

Christian Servanthood 2

Week Two - Church Authority

Introduction

Tonight — we address the subject of church authority. What kind of authority does God invest in the leaders of his church? How should church members respond to church leaders? How should church leaders exercise that authority? What are the key qualities of godly church leadership?

Bear in mind two common extremes/errors on this subject.

Anti-authority sentiment: This is especially prevalent in current postmodern American culture, which views virtually authority with suspicion. Also viewed as mindless, a sign of weakness, rejection of my personal rights.

Authoritarianism: This is prevalent in patriarchal cultures, and sometimes Christian groups overreact against the above sentiment with this.

We need to steer a biblical course between these two extremes, affirming human leadership in the church while also acknowledging human depravity and abuse.

The Concept of Authority in the Bible

In order to think properly about church authority, we must learn more broadly what the Bible teaches about authority. Consider these key biblical propositions about this important subject:

1. God alone is the ultimate authority. The source of His authority is rooted in His character i.e. loving, sacrificial, benevolence, omniscience etc.

(Matthew 6:13) "And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen."

(Romans 13:1) Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.

(Daniel 2:20-21) Daniel answered and said, "Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever, for wisdom and power belong to him. And it is he who changes the times and the epochs; he removes kings and establishes kings; he gives wisdom to wise men, and knowledge to men of understanding."

2. Rebellion against God is a serious sin.

Satan evidently revolted against God, and brought untold misery into God's universe.

(Numbers 15:30) But the person who does anything defiantly, whether he is native or an alien, that one is blaspheming the LORD; and that person shall be cut off from among his people.

(1 Samuel 15:22,23) And Samuel said, "Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, And insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king."

Saul's disobedience when he attacked the Amalekites – spared Agag, people took the best of the spoils. Disobedience resulted in his rejection as king and ongoing issues with the Amalekites. (1 Sam. 27:8; 30:1,18)

(Romans 1:28-29) And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips,

Refused to "recognize" God as the authority. Substantial consequences when we choose to go against God's authority. Paradidomi = gave them over, "put in prison"

(Jude 1:8-9) Yet in the same manner these men, also by dreaming, defile the flesh, and reject authority, and revile angelic majesties. But Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil and argued about the body of Moses, did not dare pronounce against him a railing judgment, but said, "The Lord rebuke you."

Rebellion is the attitude of contempt and scorn for authority that so characterizes our culture. Rebellion is the sin that led Satan to his fall, and will poison the ministry of any Christian who tolerates it in himself. The material in Proverbs and elsewhere on "scoffers" and "mockers" shows God's attitude toward the rebellious.

3. Delegated authority is biblical, but contingent

The Bible affirms that certain social structures are necessary in this fallen, broken world. Specifically, he affirms that God instituted the concept of limited delegated authority within certain social roles: GOVERNMENT, WORKPLACE, FAMILY, and CHURCH. The Bible knows very well that these structures are imperfect and can be abused, and it condemns this abuse of authority from the very beginning. That's why it also gives important qualifications and limitations to delegated authorities (see below). But it insists that these imperfect structures are preferable to the alternative of social anarchy. We junk these structures to our own peril!

A. Human Government

(Daniel2:37-38) "You, O king, are the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the strength, and the glory; {38} and wherever the sons of men dwell, or

the beasts of the field, or the birds of the sky, He has given them into your hand and has caused you to rule over them all. You are the head of gold.

Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Acknowledges that God put Nebuchadnezzar into a position of authority. We can learn a lot from Daniel's dealings with delegated/secular authorities.

(Jeremiah 27:6) "And now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, My servant, and I have given him also the wild animals of the field to serve him.

(Matthew 22:21) They said to Him, "Caesar's." Then He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's."

(Romans 13:7) Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

(Titus 3:1) Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed ...

(1 Peter 2:13-17) Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, {14} or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. {15} For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. {16} Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God. {17} Honor all men; love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.

B. Secular Jobs

(Ephesians 6:5-8) Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; {6} not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. {7} With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, {8} knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.

(Colossians 3:22-25) Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.

(1 Timothy 6:1-2) Let all who are under the yoke as slaves regard their own masters as worthy of all honor so that the name of God and our doctrine may not be spoken against. {2} And let those who have believers as their masters not be disrespectful to them because they are brethren, but let them serve them all the more, because those who partake of the benefit are believers and beloved. Teach and preach these principles.

(Titus 2:9-10) Urge bondslaves to be subject to their own masters in everything, to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, {10} not pilfering, but showing all good faith that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect. (1 Peter 2:18) Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable.

C. Marriage

(Ephesians 5:22-24) Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. {23} For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. {24} But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.

