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## THE SHEPHERD'S BIBLICAL RIGHT TO LEAD: A FEW WORDS ABOUT AUTHORITY



*“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account.” (Heb. 13:17)*

THE CONCEPT OF AUTHORITY is one that is increasingly alien to modern culture, and there may be any number of reasons that church leaders may shrink away from exercising authoritative shepherding leadership. It is important before moving on to what shepherds *do* that it is clearly understood that leaders have both the *right* and *responsibility* to exercise shepherding care. Before presenting the biblical perspective on authority, we will look at the challenges in the culture at large.

Following an introduction to the biblical concept of authority, we will examine two movements that have misunderstood the biblical view of authority.

### **“Who Says?” A Culture Adrift from its Moorings**

The late George Carlin was once asked if he still supported the adage of the 1960s, “challenge authority.” He answered in the negative and said that his new adage was “destroy authority.” There would be many such as Carlin who would be quick to point out the abuses of authority throughout history, but G. K. Chesterton warned against throwing out the baby with the bathwater:

Religious authority has often, doubtless, been oppressive or unreasonable; just as every legal system has been callous and full of cruel apathy. It is rational to attack the police; nay it is glorious. But the modern critics of religious authority are like men who should attack the police without ever having heard of burglars. For there is a great and possible peril to the human mind; a peril as practical as a burglary. Against it religious authority was reared, rightly or wrongly, as a barrier. And against it something certainly must be reared, if our race is to avoid ruin.<sup>1</sup>

It is unfortunate, but it appears that Chesterton’s perspective is in the minority and that Carlin’s view is no longer the fringe musing of an aging sixties pundit but increasingly represents the perspective of our society and, sadly, of the church.

1. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1994), 31–32.

The deterioration of respect for authority in culture has its root in a failure to respect the sovereign lordship of the ultimate authority, the living God who is the Shepherd and authority of all of life. Though we pay great lip service to faith in God, the bottom line of our culture is not “the Lord is my Shepherd,” but “I am my own shepherd.” Respect for the authority of the Word of the Shepherd results in clear moral boundaries within which the sheep will be safe and secure. The sheep must look to the Shepherd to delineate the bounds of the “green pastures” and “still waters.” It is to these standards that the shepherd-elder must be personally loyal and with which the elders must feed the sheep. Unfortunately, we live in a culture that has denied the authority of the Shepherd and the moral “fences” he has established. With the erosion of respect for the authority of the Shepherd, it is no surprise that respect for authority generally is diminished, whether in government, family, or the church. All of this together is symptomatic of nothing less than the deterioration of the foundation of lawful order in our culture.

This is the cultural crisis—and therefore the political and legal crisis—of our society: the popularly accessible and vibrant belief systems and world views of our society are largely excluded from the public arena in which decisions are made about how the society should be ordered.<sup>2</sup>

Neuhaus continues in proposing that religion must fill the moral void left by the “naked public square.” Unfortunately, respect for the authority of the church has diminished as well, particularly to the extent that the church has forsaken the authoritative

2. Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 259.

standard of the Good Shepherd, accommodating its standards to the surrounding culture. As Chesterton further argues,

. . . we can hear skepticism crashing through the old ring of authorities, and at the same moment we can see reason swaying upon her throne, In so far as religion is gone, reason is gone. For they are both of the same primary and authoritative kind . . . And in the act of destroying the idea of Divine authority we have largely destroyed the idea of that human authority by which we do a long division sum.<sup>3</sup>

With the loss of respect for authority, the basis upon which authoritative moral standards can be asserted in the public square or in the church has disappeared as well.

