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Foreword

Essays in this <u>Faculty Bulletin</u> 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

ETHOS AND AUTHORITY: THEN AND NOW
By Michael R. Weed

The burgeoning number of publications addressing the topic of authority suggests that the nature and function of authority is increasingly becoming a problem within modern society.[1] Evidence to this effect can also be found in various institutions and organizations throughout our society. It is not surprising then, that churches--especially fragile voluntary associations from a sociological point of view--should find the whole area of authority fraught with difficulties.

Problems facing Christians regarding authority are real and complex, and they will not be easily resolved. These comments are not intended as the final solution to the problems facing the church in this area. A more modest intent, however, is that they may help clarify dimensions of the problem and Promote reflection on the part of those perhaps more capable of addressing the issue.

It is of critical importance to note that authority functions in, and is a function of, communities.[2] Communities with different self-understandings--different values, beliefs, and goals--will develop different kinds of leaders and procedures for exercising authority, transferring authority, and limiting authority. For example, leaders in motorcycle gangs, service organizations, combat teams, and medical societies may all be "leaders," but the nature and function of their authority--not to mention their personal traits and characteristics--vary drastically.

Second, it is important to note that any major shift in the community will cause an accompanying shift in the type and function of authority in the community. That is, any new self-understanding--change of basic values and goals--will bring about a different understanding of authority.

This seemingly simple and obvious point is all too frequently overlooked--often with comic results, but sometimes with tragic ones. For example, the placing of a retired military man in charge of a dormitory for college men because of his military experience represents a miscalculation. While the retired officer may survive and make a good dormitory supervisor, he will not do so on the same basis that he exercised authority in the military. And. in fact, if he attempts to treat residents in the dormitory as if they were serving in the military,

no end of problems will arise.

Christians are not immune from making this kind mistake and attempting to interchange and transfer authority from different communities. This began to happen very early in the history of the church. One rather vivid case, for example, occurred when in the fourth century the Bishop of Milan died. A young civil servant was alerted by the commotion of the crowd and attempted to quell the near-riot. The unruly crowd was so taken with his bearing, deportment, and courage that Ambrose--unbaptized at the time--was named Bishop of Milan.

It appears that several fundamental shifts in the church's self-understanding--its nature and goals--are occurring today. These changes are related to and reflect a number of overall shifts in the contemporary climate or ethos in which the church exists. In turn, these shifts also have far-reaching implications for the understanding and exercise of authority in the church.

The Ethos of the Early Church

"Ethos" designates the climate of opinion--those deeply held values, beliefs, and assumptions which underlie and guide the manner in which life is lived in a given culture. The early Christian movement was fundamentally shaped by its environment. While the Christian movement in time developed its own distinct ethos, it was critically indebted to the ethos in which it appeared and

grew. At least four factors had a direct bearing upon the nature and exercise of authority in the emerging Christian community--factors in large part shared by Jewish communities and by the Hellenistic society into which the Christian movement quickly spread.

First, the church emerged in an environment in which a high value was placed on tradition. Tradition preserved the past--not just for the Jews but also for Hellenists--linking present society with the sacred events and heroic events upon which society was founded. Tradition preserved society with time-honored and revered ways of doing things. Thus in spite of the tensions between different traditions, life was virtually unthinkable apart from the existence of foundational traditions. Tradition formed an authoritative body of customs, practices, and teachings which gave shape and direction to both public and private life.

Second, the ethos of the first-century world was one marked by respect for aged ones in the community. This was particularly the case in Jewish communities where the very fact of longevity was regarded as a sign of God's favor. Old ones were also, however, regarded as custodians and interpreters of the traditions--living links with the past.

Respect, and occasionally almost reverence, for aged members of the community, however, was not unique to Jewish communities. In the Roman

world as well, elderly persons were respected and thought to serve as exemplars or models of ideal behavior. Significantly, respect for age was not limited to the age of one's own community but could occasionally give rise to expressions of respect even for the aged of other communities. (For example, in the semi-legendary account of the martyrdom of Polycarp, the pagan proconsul expresses respect for Polycarp's age and attempt to dissuade him from accepting martyrdom.)