(Ephesians 5:33) Nevertheless let each individual among you also love his own wife even as himself; and let the wife see to it that she respect her husband.

(Colossians 3:18) Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

(Titus 2:5) to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be dishonored.

(1 Peter 3:1-6) In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, {2} as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior. {3} And let not your adornment be merely external— braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; {4} but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God. {5} For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands. {6} Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear.

When should a husband exercise this decision-making authority? Here is our conclusion: In major decisions not clearly addressed in scripture, if after careful and prayerful discussion husband and wife cannot agree, the husband should assume the responsibility to make the decision that he thinks will best advance God's glory and the family's good.

"In major decisions not clearly addressed in scripture..." In those decisions that are clearly addressed in scripture, husband and wife should mutually submit to God. In less important decisions, both parties should be ready to defer to what the other wants ("If you're happy, I'm happy.")

"...if after careful and prayerful discussion..." I am sometimes persuaded by my wife that the course she advocates is better. I am sometimes convicted by God that my motives for my course are selfish.

"...the husband should assume the responsibility..." I will answer to God for this, so I take it very seriously.

In a good marriage, this is rarely needed because you can normally come to an agreement about the best course of action. But it is there for those cases when it is needed. The resolution is not to vote or to take turns on getting what you want—but to move forward in this way. And in these cases, God calls on wives to respect their husband's office and go along with a good attitude.

D. Family

(Ephesians. 6:1-4) Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. {2} HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER (which is the first commandment with a promise), {3} THAT IT MAY BE WELL WITH YOU, AND THAT YOU MAY LIVE LONG ON THE EARTH. {4} And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

(Colossians 3:20) Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord.

E. Church

(1 Corinthians 16:15-18) Now I urge you, brethren (you know the household of Stephanas, that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints), {16} that you also be in subjection to such men and to everyone who helps in the work and labors. {17} And I rejoice over the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus; because they have supplied what was lacking on your part. {18} For they have refreshed my spirit and yours. Therefore acknowledge such men.

(1 Thessalonians 5:12-13) But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, {13} and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another.

(Titus 2:15) These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you.

(Hebrews 13:17) Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

(1 Peter 5:5) You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.

Stedman & Nee Discussion

ASSIGNMENT QUESTIONS: Record where you agree/disagree with on their teaching about church leaders' authority. Be prepared to defend your conclusions in class.

STEDMAN

PRO'S:

Good exposé of abuse of church leadership (examples and scriptures).

Good emphasis on Jesus as living Head of the church, and leaders' primary job to discern his will

Correct that plural eldership can serve as a check on abuse, which is more likely with single leadership. But plurality not required.

Good emphasis on example, respect and persuasion as key features of godly leadership

CON'S:

Rejection of executive decision/command authority

Mark10 does not forbid this; they reject using authority to exploit and use others rather than to serve them.

Prohistemi in 1 Thessalonians5:12 is used in connection with command authority. See 1 Timothy3:4,5, where Paul says that prospective elders must be able to "manage" their own households (including keeping their young children under control).

Hebrews13:17 does indeed stress obedience to church leaders. Peithw coupled with hupeiokw indicates that actual obedience is called for (within proper bounds, of course). How can leaders give an account to God if they do not have authority? How can they watch over your souls if they don't have authority?

See Paul issuing commands to local churches on church discipline (1 Corinthians5:4,5), sending workers (2 Timothy4:12), criticizing workers for deserting (Acts15:38; 2 Timothy4:10). These statements imply that Paul had command authority, and therefore that command authority in itself is not sub-Christian.

The idea that command authority is the law and that it inevitably produces resentment and rebellion is unbiblical. God exercises command authority as well as the grace resources to follow his commands.

Practically speaking, church leaders have to fire staff, create budgets, design ministry structures, etc. These matters require command authority.

While church leaders should rarely compel obedience, it is important that we have an ethic that disobedience to church leaders is wrong (unless they are acting unbiblically)!

Insistence on unanimous agreement by elders

Agreed that this is the goal and ideal, and that we evidently have biblical example of this in Acts 15:22. But there is no biblical command to operate this way.

Practically speaking, requiring unanimous agreement can stalemate a leadership team and prevent it from doing its job. Ornery or carnal elders can have de facto absolute authority by vetoing decisions. This may also create needless conflict and alienation, when agreeing to a voting

NEE

PRO'S:

Church leaders (like all delegated authorities) have command authority (p.67).

It is a sin to wrongly disobey church authority (pp.71,73).

It is appropriate to disobey delegated authorities that violate God's commands (pp.74,109). Submission (respect) and obedience are not the same (pp.107,108).

