itself contains no implication of being "over" another. The New English Bible more properly renders it, "... and in the Lord's fellowship are your leaders and counselors." The thought in the word is that of "standing before" others, not of "ruling over" them. It is the common word for leadership. Leaders can lead only if they are able to persuade some to follow.

Another verse used to support command authority is Hebrews 13:17a {RSV}, which the Revised Standard Version renders, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account." The imperative translated "obey" is from the word *peitho*, "to persuade." In the middle voice, used here, Thayer's lexicon gives its meaning as "to suffer one's self to be persuaded." Again there is no thought of a right to command someone against his will, but the clear thrust is that leaders are *persuaders* whose ability to persuade arises not from a smooth tongue or a dominant personality, but from *a personal walk which evokes respect*.

At this point many may be tempted to say, "What difference does it make? After all, the pattern of command authority is too widely established to alter now, and, besides, many churches seem to be doing all right as it is; why try to change now?"

In response, consider the following:

1. The Bible indicates that any deviation from the divine plan inevitably produces weakness, division, strife, increasing fruitlessness, and, ultimately, death. The present low state of many churches is testimony to the effects of ignoring, over a long period of time, God's way of working.
2. A command structure of authority in the church deprives the world of any model or demonstration of a different way of life than the one it already lives by. Worldlings see no difference in the church, and can see no reason why they should change and believe.
3. A command authority inevitably produces resentment, repression, exploitation and, finally, rebellion. It is the law, which Scripture assures us we can never redeem or restore, but which must, by its very nature, condemn and repress.
4. The desire of the Lord Jesus to show to the world a wholly new form of authority which is consistent with grace, not law, is nullified by a command structure among Christians, and the gospel of dying-to-live is denied even before it is proclaimed. This means that God is robbed of his glory and distorted before the watching world. Nothing could be more serious than this!

Admittedly, a call for a change of this nature is radical, even revolutionary. But since when was the church called to be a conforming society? Is it not high time we took seriously our Lord's words: "it shall *not* be so among you"?

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