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Authority and Leadership in the New Testament

By James W. Thompson

Within the Restoration tradition, few have quarreled with the insistence that the governance of the church in biblical times provides the appropriate model for the contemporary church. Early leaders of the movement found in the church of the Philippians and the Pastoral epistles, with the “bishops and deacons” (Phil. 1:1; cf. 1 Tim. 3:1-10) mentioned there, a model for church life which could be employed in the church of all ages. However, considerable disagreement exists today on the role and authority of these offices, both in the New Testament and the contemporary church. Some insist that the early churches were highly democratic and that their leaders possessed little authority beyond that of their own personal example. Norman Parks argues, for example, that the “scriptural function” (of elders) involved the positive role of teaching, looking out for the welfare of the members and influencing conduct by their own good example.¹ Larry Richards, in *A Theology of Church Leadership*, also insists that the local leaders in the New Testament had the primary purpose of leading by example and not the authority to make decisions.²

An alternative view which has functioned in Churches of Christ is that of local leaders as highly authoritative, if not autocratic. The body of elders of the New Testament is perceived as a decision-mak-

ing body and final arbiter on the doctrine and practice of the church. This view has been, in my own experience, the dominant understanding of the function of the local leadership in the New Testament.

The Problem on Appealing to the New Testament

The Churches of Christ have always placed considerable significance on the governance and leadership of the local church. Indeed those books which treat this topic, the Pastoral Epistles, have enjoyed a special prominence in Restoration churches. However, as we have noticed, the churches work with different and sometimes conflicting paradigms of church leadership. In this essay I wish to observe the dynamics of church leadership within the New Testament in order to address some of the issues of leadership and authority facing the church today.

The fact that those who hold to various models of authority all appeal to the New Testament suggests that it is not an easy task to find a single functional pattern of authority in the New Testament. This difficulty originates, in the first place, from the fact that we come to the New Testament with our own cultural biases when we examine the way that authority functions. Those who find in the New Testament an authority pattern that is “of the people and by the people” are likely to be influenced by western concepts of democratic traditions. Those who find the authoritarian model in the New Testament are likely to be influenced by various au-

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thoritarian values.

To come to the New Testament in search for a functioning model of authority is difficult, in the second place, because the New Testament does not present a uniform picture of the leadership structure of the early churches. While the Pastoral epistles and Acts portray a leadership structure with a plurality of elders/bishops, such significant letters of Paul as Romans, Galatians, and the Corinthian correspondence do not refer to this structure of leadership. In these epistles Paul treats numerous topics, but never mentions the presence of elders, bishops or deacons. Even on such sensitive topics as church discipline, the local authorities are not mentioned. Indeed, both 1 Corinthians and Romans describe a church where "each" member builds up the body of Christ through the exercise of the gift which has been granted.

To return to the New Testament to find a model for authority today is difficult, in the third place, because of the hermeneutical problem. One simply cannot transport the leadership patterns of the early church into the contemporary church without significant modifications. The house churches of the New Testament owned no property, had no budgets, and had no permanent financial commitments. In that situation, authority would necessarily function in a significantly different way from the way it functions today. Unless the church is to attempt to reproduce the social ethos of the early house churches, therefore, one cannot simply reproduce the pattern of leadership which is found in the New Testament.

The Necessity of New Testament Models of Authority

Despite the difficulty of finding a definitive model of authority in the New Testament, we nevertheless turn to the New Testament for answers to our own questions and for insights about the nature of authority. We shall look for those dimensions of authority in the New Testament which provide a unifying thread in the New Testament and can be functional in the contemporary church.

Any study of leadership and authority in the New Testament must begin with the recognition that all authority belongs to Christ, and that human authority in the communities of his disciples is derivative. Jesus commissions his disciples to "bind and loose in his name" (Matt 18:18), recognizing that they have the authority only to act on his behalf. Paul claims the apostolic authority to "punish every disobedience" (2 Cor. 10:6); but even apostolic authority is subject to the "truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:5). The apostle Peter is confronted with his failure

to live by the gospel. As an apostle, Paul has no right to "tamper with" the word of God (2 Cor. 4:2). Those apostles who fail to submit to the gospel are condemned.

