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Teaching Authority in the Church

By Lynn Mitchell

There appears to be a growing crisis among churches of Christ concerning teaching authority. The time has long past when a dozen or so evangelists and editors could, by the sheer authority of their personalities and argumentative skills, determine the tone and the content of "doctrine and practice" for a whole generation among our churches. There is also a growing diversity within the churches of Christ in understanding our "tradition"—what we have "always believed and practiced." Thus, the task of diving what is to be believed and practiced is becoming more and more the task of the local community with its pastors and teachers.

This crisis has both sociological and theological roots. Some people are merely in reaction, along with most of their peers, to any traditional authority or "old fashioned" ideas. These people will be thrown radically upon their own whims and devices. Having nothing to hold on to, they will tend to hold onto anything that comes along.

Others are in reaction to some traditional ideas and ways because they sincerely have concluded that they are unscriptural and thus need to be removed, like barnacles from the hull of a ship. These people will be thrown more and more radically on the Scriptures for their direction.

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Who will guide them? Who is to be entrusted with the interpretation and teaching of the Scriptures? Who should claim such authority?

The Authority: Jesus Christ

The primary authority for the church is Jesus Christ. By the decree of God all authority (without residue) rests in Him (Matt. 28:18). If we wish to be the church of Jesus Christ, this fact not only must be the substance of our confession, but also the premise of all our thinking.

The authority of Christ arises out of who he is and what he has done. The authority of the church and its teachers consists solely in their conformity to the message of the Gospel. Who is this Jesus Christ? What did he do? And what does that mean? The power and the authority reside not in the proclaimer as such, but in him who is proclaimed.

If one can judge rightly from his language, Paul seriously desired to live, work, and teach out of this radically Christ centered — Gospel centered perspective. The power, he insisted, is in the Gospel proclaimed. (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:21). This Gospel treasure is entrusted to earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4:7). This undoubtedly places the grace of God in bold relief (1 Cor. 15:10), but it also puts the proclaimer decidedly in his place in terms of what his authority involves. The teacher's authority consists not in himself, but in his being transparent to the real source of power and authority.

So radically does Paul personalize this perspective that he insists to his churches that his own claim to authority as an apostle must be rejected if his proclamation runs counter to the "gospel." "Even if

we or an angel from heaven preach unto you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8).

Fundamental to Paul's perspective of teaching authority was his determination to "know nothing" among his hearers "except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." (1 Cor. 2:2) For Paul this was not phrasological piety meant to impress his hearers with his "soundness" or with his religiosity. This statement stood for the heart and soul of what he was all about.

There is an authority more fundamental than that of an apostle. There is a vision of reality more radical than all our human radicals, more enlightening than all of our human enlightened ones, more authoritative than all of our human authorities. That vision becomes real for us, as it did for Paul, when we reflect in earnest on the simple good news of Christ crucified and raised.

The Authority of a "Servant"

The Gospels and the Epistles of our New Testament Scriptures contain extensive elaboration of the meaning of the gospel in the context of the life of the earliest Church. Since this elaboration, we believe, took place under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and within the purview of apostolic authority, the New Testament Scriptures will necessarily remain the primary source for understanding the nature and content of the Gospel. The New Testament will also remain the primary source for understanding how teaching authority is properly exercised in the Church. The message of Christ and him crucified provides the basis for both positive and critical elements of any teaching authority in the Church.

With respect to teaching authority, both the positive and critical elements of the Gospel message can probably best be clarified by the analysis of one New Testament concept: *diakonia* - service. The fact that the most general and characteristic "name" given in the New Testament to holders of church "office" is **deacon** is very significant, both theologically and practically .

"What then is Apollos? What is Paul? **Deacons** through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each" (1 Cor. 3:5). God has made the apostle "competent to be a **deacon** of the new covenant" (2 Cor. 3:6) - a **deacon** of God (2 Cor. 6:4) - a **deacon** of righteousness (2 Cor. 11:15) - a **deacon** of Christ (2 Cor. 11:23). Paul is a **deacon** of the gospel (Col. 1:23) and a **deacon** of the church (Col. 1:24f). Timothy (1 Thess. 3:2), Tychius (Col. 4:7), and Epaphras (Col. 1:7), Paul's fellow workers in the Gospel, are also **deacons**.

Why does the apostle use so lowly a word to

describe his work and the work of his "authoritative" associates? Because their work is to be understood in the light of the Gospel. It is carried out in imitation of Christ.

