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Foreword

Essays in this Faculty Bulletin variously address issues associated with leadership and authority in the church. Rick Marrs provides suggestive insights for the contemporary church in his analysis of several types of leadership in Israel.

James Thompson and Allan McNicol separately address similar problems in examining leadership in the early church. Thompson finds in the early church a model of leadership which is neither autocratic nor democratic. McNicol focuses on the concept of ministry and applies his insights to the Restoration tradition.

The final essay argues that authority functions in and reflects an ethos. The contemporary church's difficulties with authority are in part due to a failure to understand this and in part due to the contemporary ethos.

Appreciation is due my colleagues for their cooperation in preparing these essays.

Michael R. Weed, editor

AUTHORITY AND LEADERSHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

By James W. Thompson

Within the restoration tradition, few have quarrel 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 on the role and authority of these offices, both in the New Testament and in the contemporary church. Some insist that the early churches were highly democratic and that its 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 For Parks, the responsibility for church discipline belonged to the corporate body and not to a

small group of leaders. The bishops did not exercise authority over the church. Larry Richards, in A Theology 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 elders of the New Testament are perceived as a decision-making 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 presence of two alternative views of the authority of leaders reflects a general uncertainty over the locus of authority in the local church. While no one denies that authority belongs to God, uncertainty exists when we ask who has the authority to speak for God. Is the church fundamentally democratic? Are leaders chosen by the congregation and subject to recall? Our uncertainty over authority is exacerbated by the fact that our own background and experience predispose us to read the biblical evidence in a way that corresponds to our own experience of the way groups function. In our own society, we are naturally tempted to take the biblical titles “elder,” “minister,” and “deacon,” superimposing a democratic or

corporate model of authority. When this is done, we naturally read into the text ideas of representative government and decision-making that are foreign to it. Our own experience of authority thus conditions us to read the New Testament with our own assumptions.

The complexity of the modern situation, where the church holds property titles and has extensive programs and budgets, adds to the uncertainty about using the New Testament to discover the nature of authority in the church. Since ancient churches had no budgets or property titles, no one exercised authority in these matters. Thus our situation was not envisioned in the New Testament.

Despite the differences in culture between the past and the present, we nevertheless turn to the New Testament for the insights it may offer on the scope of authority in the local churches. In this article, I shall focus on the dynamics of authority on the churches influenced by Paul.

Authority in the New Testament

Eduard Schweizer has pointed out that one of the “surprising consistencies” in the New Testament is revealed in word statistics. Schweizer observes a reticence in the New Testament in speaking of offices in the church.³ Although the Greek language has a wide variety of words for office, few of these words appear in the New Testament. Where they occur, they almost never refer to the

officers in the local congregations.⁴ The one authority in Paul's letters is the gospel. Not even the apostles have the freedom to "tamper with" it (2 Cor. 4:2) or to preach any other message (cf. Gal. 1:6-9). Paul knows that he is only a steward of this message (1 Cor. 4:1) which has been entrusted to him. Even such an esteemed person as Peter is subject to the authority of the gospel (2:11-14).⁵ Consequently, in the name of the gospel Paul challenges Peter at Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14); Thus authority in the New Testament belongs to the Lord alone. Even his apostles are nothing more than slaves (2 Cor. 4:5) who have been captured by the gospel. As slaves of the gospel, they exhaust themselves for the sake of others (2 Cor. 12:15).

While Paul is only a "steward" of the message, 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 1 Corinthians, he answers questions concerning a variety of problems in the Corinthian church. In all of the letters, he does not hesitate to give instructions on Christian behavior. Where his churches do not follow his instructions, he assumes the father's authority to give a beating (1 Cor. 4:21). He does not hesitate to say of these instructions, "this is the will of God" (cf. 1 Thess. 4:3), or to claim that God is speaking through him (2 Cor. 5:20). He pronounces the judgment on the man

who is living in an incestuous relationship in Corinth, and he expects the church to follow his instructions (1 Cor. 5:1-5). According to 2 Corinthians 10:8; 13:10, the Lord has given him the authority to build and to tear down. Thus his role is not unlike that of Jeremiah, who was authorized to “pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (1:10).

This authority and power in Paul cannot be separated from other aspects of Paul’s life as an apostle. His power is that of an anxious parent who has devoted himself to his children. As a parent, his role is to instruct, provide a model for imitation, correct his children, and require obedience from them.

Paul’s personal authority over his churches is closely related to his total identification with the cross of Christ in his total ministry. He does not “lord it over” his church (2 Cor. 1:24). Instead, the features which legitimize his authority are his sleepless nights, anxiety for the churches (2 Cor. 11:28), and willingness to “be spent” for the lives of others.