As an apostle, Paul is the father (1 Cor. 4:15) and mother (Gal. 4:19) of his churches, and thus he has the right to come to them "with the rod" of

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punishment (1 Cor. 4:21). Nevertheless, Paul's authority is conditioned by the new dimension in his life. He refuses to "lord it over" his congregations (2 Cor. 1:24). As one who is "always carrying in the body the dying of Jesus" (2 Cor. 4:10), he demonstrates an entirely new kind of authority. When others challenge his claim as a servant of Christ, he responds with a list of his sufferings (2 Cor. 11:23ff). His authority cannot be divorced from his willingness to bear the cross of Christ.

The Beginning of Local Leadership

Paul's commanding presence, both through his letters and his personal presence, left little place for the development of a strong local leadership. Indeed, it is at Paul's command that the church is to "deliver to Satan" an immoral man at Corinth (1 Cor. 5:5). During his lifetime he is the authority over the churches, and he is the one who provides authoritative teaching. Although he is only a "steward" of the message (1 Cor. 4:1), he writes letters to his churches to give instructions on a wide variety of matters. In Galatians, for example, he speaks with authority in clarifying the content of the gospel. In all of the letters, he does not hesitate to give instructions on Christian behavior.

Those who argue for the "democratic" nature of the early communities often appeal to the absence of references to local authority in Paul's letters as the basis for a democratic understanding of the local church. This argument ignores, however, the commanding presence of Paul, who left nothing to the

will of the majority. It ignores, furthermore, the fact that authoritative leadership emerged already in Paul's first epistle, 1 Thessalonians. Here Paul instructs the Thessalonians 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" (1 Thess. 5:12-13). A special group has apparently emerged. While three participles (in Greek) are used to describe them, the

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reference is apparently to only one group, as the use of only one article suggests. This group has authority that is recognized in the community ("esteem them"), an authority that is based on their work.

The language used for leaders in the earliest church may reflect the distinctively new Christian understanding of authority. Here we note that the leaders are described only with verbs, suggesting that their function is of primary significance. Here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, there is the avoidance of terms suggesting power. Nevertheless, this earliest church is not without local authority. While everyone is engaged in admonishing (cf. 5:14), a special group of leaders "labor," "are over" the community, and "admonish" it (5:12). Here we note that authority is accompanied by the teaching ministry. The words "labor" and "admonish" were regularly used for the teaching ministry. The term rendered "are over you" in the RSV (*proistemi*) connoted "caring authority" and "authoritative care." The term brought together the concepts of providing for the needs of others and the exercising of authority over them. It is later used for the work of elders (cf. 1 Tim. 3:4), and it was commonly associated with the "caring authority" and "authoritative care" that was the work of parents.

The emergence of local authority is also to be seen in 1 Corinthians. Although the church is described as the body of Christ with gifts that have been granted to "each" indispensable member, this equality does not preclude the emergence of local authority. Among the gifts that have been granted to the church, Paul refers to those who are "administrators" (*kyberneseis*). The term refers to the one

who steers a ship and provides guidance for the church. Later in 1 Corinthians Paul refers to those who have "devoted themselves to the service of the saints," and then adds, "I urge you to be subject to such men and to every fellow worker and laborer" (1 Cor. 16:16).

The Churches After Paul

The new dimension which one finds in the Pastoral Epistles, which have provided the primary texts for the understanding of leadership in churches of Christ, is the anticipated absence of Paul who will no longer be able to "come with a rod." As Paul writes these epistles, he anticipates that the time after his departure will bring a severe test for the church. Timothy is to find "faithful men who will teach others" (2 Tim. 2:2). The focus is no longer on the equality of the gifts, but on the preservation of the faith. Here Paul challenges Timothy and Titus to appoint those men who will guide the church in perilous times. According to Titus, the elder must "be able to confute those who contradict sound doctrine" (1:9-10). The church is an extended household, and the bishop of 1 Timothy is one who "cares for" the church in much the same way that he manages his own household (1 Tim. 3:4). He acts with the authority that one might expect from the head of the household in ancient times, establishing the direction of the church.