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise **authority** over them. It shall not be so among you but whoever be great among you must be your **deacon** . . . Even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve (**to be a deacon**)" (Matt. 20:25,26,28).

"You are not to be called rabbi, for you

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have one teacher, and you are all brethren Neither be called masters (professors), for you have one master (professor), the Christ. He who is greatest among you must be your **deacon**" (Matt. 23:8,10,11).

"You call me 'teacher' and 'Lord' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you should wash one another's feet. You should do as I have done for you. . . . No messenger is greater than him who sends him" (John 13:13-16).

We do not know what "Gospel" materials Paul was acquainted with, but he was certainly familiar with the spirit of *diakonia* reflected in these words of Christ. This was "the mind in you" which was "also in Christ Jesus" (who took the form of a servant, obedient even to death on a cross; Phil. 2). Obviously *diakonia* is the message of the cross; and the spirit of *diakonia* is the foundation of all ministry and teaching authority in the church.

The Role of the "Teacher" in New

Testament Churches

Yet, it remains true that there are those in the New Testament churches who were called "teachers." and they are listed in third place (one might say third in authority) behind apostles and prophets. At first glance, this smacks of organization, institution-

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alism, even hierarchy. Are the ways of the "Gentiles" beginning to assert themselves in the apostolic church? Are some of us actually to be called "Teachers" and to "exercise authority" in seeming contradiction to our Lord's express wishes? This dilemma is another of those tensions created by the intersection of the radicality of the Gospel and the practicality of community life. There should be no assertion of or reliance on human authorities, but it seems there must be.

"All things should be done decently and in order," says Paul, in that favorite of verses for rationalistic restorationists. "Let us get some semblance of order here" is a familiar prayer of people frustrated by the chaos of a community without meaningful teaching and authority. "How can I (understand) unless someone guides me?" (Acts 8:31) "How can they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14b)

The authority of human representatives of Christ is certainly more problematic, to say the least, than ordinary human authority. It falls under the radical call to diakonia, without "Gentile-like" authority, position, or title. Yet, it is a task which must be done. The key, of course, is in the transformation of authority, position, and title by the message of the Gospel. The questions are, in the light of the Gospel, who should exercise Christian teaching authority, how should they exercise it, and to what end?

"God has appointed in the church first apostles." The apostle was a witness of the crucified but risen Lord who was commissioned by the Lord as an ambassador of Christ and his Gospel. "He who had set me apart before I was born and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal His son to

me, in order that I might preach him among the gentiles" (Gal. 1:15-16).

The designation of apostle is the only authority known to Paul to have been instituted by God in advance of the Church. The church, in fact, has apostles in its foundation (Eph. 2:20). But the apostolate is a special gift (a **charisma**) and not an office or position in the professional or hierarchial sense.

What is true of this foundational **charisma** is particularly true of the "lesser" positions of authority; i.e. prophets, teachers, etc. Everything for Paul is a matter of "gifts" and not primarily of "position" or "office" or "talents" or "educational background." A gift or charisma has validity only as a function of the Spirit's activity in and for the church. It is an endowment by the Spirit given so that a task necessary for the life of the congregation might be implemented.

Indeed, there is order in the church. It is created, however, by the Spirit and not imposed from without on the basis of some kind of "successful" working model. The jargon and methodology of modern secular organizations, though they may be of some practical help on a superficial level in making sense of the church as a sociological community, are dangerous when they take the place of Gospel jargon such as charisma and diakonia. Systems analysis and efficiency studies, whatever their benefit, are no adequate replacement for the gifts proportioned by the Spirit.

Similarly, the recent emphasis on "professionalism" may be long overdue if it seeks to correct "unprofessional" attitudes and activities on the part of the leader or teacher. In the sense in which this expression is commonly used today, the Christian teacher should be at least "professional," i.e. dedicated, serious, competent, intellectually and educationally prepared, service oriented, discrete, ethical, etc.

"Professionalism" per se is not listed as a Christian virtue, however, and is certainly not the primary requisite for a Christian teacher. The primary requisite is that the Spirit has proportioned to him the gift. Having a professional education in the ministry of teaching and preaching is certainly preferable to not having one. At the very least a lazy person who does not know what he or she is talking about and who does not intend to learn should not be credited by the church with the gift of teaching. Ignorance and incompetence are also not Christian virtues. But again, authority comes with the gift of the Spirit, not from education or general competence. The exercise of the gift of teaching must be assumed to presuppose competence in the Scrip-

tures. But the gift of teaching should not be assumed to be present simply because one "knows his Bible," anymore than the gift of pastor can be assumed because one is "the husband of one wife."