Third, the world of the early church was a world in which wisdom was highly valued and thought to be necessary in order to live a good life. Jewish youth were enjoined to seek after and follow the ways of Wisdom. Hellenists also placed high value on that theoria and phroneisis, which promoted what Aristotle would call "human flourishing."

Finally, the world of the early church was a world which, for the most part, was structured and regulated by authorities. The political and military presence of Rome was felt throughout the empire. Additionally, local customs and traditions existed which shaped and guided everyday affairs ranging from marriage and commerce to recreation. In short, it was a world in which authorities existed and, if not always respected, were at least accepted. Moreover, structures of authority were generally linked to an underlying cosmic pattern or divine purpose. Whether or not one was satisfied with the particular expression or practice of a given authority, the idea of life apart from authority would have been unthinkable and meaningless.

The Early Church

The early church emerged in a world in which these four factors formed part of the basic underlying ethos. Accordingly, we should not be surprised to hear its leaders enjoining early Christians to "be subject to the governing authorities" (Rom 13:1), and to "be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution" (1 Pet. 2:11). To be certain, these exhortations are not blanket endorsements of existing authorities. They do suggest, however, that early Christians recognized and understood themselves to be living in a world structured by authorities either directly or indirectly reflecting the overarching governance of the Creator.

Certainly the church was a new community--an eschatological community--with a membership open to all and with a revolutionary understanding of power and authority. And yet the early church certainly did not understand itself as an anarchic community. It was neither a leaderless mob nor was it an egalitarian society. For all its newness, the church emerged as a community which reflected certain basic underlying motifs of the traditional ethos.

While the church stood in considerable tension with many of the particular traditions of other groups, it nonetheless quickly developed its own authoritative

traditions--regarding doctrine (Rom. 6:17), church practices (1 Cor. 4:17; 7:17; 11:16; 14:33), and ethics (1 Thess. 4:1ff.; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6). And these traditions carried more than the force of habit; they were regarded as deriving their authority from the Lord, apostolic figures, and the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit within the ongoing life of the community. Accordingly, the Pastorals indicate the emergence of a recognized body of authoritative tradition variously designated as "the teaching" (1 Tim. 4:16; 6:1; 2 Tim. 3:10), "sound teaching" (1 Tim. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:3; Tit. 1:9), or "that which has been entrusted" (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:12, 14). Regarding this authoritative body of tradition, the church is enjoined to "hold firm to the sure word" (Tit. 1:9), "guard it" (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:12-14), protect it (1 Tim. 6:1), and faithfully to teach and pass on the tradition to others (2 Tim. 2:2).[3]

Naturally, as a community deriving its very existence from the revealed tradition, the church chose and recognized as its leaders those older ones who knew the tradition. These were also those who possessed unique insight and wisdom given to the faithful. Such ones--exemplars of the faith--taught and gave instruction in the faith, and thus assumed a primary responsibility for the faithful passing on of the tradition. These leaders and authority structures (ranging from household relationships to social relationships and, ultimately, to the Emperor

himself) were--where not in direct conflict with the Christian tradition--to be respected.

Although the early church initiated new traditions and stood in considerable tension with many surrounding customs and traditions, it still reflected features characteristic of its surrounding ethos. The synagogue, philosophical schools, voluntary associations, and the Hellenistic household all contributed to the developing self-understanding of the new community.[4] And behind these particular influences the early Christian movement was also reflective of the general ethos or climate in which it emerged.

Hence it would be distorting to view the church as an egalitarian or democratic community in any contemporary sense. It was a community possessing an authoritative tradition and a community in which old ones and wise ones were accorded special honor and respect. Such ones were entrusted with interpreting and transmitting the sacred and authoritative tradition and with overseeing the welfare and direction of the life of the community.