Although the church after Paul appears more highly structured than the churches established early in Paul's ministry, we recognize lines of continuity which extend from the earliest churches until the Pastoral Epistles. We note, in the first place, that authority was regularly associated with the teaching ministry. While leaders were not the only teachers, they were distinguished for the teaching which set the direction of the church. Indeed, their primary responsibility seems to be that of teaching.

A second line of continuity in these references is the importance of active experience as a prerequisite for the Christian leader. The bishop in the Pastorals is not to be a "novice." In the same way, those to whom the Corinthians were to submit were the "first fruits of Achaia" who had devoted themselves to Christian service. Leaders were esteemed on the basis of their time of service, and they emerged and were highly regarded within the community because of their work.

A third line of continuity within the leadership of the early church is that, while the early churches did not recognize a hierarchy within their midst, they were never democratic. Actual authority was conferred on those who had emerged as leaders. While the Christian story exercised its influence in

reminding leaders that authority was not to be autocratic, those who were older and more experienced in the Christian faith “cared for” the church (1 Tim. 3:4) and “steered” it in the appropriate direction.

A fourth line of continuity within the New Testament is the emphasis on the character of leaders. Paul’s personal leadership is associated with his willingness to be “exhausted” on behalf of the faith (2 Cor. 12:15). Similarly, the focus in the Pastoral Epistles is on the qualifications of the leaders, who are distinguished for their exemplary manner of living the Christian faith.

Reflections for the Contemporary Church

Despite the diversity of the New Testament, these lines of continuity suggest that there were areas in which Christian leadership remained unchanging within changing circumstances of the early church. While one cannot simply transport the entire social world of the New Testament into our own day, we can learn from the New Testament that the early Christians deliberately separated themselves from ancient forms of leadership and accepted a distinctive Christian form of authority. Even in our own changed circumstances, those lines of continuity which we find in the New Testament understanding of leadership can help us through our own confused understanding. I suggest the following ways in which we can bring distinctive Christian qualities to our understanding of leadership.

1. As a tradition, our discussions have too frequently turned only to the Pastoral Epistles in the search for the “qualifications” and structural patterns of leadership. Consequently, discussion has often focused on the discrete and isolated qualifications that are mentioned (i.e., what does “believing children” mean?). We have overlooked the larger issue which is involved in the list of qualifications. When the qualifications are taken together, we recognize the New Testament’s continuing emphasis on the character and exemplary life of leaders. In our search for leaders, we need to recognize the line of continuity from Paul to the Pastoral Epistles, in which leadership cannot be divorced from the devotion and commitment of the leader. Leaders should not be chosen simply because they meet the technical requirements for leadership, but because

they follow the one who was a servant.

2. In the second place, the New Testament is a reminder that churches need the authority of those who have devoted years of service.

The will of the majority is no substitute for the wisdom of experienced Christians. Those of us who have served in churches where issues were settled by a majority vote have seen the bankruptcy of the church where inexperienced leaders emerge to be “helmsmen” for the church. We continue to live after the demise of the apostles when strong leaders are needed to guide the destiny of the church.

3. Because we live in a new situation where churches own property and control significant sums of money, we cannot easily return to the simpler time when such responsibilities did not demand the attention of the elders. The role of the elders as “helmsmen” demands that they have the major role in establishing the direction of the church. In this situation, the “helmsmen” must make important decisions, for such decision-making cannot be divorced from their role as the church’s teachers and leaders. While it may be inexcusable for elders to make decisions that are autocratic, they nevertheless make decisions affecting the direction of the church.

4. The elders of the New Testament were chosen because of their knowledge of the Christian faith and their capability of passing it on. In this situation they were primary teachers of the church. We make a mistake if the teaching of the church is reserved only for professionals who have specialized academic training. The church needs elders who have distinguished themselves in their understanding of the faith and in their ability and willingness to communicate that understanding to others.

The contemporary church, like the church in the first generations, continues to face an uncertain future when strong leadership must emerge to assist the church in maintaining its identity. The church has not rediscovered a biblical pattern only when it has some structural similarities to early churches. Restoration churches need to recognize that Jesus inaugurated a new form of leadership which transcends cultural changes. The church which lives after the demise of the apostles continues to need for its survival those “faithful men” who are able to teach others and whose authority is rooted in selfless love.