

"As He That Doth Serve"

- Lk 22:26

Authority seems to be an issue for Christians these days. People write book after book and preach sermon after sermon about who has authority over whom and why. Teachers must teach with authority; husbands claim authority over their wives; "shepherds" need authority over their "sheep." We can't talk about church without concentrating on church government. We seem unable to think about marriage without asking who has authority in it. And we can't even listen to the Bible unless we have first heard the latest word on its authority. Seems to be a problem. Maybe it is more of a problem in America because we don't usually think of ourselves as subject to authority. We think of ourselves as "free," able to do as we please. Even so, our lives are filled with people and structures which demand our obedience. The police officer on the corner and the IRS have authority.

Authority is not just the ability to compel another person. We call that "power." Power is shared by both cops and robbers. Yet only the cop has "authority"-the morally legitimated ability to compel another. Indeed, this is our common notion of authority-it is a legitimated ability to compel another, backed (if need be) by force. Yet this common notion doesn't work when transferred into Christian contexts, for Jesus and his disciples have a very different vision of authority.

Jesus' disturbing teaching about authority among his followers contrasts their experience of it with every other society. The kings of the Gentiles, he said, lord it over their subjects and make that appear good by calling themselves "benefactors." They exercise their power and try (more or less successfully) to make people think that it is for their own good. But it should never be so in the church. There, on the contrary, the one who leads is as a slave and the one who rules is as the youngest (Lk 22:24-27). Lest this lose its impact, you should stop to reflect that the youngest and the slaves are precisely those *without* authority in our normal sense of the word. Yet this is what leadership among Jesus' people is like.

Unfortunately, we nearly always avoid the force of this disturbing teaching by transforming it into pious rhetoric. We style ourselves as "servants" but act just like the kings of the Gentiles in exercising authority. Yet even the kings of the Gentiles try to make their authority palatable by legitimating it with pious rhetoric; this is why they call themselves "benefactors." So how are we any different? If we are to live like Jesus' followers, we need to take seriously his insight that leaders are as children and slaves, those without authority.

The most obvious aspect of what the NT has to say about leadership and authority is its lack of interest in the subject. In all of Paul's major letters, for instance, leaders only appear in Php 1:1, and there only in passing. For the most part, he ignores them, as do the other writers. Jesus' immediate followers were strangely silent about leadership and authority. This silence, it turns out, is quite significant.

The NT uses two words which correspond to different aspects of what we mean by "authority." The first, *dunamis*, is usually (and rightly) translated as "power." This word is less important for us because though "power" may be associated with some kinds of authority, it also can exist

without authority. Someone waving a gun has power over others, but that does not necessarily give them authority.

Still, it will be worthwhile to look at who has *dunamis* (power) in the NT. If you take a walk through a concordance, you will find that the following possess power: God, Jesus, the Spirit, as well as angels, demons, and "principalities and powers." Human beings, oddly, don't have power themselves; they are only energized by these other powers. The ministry of the gospel, the miracles of the apostles, and the lives of believers are all conditioned on the "power of God." Strikingly, the NT seldom, if ever, recognizes human beings with "power" in their own right—power always comes to people from elsewhere.

Things become even more interesting when we turn to the other relevant Greek word: *exousia*. This word is usually translated as "power" or "authority" and is the closest equivalent to our English word "authority." The NT's list of those who have *exousia* is essentially the same as those who have *dunamis*: God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, angels and demons. But now, the list extends to humans who are not merely energized by heavenly authority but have authority themselves.

Thus, kings have authority to rule (Ro 13:1-2) and Jesus' disciples have authority over diseases and spirits (e.g., Mt 10:1). Believers have authority over the various facets of their lives—their possessions (Ac 5:4), and eating, drinking, and being married (1 Co 11:10).

What is striking, however, is that the NT does not say anything about one believer having authority over another. We have plenty of authority over things, and even over spirits, but never over other Christians. Considering how much energy we put into discussions of who has authority in the church, that should be surprising. Kings have authority over their subjects; Paul had authority from the high priest to persecute Christians (Ac 9:14; 26:10-12). But in the church, one believer is never spoken of as having *exousia* over another, regardless of their position or prestige. With the exception, that is, of 2 Co 10:8 and 13:10. In these texts Paul speaks of having "authority" to build up, not tear down. It seems that he, at least, has *exousia* over other believers. Admittedly, one has to over-interpret the texts in order to make them a real exception since in both cases this is not an authority "over" anyone but rather an authority "for" a purpose.

But even granting that this over-interpretation is plausible, the exception is hardly an exception when you take two things into account. First, by his own admission, Paul is speaking "as a fool" in this part of his letter. He avoids claiming authority over others when he speaks "soberly," so it seems unlikely that he would be pleased with us using his "foolish" speech as the only basis for claiming that church leaders have spiritual authority over other believers.

Second, the context of the letter is characterized by persuasion. The profound significance of this will become clear in due course. Paul spills a great deal of ink trying to persuade the Corinthians to listen to him. If he "had authority" over them, in the sense we usually think of it, why did he bother? Why not just give the orders and be done with it? The answer, as we will see, lies in the peculiar nature of the relationship he sees between leaders and other believers.