Good qualifiers for church authorities in pp.116-121. Much of this material agrees with Stedman, and shows that Nee is not advocating tyranny.

CON'S:

Younger leaders should not necessarily obey older leaders (p.67). This is not taught in the New Testament—in fact, Paul tells Timothy to act authoritatively even though he is leading people older than he.

Women should not necessarily obey men in the church (p.67). The passage he quotes (1 Corinthians 11:3) is about marriage, not the church in general. The two passages on women being silent in church (1 Corinthians 14:33-35; 1 Tim. 3:11-13) are situation-specific, not general.

James did not make the final decision in Acts 15 (p.69). The text indicates that the leaders agreed.

Luke 10:16 refers to official ambassadorial authority—not to church leaders in general (p.70).

Christians should be concerned with whether their leaders are right or wrong (p.71). Just as leaders will give an account for how they led, we will give an account who we chose to follow. We will not be able to answer (as Nazi leaders did at Nuremberg), "We were just following orders!"

God will supersede delegated authority (pp.73,74). He may not remove them with temporal judgment, but he will raise up other leaders to build his church.

4. Unjustified disobedience to delegated authorities is disobedience to God.

Numbers 12,16 teaches this principle, as does Romans 13:2. Since it is God who commands our subordination to delegated authority, unjustified insubordination to them is insubordination to God himself.

Because of this, the statement "I have no problems with God's authority—just with man's authority" usually betrays either ignorance or a rebellious attitude.

5. Three limiting features for delegated authorities:

A. The scope of the authority is limited to the area of authority assigned to them by God. This is why wives are urged to "be submissive to your own husbands" - not to all men (1Pet. 3:1; Eph. 5:22). For the same reason, parents should not tell their adult children who they must marry, nor can civil authorities tell their citizens what religious beliefs they must hold. Likewise, church leaders should not tell Christians what jobs they may take, how to spend their money, who to date, or other issues unrelated to running the church.

B. Human authority should never be autonomous. All delegated authorities should be under God's authority. This is why when scripture addresses those under delegated authority, it usually also addresses those in authority in the same passage and reminds them of their responsibilities before God. This is also why we should disobey delegated authorities whenever they tell us to do something contrary to God's will (Acts 4:19,20; 5:29).

C. God's design for leadership is to serve (Mk.10:41- 45; Rom.13:4). Even though God often permits wicked people to hold positions of authority, the scripture condemns the abuse of that authority for the purpose of exploitation or oppression, and God will personally call them to account for their actions.

Actions & attitudes for those under authority

1. Believers should have an attitude of respect and the inclination to follow their leaders (Heb. 13:17).

2. Following should be active--not passive. We should seek out leadership, and find ways to help them succeed in accomplishing legitimate goals.

3. Whenever possible, we should be sure that we understand why leaders are asking us to do something. This is important because such understanding enables us to follow their instructions more enthusiastically, and to do so out of genuine obedience to God (see Eph. 6:5,7; Col. 3:22,23 - "as to the Lord" has this meaning).

4. The burden of proof is on those under authority to justify why they should not follow, not vice-versa.

5. When we cannot obey a leader's directive because for reasons of conscience, we should seek a constructive alternative that will fulfill leaders' desires as much as possible, and also enable us to obey God (see Dan. 1:8-16 for an example of this). In this spirit, we can and should ask questions, make suggestions, and even raise objections, but with a respectful demeanor.

6. When disobedience to a leader is necessary, we should do so respectfully, not rebelliously or maliciously. We should explain our reasons (see Acts 4:19,20; 5:29). In most ongoing relationships, especially in the church, we should have the courage to declare our intention to disobey.

7. Within the church, dissent is different than rebellion or disobedience. We may disagree with delegated authorities over issues, and we are free to express that disagreement as long as we handle the disagreement properly. Most areas of disagreement are so minor that we can simply go along with those who lead. Some issues, however, are important enough that our conscience requires that we take further measures. In these cases, the first thing to do would be to talk about the issue with those who are in leadership.

Perhaps we will persuade our leaders that our viewpoint is correct, or perhaps they will persuade us. Either of these results would end the dissent. If the disagreement is not resolved, we should decide how important the issue is.

If we think the issue is important and we may be disobeying God or our conscience to follow the leadership, we should either:

- Inform the leadership that we will be unable to obey and ask what they want to do, or
- Inform higher leadership (i.e. sphere leaders) of your dilemma and appeal for intervention (note, your leaders should have no objection to your going to higher authority, like sphere leaders, with an appeal), or
- Leave the group and find leadership we can follow, making clear to the old leadership what our reasons are for withdrawing.