Authority in the Local Churches

If Paul exercised authority over his churches, which included even the right to command the whole church to follow his instructions on church discipline (1 Cor. 5:1-5) or in the appropriate attire at worship (1 Cor. 11:2-6), one may reasonably ask if the local church had positions of authority. The letters were

addressed to the entire community, and they suggest that no function is reserved only for office holders. There is no Christian equivalent to the “head of the synagogue” (archisynagogos, cf. Mark 5:22; Acts 13:15; 18:8). Paul insists that every Christian has the gift of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12: 13), and that each one contributes to the life of the body. A persistent theme in his letters is that of mutuality, which is to be seen in his frequent use of the expression “one another” (allelon, Rom. 12:5, 10; 15:7, 14; Gal. 5:13, 15). All Christians are to “encourage one another” (1 Thess. 4:18) and “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2). They are to “live in harmony with one another” (Rom. 12:16) and “welcome one another” (Rom. 15:7). Expressions with “one another” provide an important linguistic clue to the patterns of community life in the New Testament, as G. Lohfink shows.⁶ This community life was built on the responsibilities of all for each other.⁷

Although the whole church is encouraged to be active in teaching, encouraging, and admonishing (cf. 1 Thess. 5:14), Paul’s letters indicate that the church was not meant to be a “leaderless mob.”⁸ From the very earliest days, local leadership existed and was recognized by the congregation. The relationship between the obligations of the whole community and those of its leaders is evident in Paul’s earliest extant letter, 1 Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians 5:11,

14, Christians are told to “encourage one another and build one another up” (5:11), to “admonish the idlers” and “encourage the fainthearted” (5:14). At the same time there is a special group composed of those who “labor among you and are over you and admonish you in the Lord” (5:12). That a single group is referred to is indicated by the single article used to describe them.⁹

The use of participles rather than nouns to describe them indicates that no fixed titles exist in the community.¹⁰ They are known for the functions which they perform. A close interrelationship exists between the functions of laboring, being over the congregation, and admonishing others. Inasmuch as their role in “admonishing” is also the work of the whole church, a continuity exists between the roles of the group of leaders and the task of the whole church. Although all are instructed to “admonish,” a special group had emerged who were recognized for their work of admonishing.

The RSV expression, “those who are over you” (proistameno), suggests that a measure of authority accompanied the task of laboring and admonishing. The term rendered to “be over” (proistemi) also means to “give aid,” In the list of ministries provided by the Spirit in Rom. 12:8, the word is rendered in the RSV, “he who gives aid.” In antiquity both meanings were present because the giving of aid was the task of those in high positions who cared for their dependents and

subordinates.¹¹ The word, according to H. Greeven, was used for the protective, authoritative care exercised by superiors.¹² Brockhaus calls it. “an authoritative care” and a “caring authority.”¹³ By the early fifties of the first century, therefore, some had emerged who were, like the leaders of a city or parents in their homes, looking out after the needs of those who were under their care. The mutuality of the life of the church did not preclude the presence of local leaders who exercised authority in the church.

The emergence of leaders who are distinguished from the rest of the congregation is also indicated in 1 Corinthians 16:15-16 where, as in 1 Thess. 5:13, the congregation is encouraged to “know” them. Here also no titles are given. The household of Stephanas is distinguished by the fact that they “have devoted themselves to the service of the saints” (1 Cor. 16:15). Similarly, the leaders of 1 Thessalonians 5:13 are recognized because of their work. Here, as H. Greeven has indicated,¹⁴

It is not cleverness, worldly wisdom, or “connections” which predestine one for leadership in the community, but rather the zeal and joyful devotion on its behalf alone. One who is driven by zeal and does not hesitate to put forth effort is one who is capable of assuming leadership.

Consequently Paul summons his congregations to “know” them and “esteem them” (1 Thess. 5:13), i.e., to recognize what they have done and continue to do

for the church. Their legitimacy is not derived specifically from ordination or appointment, but from their commitment to a task and the church's recognition of their work.

In churches which were distinguished by the mutuality of obligations, what authority did these leaders possess in their local congregations? In the period of Paul's activity, their authority was limited, for, as we have seen, Paul exercised sweeping authority over his churches. When, for example, the church exercised discipline, it acted on the authority of the apostle. Nevertheless, the references in 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians indicate the presence of significant authority in the hands of the leaders who had emerged. In addition to the church's obligation to "esteem" and "know" them, it is also instructed to "be subject" to such people as the household Stephanas and "to every fellow worker and laborer" (1 Cor. 16:16). The verb hypotassein ("be subject") is used elsewhere in the New Testament for the wife's subjection to her husband (Col. 3:18), for the mutual submission of family members to each other (Eph. 5:21), and for the Christian's subjection to the state (Rom. 13:1). The word is derived from tassein, to order or determine,¹⁵ and is related to taxis, order. The word and its cognates are used for the orderly arrangement of things. Since all things are to be done "decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40),¹⁶ some within the congregation are to be subordinate to

others. Thus one may speak of the development of local authority within the congregation are to be subordinate to others. Thus one may speak of the development of local authority within the Pauline churches.