### **Doing What Is Right in Our Own Eyes: The Loss of Moral Values**

In speaking of the fall of Communism in the Soviet Union, Os Guinness observed that it represented a dual victory for the American political order and economic order. But here's what he said about a "third" sphere:

But the third great sphere . . . the moral and cultural sphere is in deep trouble. At the very moment of her historic political and economic vindication, a crisis of cultural authority is sapping the very vitality of the United States. Americans are no longer shaped by beliefs, ideals, and traditions as they once were. It is now questionable whether America's cultural order

3. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 32.

is capable of nourishing the freedom, responsibility, and civility that Americans require to sustain democracy.<sup>4</sup>

The loss of respect for authority has led to the loss of authoritative standards. The loss of authoritative standards has left each person to be his own standard-maker. The sovereign authority of God has given way to the sovereign authority of the individual. Futurist Robert Naisbitt confirms the rise of individualism: “The great unifying theme at the conclusion of the 20th century is the triumph of the individual. Threatened by totalitarianism for much of this century, individuals are meeting the millennium more powerful than ever before.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, in his concluding analysis of culture at the end of the twentieth century he says, “Recognition of the individual is the thread connecting every trend described in this book.”<sup>6</sup> What are the implications of individualism upon morality? “The destruction of standards is inherent in radical individualism.”<sup>7</sup>

This pessimistic conclusion is supported by the research of Patterson and Kim, who conducted a comprehensive survey of 2,000 Americans who responded to 1,800 questions. Here is one of their enlightening findings:

Americans are making up their own rules, their own laws. In effect, we're making up our own moral codes. Only 13 percent of us believe in all of the Ten Commandments. Forty percent of us believe in five of the Ten Commandments. We choose

4. Os Guinness, *Dining With the Devil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 16.

5. John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene, *Megatrends 2000* (New York: William Morrow, 1990), 298.

6. *Ibid.*, 308.

7. Robert H. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah* (New York: Regan Books, 1996), 140.

which laws of God we believe in. There is absolutely no moral consensus in this country as there was in the 1950's, when all our institutions commanded more respect. Today, there is very little respect for the law—for any kind of law.<sup>8</sup>

The first chapter of Patterson and Kim's book is entitled "A New Moral Authority: You're It!" The question, "Who are our moral leaders now?" produced the following result: "Well, the overwhelming majority of people (93 percent) said that they—and nobody else—determine what is and what isn't moral in their lives. They base their decisions on their own experience, even on their daily whims."<sup>9</sup> This is nothing less than moral relativism. The picture is not unlike that portrayed in Judges 21:25, which states, "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes." Without the authority of the king, the people became their own moral authority.

"We are living in what could be called a 'Me First' generation, whose primary interest seems to be to satisfy itself first, to do its own thing, to go its own way, to capture and hold on to absolute personal freedom, free from the restraints of law, discipline, self-denial, and self-control."<sup>10</sup> This perspective pervades our culture and has become a Madison Avenue selling point:

The early pioneers were Nike's "Just Do It!" (in other words, don't think about it and don't let anything stand in the way to your doing it) and Burger King's "Sometimes, you gotta

8. James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth* (New York: Prentiss Hall, 1991), 6.

9. *Ibid.*, 27.

10. Paul Settle, "Of Church Censures 2: The Power of the Keys," *Equip for Ministry* 3 (1997): 16.

break the rules.” And the imitator’s have been numerous. Bacardi Black rum, which advertises itself as “the taste of the night,” goes on to say, “Some people embrace the night because rules of the day do not apply”; Easy Spirit shoes even latched onto this theme promising a shoe that “conforms to your foot so you don’t have to conform to anything”; Ralph Lauren’s Safari celebrates “living without boundaries”; even stayed and reliable Merrill Lynch declares that “Your world should know no boundaries”; and Nieman Marcus encourages its customers to relax because, it says, there are “No rules here.”<sup>11</sup>

Have any of these retailers considered the implications of their words? Imagine taking a trip to Nieman Marcus (which I’m sure you do regularly!), but this time you merely walk toward the door with your merchandise instead of to the checkout. Before you reach the door you are approached by a stern looking security guard who asks if you have paid for the items. You respond, “No.” He informs you that you cannot leave the store without paying for them to which you say, “But I thought there were NO RULES HERE!” Do you think the security guard would say, “Oh, that’s right. I forgot.” I don’t think so. Advertising phrases like these might sound good for marketing purposes as they capture the spirit of the day, but they really don’t work out very well in day-to-day life.