Before we get to that, however, we should notice that Paul seems to lack authority in our everyday sense of the word (morally legitimated power) even here where he is allegedly asserting it. This should strongly caution us, then, against thinking of leaders as having authority merely on the basis of two sentences in 2 Co.

Now look at things from the other side. Rather than asking who has authority in the NT, we should ask the opposite question, "Whom should one obey?" The answer here is interesting, too.

If you examine the usage of *hupakouo*, which is the Greek equivalent of "obey," you will find that we ought to obey God, the gospel (Ro 10:16), and the teaching of the apostles (Php 2:12; 2 Th 3:14). Children are to obey their parents and servants their masters (Eph 6:1, 5). But are believers to obey church leaders? If they are, the NT writers studiously avoid saying so. But what about Heb 13:17 which says "obey your leaders?" This text is interesting, because it can give us an insight into the positive side of the NT's understanding of leadership. Up to now I have emphasized the negative-that they do *not* have authority in our usual sense, and believers are *not* told to obey them. In spite of all this, the NT insists that there are leaders in a local body, that they are recognizable as such, and that their existence and ministry are important to the health of the body.

What is the positive side of this understanding of leadership? There is a clue in Heb 13:17. If you examine the verb translated "obey" in this text, you will find it to be a form of the word *peitho* which means "persuade." In the form used here it means something like "let yourself be persuaded by" or "have confidence in." That's helpful. Believers are to let themselves be persuaded by their leaders.

Leaders in the church are accorded a certain respect which lends their words more weight than they have in and of themselves. And the rest of the church should be "biased" in favor of listening to what they say. We are to allow ourselves to be persuaded by our leaders, not obeying them mindlessly but entering into discussion with them and being open to what they are saying. (By the way, now it should be clear why it was so significant that Paul's statements in 2 Co were in a context of persuasion. He was trying to persuade them to let themselves be persuaded by him.)

The other verb used in Heb 13:17 reinforces this conclusion. When the text goes on to urge people to "submit" to leaders, it does not use the garden-variety Greek word for "submit." The normal word is *hupotassomai*, which connotes something like placing oneself in an organization under another person. Thus we are sometimes told to submit to governments (Ro 13:1; Tit 3:1), to the social roles in which we find ourselves (Col 3:18; 1 Pe 2:18), and to the "powers that be" of our society (1 Pt 2:13).

The word here, however, is different. It is *hupaitko*, and it occurs only here in the NT. It connotes not a structure to which one submits, but a battle after which one yields. The image is one of a serious discussion, and interchange after which one party gives way. This meshes nicely with the notion that we are to let ourselves be persuaded by leaders in the church, rather than simply submitting to them as we might to the existing powers and structures of life.

All this makes sense of the criteria for elders or overseers in the pastoral epistles. In these writings, character, not charisma or administrative ability, is the most important thing about leaders. They should be "respectable." If they are supposed to be persuaders, it makes sense that they ought preeminently to be respectable because this is the kind of person whose words we are inclined to take very seriously. The kind of respectability outlined there lends credibility to the words of leaders, and hence gives us confidence in opening ourselves to being persuaded by them.

The NT's orientation to leaders in the church is characterized by genuine servanthood, not morally legitimized force. Thus, we should begin from the idea of "persuaders" when we try to understand leadership. It is true that the one by whom people are more easily persuaded does have a kind of authority. But it is not the authority-to-be-obeyed kind of authority. It also does

not expect the mindless submission which characterizes many of our assumptions about authority today.

But there is more. The persuasiveness of such leaders depends on truth. Presumably, if leaders are wrong in their judgment and yet are seriously concerned to serve, they would not be happy with someone following them in their error. A leader who has the charisma to persuade people of something untrue, and does so, is virtually demonic. To be persuaded of a lie is the worst form of bondage. Leaders in the church are bound to the truth and serve it above all in their service of others.

This necessity of serving the truth, by the way, is the reason why the NT emphasizes obeying the gospel or the apostle's teaching, rather than leaders. The trust engendered by service is dangerous if it is not coordinated with a common obedience to the truth of the gospel. If the desire for truth is not at the basis of leadership in the body, the trust which can be created by service is just another, more subtle form of power-the power we call manipulation.

Persuasion presupposes dialogue; and dialogue requires the active participation of the whole body. Our common understanding of authority isolates leaders and puts them over those who are under authority. The leadership of genuine service, however, has a natural basis in the dialogue which undergirds it. Leaders in the church have need for neither the pious rhetoric of the kings of the Gentiles nor the force which lies behind it. Rather, because they are persuaders, they can rely on dialogue as the arena and channel of their service.

So, genuine leadership in the church is based on service, truth, and trust, not authority. Leaders in the church are called by the truth to lives which are worthy of imitation, and thus respectable, and to lives of service. Such a life engenders the trust of others. Yet leaders, as well as the rest of the members of the body, are always in common subjection to the truth which is in Christ.

- H.M.