<center>The Modern Ethos</center>

The modern ethos is one that is fundamentally different from that in which the early church emerged. In the present age the supporting framework of a traditional ethos is quickly disappearing. More precisely, the particular features which we have traced have largely eroded. Hannah Arendt succinctly states: "We

live in a world that is neither structured by authority nor held together by tradition."[5] It is a society which, outside of annual ceremonies, knows little real tradition other than perpetual restlessness and an openness to the new and the novel. In this climate it is not surprising that wisdom does not fare well Christopher Lasch states:

> The real value of accumulated wisdom of a lifetime is that it can be handed on to future generations. Our society, however, has lost this conception of wisdom and knowledge. It holds an instrumental view of knowledge according to which technological change constantly renders knowledge obsolete and therefore non-transferable.[6]

Likewise, the significance of old ones in the community has undergone a radical shift in meaning. Again, Lasch states:

> Our society notoriously finds little use for the elderly. It defines them as useless, forces them to retire before they have exhausted their capacity for working, and reinforces their sense of superfluity at every opportunity.[7]

In modern society, old ones represent antiquated, quaint, and pre-modern views. They are not viewed as links to an authoritative tradition or as possessors and exemplars of wisdom valuable for human flourishing. Like children of an earlier era, old ones are now expected to be seen and not heard. In the modern ethos, "the older generation has nothing to teach the younger... ."[8]

Accordingly, we may contend that the erosion of the traditional ethos is presently having far-reaching and devastating effects on contemporary society and its institutions--particularly with regard to the nature and function of authority. These destructive effects can be seen at work in government,

commerce, education, and even in the contemporary family. In essence, the modern ethos promotes an ahistorical, radically individualistic, and egoistic view of the human. Such a view of the human legitimates the raw pursuit of narrowly defined self-fulfillment. And, as is increasingly evident, this is an ethos which can neither sustain a culture nor preserve and promote that which is truly human.

Concluding Theses

In concluding these reflections several theses may be stated which, while not profound, do appear to merit further consideration.

Thesis One. Given the pervasive influence of the modern ethos on the institutions of contemporary society, it should not be surprising that the church is also becoming heavily affected by the modern ethos and the loss of the traditional ethos.

Thesis Two. The loss of the traditional ethos will have a radical impact on the church. Given the formative influence of the traditional ethos on the shape of the early church as it emerged, the disappearance of this ethos is not merely the loss of some incidental and expendable aspect of first-century cultural baggage. Because of the integral role of the traditional ethos in the formation of early Christian faith and practice, its disappearance will have far-reaching implications for the contemporary church.

Thesis Three. The traditional ethos, in its formal attributes, may be viewed as more of a truly human ethos than the contemporary ethos. That is, it may be argued that, given the fact that humans are social and rational beings living in history, there are certain foundational values, practices, and institutions which preserve and promote reflection, free and just communities, and the endurance of meaningful human experience in history. Tradition, wisdom, respect for aged exemplars, and a general sense of order and purpose, may all be included in this category.

Thesis Four. The loss of the traditional ethos will have radically negative and far-reaching effects on the contemporary church--especially in the area of authority. At the very least, contemporary Christians will increasingly find themselves bewildered, confused, and even stupefied as they attempt to comprehend the strange world of the early church. At the more extreme, an increasing number of contemporary Christians will overtly resist such ideas as the authority of scripture or apostolic authority. They will say with candor, "Paul just doesn't do anything for me," or "But isn't that just the writer's opinion?"

Far more pervasive, however, will be a number of more subtle forms of compromise and accommodation. Thus biblical images and terms will either be used in ornamental fashion or will be infused with new meaning reflecting

contemporary values and practices.

By way of illustration, in the modern technological and bureaucratic climate of managers, executives, and directors the traditional concept of "elder" is as meaningful as "alchemist." While the term itself survives as part of the debris of bygone days, many elders would frankly admit that they serve more as members of an executive board or as elected officials representing and responsive to a body politic.