The radicality of that Gospel Message, Christ and him crucified, continuously calls into question all of our inclinations and competencies and drives us back to recognizing him as the sole source of our value and authority in the community. Our derived authority is gift-given. It is service - service received and service given. In this light, the medium (the teacher) is not the message; but the medium should be so radically conformed to the message that his life and mind (attitude) is transparent to the message. Perhaps the teacher might be so bold to urge his hearers "to be imitators of me" (I Cor. 4:16; Phil. 3:17).

Recognizing our "Gifted" Leaders

Many of us can remember occasions (hopefully long past) when potential leaders whom the Spirit had made "pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits" (wisdom from above - James 3:17) were deliberately passed over in favor of those who were not so "soft" and "unsound." The resulting leadership and teaching were not Spirit-originated, Spirit-given, or Spirit-controlled. The wisdom that prevailed was earthly wisdom "not such as comes down from above."

Less sinister, perhaps, but no more biblical is the indiscriminate filling of "offices" just because they seem to need filling. A recent high school graduate in south Texas found potential employment when he discovered that the office of County Inspector of Hides had not been filled for decades. The young man ran, he won, and he filled the office. Fortunately for him no one any longer submitted hides for inspection, since he had no idea what constituted an acceptable hide. Such "office-filling" is ludicrous when non-inspected hides are at stake, but not so amusing in the case of untaught and unpastored churches.

Among churches of Christ, a biblical idea of gifts was largely a casualty of the denominational wars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The last thing in the world our Campbellian pioneers wanted was to lose a calm, rational approach to the application of the Scriptures to the life and worship of the church. This approach was certainly challenged on the American frontier from the wildfire of "Methodistical" warm-hearts and shouting exercises. There were dangers of arid intellectualism and cold worship inherent in our ancestors' Puritan and Enlightenment heritage (against which the pioneer leaders often complained). But the excesses of emo-

tionalism and sloppy biblical thinking worried them more.

Our pioneers did not deny the Spirit nor his gifts. They simply had grave misgivings, sometimes even revulsion, about almost everything being done and said about these subjects at the time. Especially in the light of recent revivals of these excesses and irrationalities, I feel more empathy with and gratitude for their sober and measured skepticism than I used to feel. I believe that the next decade will cry out for sobriety and sweet rationality among our churches.

Regrettably, our pioneers set their own spiritual progeny up for reactionary spurts of emotionalism and irrationality when they fell into almost complete silence about the reality of the life of the Spirit and his gifts. If sober, measured, rational interpreters of the Scripture do not speak positively, clearly, and often about the Spirit and his exciting work in the community, eventually someone will speak in such a way as to create a volatile mixture of excitement without understanding.

It is a truism of the history of tradition that what is merely assumed in the first generation will be lost in the second. Our tradition has simply followed the rules in this regard. But once this is recognized, it can no longer be tolerated. The time is ending, thanks be to God, when a church of Christ could actually be proud of the idea that the preacher was not called, did not have the Spirit, and was neither gifted nor theologically educated. We have begun again and we must continue to reaffirm that

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the Church is the creation of the Spirit and that only those whom the Spirit has called and gifted for service should be leaders in the church.

Two Major Obstacles

The problem arises, of course, as to how Spirit-

gifted people are recognized and how do they get to be leaders in the community. The first priority is to orient the community itself to the reality of gifts and to the habit of looking for them.

There are two major obstacles to our accepting this as a simple task. Both are tied to our rational-

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istic tendencies. First is the simple skepticism about the continued existence of these gifts in the church. Christians over the centuries have wondered and disputed about the nature and continued relevance of various individual gifts. That problem remains a matter of serious study. But it is a conceit almost unique to Churches of Christ in America that the Church of God could survive for one instant beyond the cessation of the spiritual gifts. Such a prospect would surely have boggled Paul's imagination, and such a position would probably have strained his doctrinal tolerance.

The second major obstacle to the task of seeking out and recognizing spiritual gifts is our pseudo-virtuous reticence to make such judgements. The criteria for recognizing spiritual gifts are, after all, "spiritual." The Spirit works in such an eerie way, "his wonders to perform."

Certainly one must acknowledge the freedom of the Spirit. He blows where he wills (John 3:8) and he gives gifts to each one as he wills (1 Cor. 12:11). But this Spirit is not a divine poltergeist; he is the Spirit of God. Though his work is not rationally quantifiable or humanly predictable, he is not the Spirit of irrationality. The community of the Spirit should be able to tell when he is working.

