

AUTHORITY

In The Body Of Christ

by Clifford Fox



I present to you today what I feel is a great need in many believers' lives. I fear that many of us have absorbed way too much of this individualism that is so prominent in our land. This is a call to lay down our own agendas and have a meek and humble spirit, looking to our authorities as speaking from God. I am not a pastor or leader of any kind, so I am not seeking for any type of respect for myself as such. It is just my heart to see people accept counsel from capable leaders. In no way will leaders ever replace the need for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, or time spent reading the Word of God. Also, I know that there are leaders who have abused this authority and perhaps you have been hurt in such a situation. I am sorry if you have. But remember, just because you have had one bad experience does not mean that all leaders are the same. Let me begin with a short allegory.

Adam

Adam needed help with handling his finances. It was obvious to everybody, but was a bit hard for him to admit. But one day he finally asked an expert we'll call Eli to help him set up a budget and hold him accountable until he was financially stable. So they sat down together and talked about what his needs were and how to avoid all the struggles he had to pay his bills. He went home with renewed determination to pay off his mounting bills. But as time went on, he realized that his spending habits were not so easily changed and he felt he needed things that did not fit his budget. There were also some bills that he had not mentioned to Eli. And so the next time he met with Eli, his record did not look much better. Eli pointed this out and explained that for this plan to work, he would not be allowed to spend any money that was not in the budget. Adam sighed and nodded his head.

Another month went by and they met again. Again Eli pointed out that the budget was not always being followed and that debts were accruing interest. By now, Adam was beginning to resent hearing about this, even though he knew he had a problem. So when Eli started to scrutinize his spending, Adam began to feel defensive. He started to think things like, "That's such a small amount. Why should he even mention that? He is just too particular!" But he didn't say anything about this to Eli.

When they met again, Eli was discouraged about how little he had been able to help this man. Things

seemed to be getting worse instead of better as the interest added up. So Eli gave Adam some specific guidelines to follow. He told him that he should not go out to eat or even stop for coffee on the way to work. He also told him to buy used things instead of new if he needed something. By this time Adam had enough of Eli's advice and was feeling like half of his problem was Eli himself. So, in frustration, he told Eli that he wouldn't come back again and that it was his own money and he would decide how to spend it. He left in a hurry and went his way to manage his own affairs the best he could.

Eli felt crushed. He had grown to love this man and wished so much that he would be able to turn his life around and be financially stable. But he had also sensed that his advice was not always appreciated and certainly not always followed. Yet, he felt like somehow he should have done more for Adam. So, he called him a few days later just to see if he had changed his mind and would accept his help again. Would Adam see his need or would he still go his own way?

So how many times have you been in Adam's shoes spiritually? Have you ever been unwilling to receive counsel for your own good? Do you feel defensive when someone begins to give you some direction? It goes against our human nature to admit that we need someone to guide us when we think we know the way ourselves.

Can we step back from our experiences and take a look at God's heart on the matter? Should there be people in authority in church? Or is it right to say that God is my only authority? Let us look at what God's Word speaks to us on this subject.

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God." (Ro 13:1)

I know this verse is speaking of the leaders of the land, but if they are ordained of God to have authority,

how much more are the leaders of God's own children given this authority from Him.

"And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed." (Ro 13:23)



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unwilling to receive
counsel for your own
good? Do you feel
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direction?

"For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee." (Tit 1:5)

Here are two verses that show that it was the practice of the early church to have men ordained to be the spiritual leaders of the group.

"Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation." (Heb 13:7)

That word rule sounds rather strong to us independent-natured Americans, does it not? Well, ten verses later the writer again uses that word rule and adds that we shall obey them and submit ourselves.

"Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you." (Heb 13:17)

Warnings to Elders

I believe that there is clear teaching in the Bible that leaders shall not be seeking after honor or the ability to flaunt their authority over someone else. James 3:1 says:

“My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.” There is more required of one in leadership. Like the analogy of the watchman on the city wall, so God will require an account of His children from those who are leading. Any leader who comforts a sinner in his sin will have to answer to God for it.

James and John were also rebuked by Jesus for desiring the glory and power of a position rather than looking for a way to be a servant. (See Mt 20:20-28)

Jesus clearly teaches that He has an “upside-down kingdom”. If you want to be somebody in His kingdom, you need to be an humble servant. The natural person desires the fame, power, and honor that comes with a title, but God’s children shall seek no honor for themselves, but only for their King.

So if there are authority figures, how should they be viewed? Should we put them way up on a pedestal and view them as someone totally separate from the laity? Or are they just another brother and we are all equal? In the Reformation, the Roman Catholic model was rightly challenged, but have we gone too far?

Instructions from the Inspired Word of God

1. Respect

We treat leaders with respect.

“Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.” (1Ti 5:17)



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you need to be an humble servant.
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2. Obedience

We’ve already read how we need to obey them that have the rule over us and submit to them. You all know that at a workplace one must be in charge and say what gets done and how it gets done. If everyone had equal authority, it would not work well. There may be more than one good way to do something, but cooperation makes things flow smoothly. The same thing applies to marriage. One must be the leader and the other a supporter of that leader. Otherwise the marriage will have difficulties. A group of believers must also have a recognized leader to function properly.

3. Support

“Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you....” (2Th 3:1)

I believe that this is a very crucial, though hidden ministry. We must pray for our leaders that they may hear the voice of God and not preach words that only tickle our ears and soothe us. This verse says that the Word of the Lord will be glorified when the preacher has the freedom to preach what God has laid on his heart. Several of the letters are closed with the request that the group of believers pray for them. It is one way to give your support to your leader.