Although local leaders with authority in the community had emerged in the mid-fifties, no fixed titles appear to be in use until a later date. “Those who are over you” in 1 Thessalonians 5:13 may be the equivalent to the “administrators” (*kybernēseis*) who are listed among the workers in 1 Corinthians 12:28.¹⁷ In Philippians 1:1, the first reference is made to “bishops and deacons.” We have no indication from Philippians what their functions were, except what can be inferred from the meaning of the titles themselves.¹⁸ The bishop (*episkopos*) undoubtedly had the role of supervision. Thus the role of bishop in Phil. 1:1 cannot be distinguished from that of “those who are over you” in 1 Thess. 5:13, as both terms are derived from related areas secular speech.¹⁹ James D. G. Dunn²⁰ is probably correct that

some of the less well-defined areas of administration and service ... had begun to be grouped together or to cohere into more clearly outlined forms of ministry, so that those who regularly engaged in them could be known by the same name (overseer or deacon).

The Pastoral Epistles

A new development in the view of authority in the Pauline churches is

apparent in the Pastoral Epistles, for these letters anticipate the demise of the apostle's personal authority and the need of local leaders in the church in the battle against false teaching. The bishop episkopos of 1 Tim. 3:1 is apparently the equivalent of the elder in 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5.²¹ Here one may speak of the "offices" of the bishop and deacon with specific qualifications for each. Such "faithful men" comprise the bridge between Paul and the post-apostolic age (2 Tim. 2:2). They are to be ordained "in every city" (Titus 1:6), where they serve as the bulwark against the growing dangers of false teaching. Alongside Timothy and Titus, Paul's emissaries, they are active in passing on the sound teaching. Some are said "to labor in preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17).

Although the focus of the Pastoral Epistles is on the qualifications for church leaders, the actual authority of these leaders is indicated in a few references. The church in these epistles is viewed as a "household," according to 1 Tim. 3:15. Accordingly, the bishop functions as the head of an extended family. His role is especially evident in the instructions for bishops in 1 Tim. 3:4-5. In a parenthetical comment intended to justify the requirement that the bishop "govern" his household well, the parallel is drawn between governing the household and caring for the church: "For if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's church?"

The authority of the bishop is indicated in the parallel between managing (proistemi) the household and “caring for” (epimeleomai) the church. The two words are interchangeable in referring to authority of various kinds at different levels, including the wide-ranging authority associated with the head of the family in the Hellenistic-Roman society.²² Indeed, a form of proistēmi is used in the reference to “elders who rule well” in 1 Tim. 5:17. As heads over an extended family, they undoubtedly exercised a significant amount of authority, particularly in the area of teaching.

Their authority was not unlimited, for 1 Tim. 5:19-20 offers measures to be taken when elders “persist in sin.” Procedures are mentioned for the rebuke of the elder. Here members of the congregation would serve as witnesses in such a proceeding.

The Scope of Local Authority

During the period of Paul’s active ministry, the scope of the authority of local leaders is not clearly indicated. They neither exercised church discipline nor arranged the services of worship (1 Cor. 14:26). Where major conflicts exist, as in Galatians, Paul does not place the leaders in charge.²³ One may reasonably ask, therefore, what authority was exercised by local leaders. Although Paul’s letters do not answer the question directly, they refer to the functions of some who were

recognized for special qualities. Some were numbered among the “spiritual” of Galatians 6:1, who restored the wayward Christians. Others were recognized sufficiently for their teaching that they were to receive remuneration for their work (Gal. 6:6). Undoubtedly the primary authority of the early leaders grew out of their role as teachers. Perhaps, as B. Holmberg has suggested, they also cared for the sick and the poor, received traveling missionaries, and accommodated the church in their homes.²⁴

The decisive reason for the limit in the authority of local leaders in the epistles written during the fifties is the presence of Paul as the final arbiter of all questions of faith and practice. His letters show that he still controls church life and takes personal responsibility for the members. Holmberg is correct when he says,²⁵

The founder has not left the scene, but is fully and energetically active in his churches (especially in Corinth). . . . And it is just this potential accessibility of the apostle, the fact that he is still actively present and his authority fully accessible, that prevents the full (social, legal and theological) development of those beginnings of an office structure we observe in the Pauline letters.