"We have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God...The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Cor. 2:12,14)

None of this may be as instantly clear as a

Campbellian argument on baptism. But Paul does have a great deal to say about it. It must mean something. It means at least that we cannot live as the church without the Spirit and the gifts he gives. It means at least that those gifts have been given, and we have only to recognize them. It means at least that our reticence to do so is not a virtue of soundness and humility, but is a symptom of unbelief and an idolatrous dependence on our natural, fallen wisdom. We need not continue to "elect" pastors and teachers merely because they are good business men, have multiple offspring, and "know" the Bible cover to cover. The Spirit has already elected our pastors and teachers and gifted them. We need to recognize them, encourage them, help to train them where needed, and listen to them as they minister the Word to us and care for our souls.

The New Testament affirms almost matter of factly the capability of the Christian community to recognize and appoint leadership necessary to its life. "Pick out from among you some men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3). Recognizing people who are spiritually gifted and "full of the Spirit" may be esoteric in the sense that only the Spirit-gifted community can do it. But its certainly not an esoteric exercise within the community. It must be a commonplace exercise carried out with serious deliberation and prayer. We need not see tongues of fire on top of the teacher's head. We need to see in him or her the fruit of the spirit, wisdom from above, the mind which was in Christ Jesus to serve. We need to see a person fervently committed to telling the good news of Christ, one who knows the righteousness that comes from God, one who is steeped in the Word. We need to see their love for the brotherhood and their burden for the lost and dying. None else should be recognized or appointed anything in relation to the community's teaching or pastoral leadership. It is obvious that the gift is not theirs.

Acknowledging the Authority of our "Gifted" Leaders

If the gift is recognized and the teacher is "known," what then is their relation to the community? What is their authority? How are we to "be subject" to them (1 Cor. 16:16)? Our historical failure to understanding teaching or pastoring as a "diakonia" has resulted in our people succumbing repeatedly to "Gentile-like" leadership styles: either (1) authoritarian dictatorships by people who consider gentleness and openness to reason to be democratic weaknesses; or (2) what Alexander Campbell called "licentious equality," where anyone in his or

her majority is assumed to be as authoritative as anyone else in determining doctrine and practice in a local community.

Even more spiritually stifling to the community is the monstrosity which manages to be a paradoxical fusion of both of the above styles. With no scripturally thought out theology of leadership and teaching authority, this unlikely hybrid is as likely as any among churches of Christ. In this kind of situation, congregational life becomes a long struggle between unself-critical leaders who feel they must be authoritarian to be scriptural, and untaught and unpastored members who want good, spiritual leadership but do not know how to get it. Authoritarianism is so inimical to the mind of Christ, and the failure to honor diversity of gifts is so opposed to the will of the Spirit, we must allow ourselves to be fundamentally reoriented.

The very character of the Gospel requires that the teaching authority of the church be non-authoritarian. That is, there must be submission to teaching authority in the church. It must not be blind submission to an "officer" or the person "holding" the office. Rather, our submission must be to the treasure contained in that vessel. The teacher's authority is not personal; it is representative of Christ. To the extent one's teaching is of the "gentiles" either in content or style, to that extent his legitimate authority as an ambassador for Christ must be considered null and void. The teacher is responsible to God in obedience and to the community in service. The community is responsible to listen and to imitate the teacher only in so far as he is listening to and imitating Christ. Judgments about all of this should be community judgments and should not be at the whim of individual preferences no matter how "well placed" such individuals might be.

No teacher, even if he were an apostle, should be allowed to preach "another gospel." However, once the gift of teaching and teaching authority has been established as attaching to a particular person or group of persons, that authority should not be up for grabs. Not everyone should feel the right nor be allowed to assert himself or herself factiously over against the teaching and pastoral leadership. This does not mean that everyone must agree or feel comfortable with everything the teaching leadership says or does. But it does mean that personal opinions, preferences, and tastes do not have the same authority as that given by the Spirit and recognized by the community of the Spirit.

This applies to customary practices and traditions as well. One who leans toward constant innovations or doing "nifty new things" probably should be judged deficient in the gift of leadership. Tradi-

tions, especially the Gospel tradition, but even common human, cultural, and community traditions, are too valuable to be dealt with in a cavalier manner. A teacher or leader who is wont to do so needs the discipline of the spiritual community.