If we decide the issue is not important enough to violate our conscience, we should be able to serve with a good attitude toward the leadership, though in disagreement in a specific issue.

8. We could possibly find ourselves unable to agree with the leadership on a fairly important point, but not so important that we feel we should leave the church. In this case, we may declare ourselves to be loyal dissenters. A loyal dissenter is unwilling to remain quiet about his dissent, but also unwilling to leave. Such a posture is permissible, but often questionable. Such dissenters need to exercise special care to avoid division in the church. Their dissent must be shared only in helpful ways, and qualified carefully. They must take care to avoid portraying other's positions unfairly or leaving out important material. Leaders may call on dissenters to restrict their dissent in various ways for the sake of unity and reducing confusion. (For instance, why share your area of disagreement with new people who are still trying to understand the basics?)

Five Principles of Godly Leadership

Is it a sin to want to become an authoritative leader? Not necessarily (see 1 Timothy 3:1)—God wants and needs many such people to lead his church! The key qualifier is that we must aspire to godly leadership. Consider the following biblical principles for godly and authoritative church leadership:

1. Model godly behavior, values, and attitudes. See 1 Timothy 4:12; 2 Timothy 2:20,21. Never underestimate the power of your example! This includes:

Serving others within the group. Do you have a reputation of one who loves the people in the home group, showing up at meetings in the Spirit and ready to serve, initiating with people, etc.?

Willingly following the authorities above you. Do the people in your home group hear you advocate and defend church leadership's directions? Or do you grouse and complain and cynically talk about "they" and "them?" Do you make it hard or a joy for those who oversee you?

Humility about our own opinions and need for growth. Do you clearly distinguish between what the Bible says and your opinions? Do you talk openly about your own besetting sins? When you make mistakes or wrongly offend, are you quick to take responsibility and apologize?

2. Teach scripture and persuade through biblical principles, priorities, and example. See 1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Timothy 4:2. We should not only teach what the Bible says, but also foster the ethic that we should follow what the Bible says.

Try to point people back to God's perspective through use of scripture, and call on them to think through the same. In disputes about direction, call on yourself and others to try to find God's perspective, not argue from personal power and opinion.

As leaders we miss an opportunity to help our group develop leadership-thinking (and vision for leadership) if we don't include them in the process of how and why decisions are made. In other words, we should be leading people to see the connection between our decisions about structures, meeting format, etc. are to facilitate the Great Commission.

3. Provide direction and vision for the people under your leadership. Like a good shepherd (John 10), good leaders lead—they are out ahead of the flock, charting a course to the goal!

Be proactive and initiate; don't just react to problems or people's requests. Be transformational (calling people to growth), not transactional (reading what people want and dishing it up to them).

4. Work toward consensus on extra-biblical issues within your sphere of authority when possible. See 2 Corinthians 2:6 for an example of this in church discipline. See Acts 15:4-29 for an example of this on an important doctrinal and strategic matter (circumcision).

Most decisions can and should be arrived at by consensus between the leaders, then persuading the other workers, then calling the rest of the home group to respond (EXAMPLES: PLANT PLAN & TIMING; MEETING SCHEDULES & FORMAT). This increases ownership of

the decision and motivation to carry it out. Most church leadership decisions can be made this way. (See the paper on Decision Making for practical guidance on how to accomplish this)

5. Exercise command authority on extra-biblical issues within your sphere of authority only when necessary. See 1 Corinthians 5:3-5 and 1 Timothy 1:20 for examples of this in church discipline.

A godly leader must not be self-willed, pulling rank on minor issues for whatever pleases him. Usually it is better to defer in these matters, saving your insistence for matters of greater importance.

On the other hand, a godly leader must be prepared to "grasp the nettle" and make a difficult decision on important matters—even if everyone else disagrees with him (EXAMPLES: NO SINGING AT HC; TERMINATING A "SACRED COW" MINISTRY; CALLING TO PLANT IN A TRIBAL HC).

Assignment Due Next Week

Notebook Check

From today's handout, read Crabb's description of three counseling models (pp. 80-85 of Understanding People). Then read the excerpt from his next chapter's section (pp. 93-96) on the biblical perspective of the nature of man.

Evaluate the three models in light of the biblical perspective of the nature of man. Write two positive contributions and two criticisms of each model in light of the biblical view of man.

Memory Verses

Mark 10:40-45**; Hebrews 13:17*

Key Points to Know for Exam

1. Be able to explain three limiting features for delegated authorities.
2. Be able to explain three of the eight essential attitudes and actions for those under authority.