Someone once said that “before you tear down a fence, you should find out why it was put there in the first place!” The authority of the Lord, the Shepherd, is no longer respected, and the natural consequence is the dismantling of the moral

11. David Wells, “Our Dying Culture,” in *The Formal Papers of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals Summit* (April 17–20, 1996), 13.

principles and “fences” he has given us for our own good. The postmodern flight to relativism has ushered us into a *postmoral* age. As if that weren’t bad enough, without the absolute standard of the Scriptures, the culture slowly deteriorates, becoming accustomed to each successive step downward. “With each new evidence of deterioration, we lament for a moment, and then become accustomed to it. . . . As behavior worsens, the community adjusts its standards so that conduct once thought reprehensible is no longer deemed so.”<sup>12</sup>

This downward trajectory of cultural standards places increasingly greater pressure on the church as it strives to maintain the clear moral imperatives of the Scriptures. Sadly, even those who are involved in the church are less and less influenced by their religious beliefs.

When the pollsters go on to question how beliefs influence life, it becomes clear that for many people “belief” is little more than religious assent. . . . They give conventional answers because they have never stopped to consider the implications of those stated beliefs for their manner of life. There is a disturbing gap between belief and personal commitment to those beliefs.<sup>13</sup>

Without a relentless commitment by the shepherd-elders to the authority of the Shepherd and his revealed will, the church cannot but parallel the moral decline of the culture, following eventually, but following nonetheless. Rather than being salt and light, influencing the culture with the truth, the church becomes the *influencee*, increasingly reflecting the godless values

12. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*, 3.

13. Eddie Gibbs, *In Name Only: Tackling the Problem of Nominal Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1994), 30.

and priorities of its cultural context. Robert Bork's words are particularly lucid on this point:

If a church changes doctrine and structure to follow its members' views, it is difficult to see the value of that church and its religion. Religions must claim to be true, and in their essentials, to uphold principles that are universal and eternal. No church that panders to the zeitgeist deserves respect, and very shortly it will not get respect, except from those who find it politically useful, and that is less respect than disguised contempt.<sup>14</sup>

However, those in positions of authority and responsibility in churches that “pander” are still accountable to God for the well-being of their flocks. Without clearly setting forth the boundaries and standards of the Chief Shepherd for the security of their sheep, the flocks are scattered:

So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them. (Ezek. 34:5–6 NIV)

Without the will to assert the clear boundaries of God's standard, it is no surprise that the will is lost to seek for those who have strayed, since in so many cases church leaders do not even perceive that their people *have* strayed. What does it mean to stray if there are no fences? The implications for shepherds who are committed to seek stray sheep through church discipline are clear.

14. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*, 293.

## See No Evil, Hear No Evil: The Loss of the Will to Discipline

If there are no standards, what is there to enforce? If there are no standards, how can anything be “wrong”? Is it possible that this perspective has found its way into the church? The observations of Albert Mohler are particularly insightful on this point:

... the modern secular worldview has wrought destruction within the Church as well. The modern attempt to dominate truth has given way within sectors of the Church to the post-modern rejection of truth itself. Indeed, in many denominations and churches, notions of orthodoxy and heresy have become “conceptual emptiness.” The boundaries have vanished. The very possibility of heresy is dismissed in many circles within mainline Protestantism, and many evangelicals seem to have no better grasp of the moral imperative to honor the truth and to oppose error.<sup>15</sup>

If the boundaries have vanished between truth and falsehood in doctrine into a “conceptual emptiness,” it follows that the boundaries of right and wrong *praxis* have given way to a “moral emptiness” as well.