On the other hand, we choose teachers, hopefully, because they are Spirit-nurtured and committed to biblical authority. They must be free to speak "as the oracles of God." They must be allowed continually to reengage the Scriptures in the light of their educational and pastoral tasks. If a customary practice has become a spiritual impairment to the church, or if a traditional view now appears to be an obstacle to understanding and proclaiming the Gospel, our teachers must courageously teach us and show us what to do. That is why the Spirit gave them to us. If they fail to do this, then they must answer.

If our teachers and pastors are our seniors in life experience and spiritual development, we should honor their maturity at least to the extent of giving them the benefit of the doubt. Their counsel cannot be viewed as inerrant, but it can certainly be given the status implied by spiritual maturity and the empowerment of spiritual gifts.

If our pastors and teachers have been serious and prayerful students of the Word; if they conscientiously listen to their own seniors in Christian faith and biblical scholarship; they should be respectfully and prayerfully listened to in return. Teachers who have devoted hundreds or thousands of hours to the task of biblical theological understanding, perhaps even having professional training and scholarly

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guidance, should be presumed (until proven otherwise) to have a better handle on the problems of biblical interpretation and theological understanding. They are not infallible; but they have a better handle. That is their gift, and it should not be treated with the disdain of "licentious equality."

Areas of Further Exploration

As we continue to study this issue as a brotherhood of churches, I would like to suggest areas of further exploration.

First, nothing of what I have said in this articles makes sense without a continued emphasis among our churches on the centrality of the Cross and the Gospel of Christ. Related to this in terms of understanding is the need to reflect more profoundly on the doctrine of sin and the nature of man as finite and sinful. We cannot understand grace as it applies to human relationships if we do not have a good idea on what our problem is and what it is that we are being saved from.

Second, we need to explore a reality about which more and more of our scholars are becoming aware; that is, that an honest handling of the New Testament does not provide the detailed prescriptions or blueprints for church organization and worship style that some of our restoration ancestors had hoped that it did (some even assumed it must). This fact, however, does not point us away from the Bible or the Gospel - it points us more radically to the Word for guidance on how to make decisions about what God really wants for us in our churches. Does he really want prescriptions filled or does he want worship offered? Does he really want blueprints discovered or does he want the mind which was in Christ? Perhaps he wants both, but in proper Gospel perspective. We need to find out more.

Third, in the light of the above, we need to launch out on a movement to "restore" the biblical doctrine of gifts and leadership. I would suggest, for instance, that what we usually call an "eldership" in our churches is a secularized version of the New Testament "presbytery." Whereas the ancient version had as its primary task the teaching and pastoring of local communities of Christ, the modern version, in many instances, has as its primary task the administering of the fiscal and physical assets of a religious corporation. Often those who carry on the fundamental work of the New Testament presbytery are not called "elders" at all in our churches. They are called "the preacher" or "the associate minister," or they are former "elders" or people who have never "run" for elder.

Earlier in the movement, a mature man who

was a preacher or teacher for a local church would naturally be called "elder" whether there were elder "elections" or not. Perhaps our "eldership" should include more New Testament offices under it rubric.

There are those people in our churches who are gifted to do what our "elders generally do." They have the gift of administration and are "full of the Holy Spirit" as well. Let them "administer." Call them elders, seniors, superintendents, or administrators. Congregational administration and decisions-making (in consultation with other elders and the congregation when appropriate) would be their diakonia. In practical terms, of all the leadership roles, theirs is the one most vulnerable to abuse - "lording it over the flock."

So let these "elders" be elected for specific terms and rotate off occasionally, so that the church can have more input into local church policy.

Another group of "elders" in a local church would be the preachers, teachers, and exhorters (some "paid," some not).

This group is, of course, primarily concerned with biblical scholarship and

proclamation of the Word. They are also the consultants to the other "elders" on matters having to do with the Word and its application to the life of the community.

Another group (none of these groups being mutually exclusive) would be the pastors and encouragers. Their role is absolutely crucial, yet it is the most neglected. Tending the flock spiritually should be some folks' primary occupation in the church. Let them do it. And recognize their authority to do it as "elders" and "pastors."

The congregation as a whole would be submissive to all of these elders as they exercise their various roles of administration and decision making, preaching and teaching, and pastoring and exhortation - as the Spirit has apportioned. The elders, for their part, would be submissive to the eldership as a whole and to the congregation. Details and ground rules would have to be worked out as in all organizational arrangements.

In the process of our reorientation, the gift of teaching and the authority which accompanies it may find their rightful place among the "offices" of the churches. Our teachers may then be truly **deacons** of the Word, and therefore **deacons** for the Church of God.

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