The Pastoral Epistles reflect the natural development in local authority. Where the demise of the apostle is anticipated, greater authority is assumed. The bishop/elder is responsible for the preservation of sound doctrine. As in Paul’s speech to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:18-35), the task of the elder/bishop is to protect the church from the wolves who would destroy it. The authority to protect

the church undoubtedly included the determination of sound doctrine and the exclusion of those who failed to pass the test. The elder/bishop of the Pastoral Epistles was a patriarchal figure who had emerged as a leader because of his faithfulness and his ability to preach and teach. As the patriarch of an extended family, he took responsibility for the spiritual health of those who were under his care.

Authority of Local Leaders Today

Although local authority in the New Testament was in the process of development and rooted in a patriarchal culture, there are features of local authority which were so intrinsic to the Christian faith that they can be used in the contemporary church. I suggest that the following aspects of local authority should be present in local congregations today.

1. The subtle dialectic in the New Testament between the responsibilities of all and the task of a small group of leaders, resulting in a mutual service between those who lead and those who are subordinate, should be recognized. Fundamental to the functioning of the local church is the recognition of the equality of all as members of the body of Christ and the recognition that some have the authority to serve as “helmsmen” for the community.

2. The church is not a democracy. The church has a special need for those who, because of their maturity in the faith, provide special guidance and have grown in the faith. The major decisions affecting the identity of the church

are not settled by majority vote. Nevertheless, Christian leaders recognize that their authority does not justify the excesses of the autocrat. The model for Christian leadership remains the one who exhausted himself for others (cf. 2 Cor. 12:15).

3. Christian leaders were, from the beginning, primarily teachers who had grown in the faith. They were recognized as leaders because they had demonstrated their gift of teaching and service (cf. 1 Cor. 16:15-16). The divorce of the teaching ministry from the modern eldership has disastrous results for the church. The selection of elders on any basis other than service and maturity in the faith will leave a church without essential leadership.

4. Just as essential authority in biblical times resided in the gospel itself, and not in the apostles and local leaders, authority today rests in the gospel. All leaders remain subject to the claim of the gospel, which is mediated through Scripture. All leaders remain nothing more than “stewards of the gospel” (cf. 1 Cor. 4:1).

The New Testament is authoritative for the life of the church as it remains the source of doctrine and offers models of leadership. 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.

Footnotes

- ¹ Norman Parks, Mission 18 (1984) 5.
- ² Larry Richards, A Theology of Church Leadership (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 89-95.
- ³ Eduard Schweizer, Church Order in the New Testament, SBT 32 (London: SCM, 1961) 171.
- ⁴ Schweizer, 171.
- ⁵ Hans von Campenhausen, Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries (Stanford, California: Stanford University, 1969) 37.
- ⁶ G. Lohfink, Jesus and Community (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 99.
- ⁷ G. Lohfink, 102.
- ⁸ See C. K. Barrett, Church, Ministry, and Sacraments in the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 34.
- ⁹ H. Greeven, "Propheten, Lehrer, Vorsteher bei Paulus. Zur Frage der 'Ämter' im Urchristentum," in K. Kertelge, ed. Das Kirchliche Amt im Neuen Testament (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977) 348.
- ¹⁰ R. Banks, Paul's Idea of Community (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 144.
- ¹¹ von Campenhausen, 65.
- ¹² Greeven, 346.
- ¹³ U. Brockhaus, Charisma und Amt. Die paulinische Charismenlehre auf Hintergrund der frühchristlichen Gemeindefunktionen. Cited in B. Holmberg, Paul and Power (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 99.

- ¹⁴ Greeven, 349.
- ¹⁵ W. Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957) 813.
- ¹⁶ H. Conzelmann, “1 Corinthians,” Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 298.
- ¹⁷ Kybernēseis refers literally to the helmsman who “steers a ship.” It was often used metaphorically for those who exercised leadership in communities. H. W. Beyer, TDNT 111. 1036-1037.
- ¹⁸ Holmberg, 100.
- ¹⁹ Greeven, 354.
- ²⁰ James D. G. Dunn, Unity and Diversity in the New Testament (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 113.
- ²¹ Earlier Pauline letters make no reference to the presbuteros (elder). The term is derived from the Jewish synagogue and is used in Acts for the church leaders in Jerusalem and elsewhere (cf. Acts 4:5, 8; Acts 14:23).
- ²² David Verner, Household of God; The Social World of the Pastoral Epistles, SBL Dissertation Series (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983) 152.
- ²³ Holmberg, 112.
- ²⁴ Holmberg, 116.
- ²⁵ Holmberg, 116.

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