Now I would like to look at several examples of rebellion against leaders and what those rebels gained or lost by it.

1. Moses vs. Aaron & Miriam

“And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married: for he had married an Ethiopian woman. And they said, Hath the LORD indeed spoken only by Moses? hath he not spoken also by us? And the LORD heard it. (Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.) And the LORD spake suddenly unto Moses, and unto Aaron, and unto Miriam, Come out ye three unto the tabernacle of the congregation. And they three came out. And the LORD came down in the pillar of the cloud, and stood in the door of the tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam: and they both came forth. And he said, Hear now my words: If there be a prophet among you, I the LORD will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream. My servant Moses is not so, who is faithful in all mine house. With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the LORD shall he behold: wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them; and he departed. And the cloud departed from off the tabernacle; and, behold, Miriam became leprous, white as snow: and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, she was leprous.” (Num 12:1–10)

2. Moses vs. Korah

“Now Korah, the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On, the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men: And they rose up before Moses, with certain of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty princes of the assembly, famous in the congregation, men of renown: And they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said unto them, Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them: wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the LORD? And when Moses heard it, he fell upon his face: And he spake unto Korah

and unto all his company, saying, Even to morrow the LORD will shew who are his, and who is holy; and will cause him to come near unto him: even him whom he hath chosen will he cause to come near unto him. This do; Take you censers, Korah, and all his company; And put fire therein, and put incense in them before the LORD to morrow: and it shall be that the man whom the LORD doth choose, he shall be holy: ye take too much upon you, ye sons of Levi. And Moses said unto Korah, Hear, I pray you, ye sons of Levi: Seemeth it but a small thing unto you, that the God of Israel hath separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself to do the service of the tabernacle of the LORD, and to stand before the congregation to minister unto them? And he hath brought thee near to him, and all thy brethren the sons of Levi with thee: and seek ye the priesthood also? For which cause both thou and all thy company are gathered together against the LORD: and what is Aaron, that ye murmur against him?” (Num 16:1-11)

3. Jesus vs. Pharisees

The Pharisees challenged Jesus’ authority and were shamed for it. They also were rejected by God for their rejection of Jesus.

“And say unto him, By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority to do these things?” (Mk 11:28)

4. Paul vs. Corinthians, etc.

In 1 Cor 9 Paul was challenged by the people about his authority and he boldly told them: “Your very existence as a church is proof that I am an apostle.”

“Am I not an apostle? am I not free? have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? are not ye my work in the Lord? If I be not an apostle unto others, yet doubtless I am to you: for the seal of mine apostleship are ye in the Lord.” (1 Cor 9:1–2)

5. One example of a man who understood authority.

“The centurion answered and said, Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant

shall be healed. For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it. When Jesus heard it, he marveled, and said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. And Jesus said unto the centurion, Go thy way; and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee. And his servant was healed in the selfsame hour” (Mat 8:8–13).

Now for some practical applications. In what areas do they have authority? How far does this authority reach? Does your heart have boundaries where a leader cannot speak to you about certain subjects?

1. Church doctrine and operations

I believe that a church must be unified about their belief and practice and of their interpretations of Scripture. I also believe that the leaders must chart the course. A leader also needs brothers who care about the church enough to pray and discuss issues with their leader.

2. Personal lives of congregation

What about your personal life? If there is sin in the church many will be weak and sickly. We must judge ourselves, but sometimes we are blind to our own sins and we need a loving leader who is bold enough to confront sin. A minister will preach principles and should teach practical applications as well.

For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.

I remember once
when I asked counsel
of my minister and I
differed with him.
Today I am very glad
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heart....

*For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.
(1 Cor 11:29–31)*

3. Missions

I believe that missions is another area that should be guided by the leaders of the church.

So how far should I obey? What if I feel God is saying something different to me? I remember once when I asked counsel of my minister and I differed with him.

Today I am very glad that I bowed my heart and said “Okay, Lord, you know what is best”. It was a blessing to see how quickly God worked and I could see the wisdom of that advice. This is just one testimony of God’s power to bless the heart that is willing to be humble.

Compare your life with the Scriptures. What does the Bible say to your situation? It says to try the spirits to see whether they are of God. Search the Scriptures. Your minister is also human and can make mistakes. He may not see the whole picture. However, be slow to pass judgment if you disagree. Time bears fruit; don’t be hasty. Be willing to try to understand his point of view. Patience is a fruit of the Spirit, but a zealous, dogmatic spirit is not.

So, in closing, how much have we been affected in our churches by the “great American democratic ideas”? Are we willing to hear what God has to say to us through our leadership, or are we going to side with Aaron and Miriam and Korah, etc? I pray that we can honor our leaders as God would have us to; not lifting them up to a position to the point that they are thought of as infallible or that they become our mediator with God. We recognize the error of the Catholic Church. But let us not go to the opposite extreme and say (or think), “No one is going to tell me what to do”.

So, what if I am Adam and it is my spiritual life that is bankrupt? Will I reject the best efforts of my leaders or will I follow their advice? Will I say that it is my life and I will live as I see fit? Will I see my leaders as God’s hand directing me or will I say that I answer to God and no one else? I do not mean to judge anyone, but I do feel burdened about this subject. I hope that I did not offend you. I think a minister can survive without much financial support easier than if he doesn’t have your support. □