Or, to cite another example of how a biblical image or term may survive but be infused with new meaning, one could note the current interest in New Testament (and especially Pauline) family and household imagery (e.g., "the church family here at Woodvine"). Ironically, while this imagery is presently being employed to capture or create an impression of intimacy, acceptance, and informality, this is not its primary significance within the early church. Like the contemporary nuclear family, the first-century household (both Jewish and Hellenistic versions) had a definite structure and order. New Testament scholar Wayne Meeks states that in the first century, the

> . . . head of the household . . . would exercise some authority over the group and would have some legal responsibility for it. The structure of the oikos was hierarchical, and contemporary political moral thought regarded the structure of the superior and inferior roles as basic to the well-being of the whole society.[9]

While the church did set in motion countervailing tendencies, in the first instance, familial terminology provided the early church with an imagery which suggested structure, order, and stability. Consequently, membership in the family or household of God conveyed a sense of order, structure, obligation, and even some sense of ecclesiastical hierarchy rather than a sense of simple conviviality and familiarity.[10]

(Certainly it is understandable that closeness and intimacy are desirable, especially in large churches and especially in a society which makes people feel alienated, lonely, and insignificant. But the long-term value of using biblical imagery of the family without further thought may be undesirable--especially regarding questions of authority. In light of the instability of the modern family, its marginal nature in society, and the increase in single-parent families, emphasis on the church-as-family may become problematic. In a world where "mom, dad, and the kids" are on a first name basis and grandmother water skis with her boyfriend, church-as-family may require some review and revision. At the very least, church-as-family may prove problematic imagery in churches struggling with the nature of biblical authority.)

Thesis Five. Strategies of accommodation, compromise, and adaptation may help to build numerically large churches. The test, however, is not whether

churches can draw crowds or "meet needs" (to use a terrible cliché--barrooms and pool parlors "meet needs") but whether the Christian faith is taught. The test is whether there is spiritual growth and growth in knowledge of the Christian tradition--scripture. And the test is whether the faith is being passed on.

Thesis Six. A recovery of authority in the church will entail the reconstruction of something analogous to the traditional ethos (in particular the above factors indicated) in which the early church emerged. For reasons already stated--namely, the formative role of the traditional ethos in the emergence of the early church and because the traditional ethos is, in the attributes noted, more of a human ethos than the contemporary ethos--a recovery of biblical authority demands that the church understand itself as founded on and drawing on the biblical tradition for its existence. Only a church that sees itself as primarily interested in promoting something like a growth in Christian wisdom and recognizes exemplars of the faith will be one in which biblical models and images take on substantive meaning.

In essence, a recovery of authority in the church--in the total life of the church--will entail the emergence of an "ethos of the Word." That is, only as the church takes seriously what it means to be a people formed by an authoritative word and responsible for the faithful passing on of that word will we find the

church's self-understanding to be one which is compatible with biblical images and also illuminates structures of the truly human.

Thesis Seven. The recovery of a biblical-traditional ethos in the modern world will entail a willingness on the part of Christians to be committed to a lifestyle that is in considerable tension with modern values, beliefs, and practices. Among other things, it will entail the church being a community that has spiritual reality as its primary reality. It will entail the church being a community that sees salvation, not wealth and prestige, as the primary goal of human life. In short, it will entail a willingness and commitment on the part of Christians to live a sectarian lifestyle.

Footnotes

1 See for example Robert Nisbet, <u>Twilight of Authority</u> (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) and Jeffrey Stout, <u>The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest Autonomy</u> (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

2 This important insight does not appear to be sufficiently recognized in many discussions of the nature and function of authority in the early church (or modern church as well). For a notable exception see Bengt Holmberg, <u>Paul and Power: The Structure of Authority in the Primitive Church as Reflected in the Pauline Epistles</u> (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). "...the nature of authority is such that it is in itself a social phenomenon, not a theological interpretation of social phenomena" (204).

3 Cf. James D. G. Dunn, <u>Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry Into the Character of Earliest Christianity</u> (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 67ff.

4 Cf. Wayne A. Meeks, <u>The First Urban Christians: Social World of the Apostle Paul</u> (New Haven: Yale, 1983), Chapter 3.

5 Hannah Arendt, <u>Between Past and Future</u> (New York: Viking, 1961) 195.

6 Christopher Lasch, <u>The Culture of Narcissism</u> (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1979) 213.

7 <u>Ibid.</u>, 209.

8 <u>Ibid.</u>, 213.

9 Meeks, 76.

10 <u>Ibid.</u>, 77.

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