In fact, the will to draw lines of right and wrong clearly and authoritatively has disappeared, and a newly found will has been found to stand *against* those who would *oppose* immorality: “In our day of diversity and tolerance, where God the Creator has been dethroned, denouncing error has become the ultimate unpardonable sin. Principial opposition to anything that others hold dear makes

15. Albert R. Mohler, “The Truth of God’s Word,” in *The Formal Papers of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals* (April 17–20, 1996), 3.

you a bigot and a hate monger.”<sup>16</sup> The implications for discipline are clear. The leaders of churches that advocate certain aberrant lifestyles are in no position to discipline members who engage in such lifestyles. If the standards are self-generated, there is no ground upon which the church can stand to exercise discipline:

This individualism, it is quite apparent in our time, attacks the authority of family, church, and private association. The family is said to be oppressive, the fount of our miseries. It is denied that the church may legitimately insist upon what it regards as moral behavior in its members.<sup>17</sup>

This result of these conditions is an increase of litigation by congregants against elders who may well be exercising their biblical responsibilities of church discipline.

An increasing number of lawsuits against church officers signals a growing disrespect for the authority of Christ's officers. In many congregations it is acceptable for the pastor to denounce sin from the pulpit, but the officers are not to deal with specific sins according to biblical principles! This trend reflects a society which evidences increasing disrespect for authority and a rejection of absolutes, and which produces antipathy toward the erection and enforcement of absolute law.<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately, the skepticism of lawful authority produces an authority without the *will* to discipline:

16. Peter Jones, “Apostasy in America: Dressing up Paganism in Christian Clothing in an Attempt to Take Over the Christian Faith,” *Equip for Ministry* March-April 1997: 10.

17. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*, 6.

18. Paul Settle, “Church Discipline: God's Way of Caring,” *Equip for Ministry* July-August 2007: 16.

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A fragmented society . . . displays loss of nerve, which means that it cannot summon the will to suppress public obscenity, punish crime, reform welfare, attach stigma to the bearing of illegitimate children, resist the demands of self-proclaimed victim groups for preferential treatment, or maintain standards.<sup>19</sup>

A remarkably similar conclusion is reached by David Wells in speaking of the church's response to moral relativism:

It is, therefore, a matter of some poignancy to realize that in the very moment when our culture is plunging into unprecedented darkness, at the very moment in which it is most vulnerable, the evangelical Church has lost its nerve. At the very moment when boldness and courage are called for, what we see, all too often is timidity and cowardice.<sup>20</sup>

“Timidity” and “cowardice” are strong but accurate descriptions of shepherd-elders who fail in their commitment to the sheep and, ultimately, to the Chief Shepherd. This has led to a crisis of care in the church.

Today the church faces a moral crisis within her own ranks. Her failure to take a strong stand against evil (even in her own midst), and her tendency to be more concerned about what is expedient than what is right, has robbed the church of biblical integrity and power. It is true that, historically, the church has sometimes erred in this matter of discipline, but today the problem is one of outright neglect.<sup>21</sup>

19. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*, 11.

20. Wells, “Our Dying Culture,” 18.

21. Art Azurdia, “Recovering the Third Mark of the Church,” *Reformation and Revival* Fall 2007: 61.

All of these developments have led to an increasing unwillingness of people to submit to authority or to make commitments to the institutions they represent, including the church.

The impact of cultural influences upon the work of the shepherd-elder is clear. Failing to acknowledge the sovereign authority of the Lord and his Word, the culture has wandered from any authority other than self. People are showing increasing reluctance to identify themselves with a particular flock, to make the commitment of church membership vows, and to submit to the authority of shepherd-elders inherent in those commitments. Even within the church, however, Christ's sheep are transgressing the bounds of safety and security established in his Word. Church leaders, on the other hand, are showing unwillingness not only to embrace the standards of the Chief Shepherd and his Word but reluctance to courageously seek those who have strayed for the glory of God and the health of his flock. The danger of the age in which we live is the collapse of commitment: to the Lord, to his standards, and to the authorities he has established.

For the church to function properly, we must understand and embrace the biblical nature and functioning of authority. This clearly has implications for those who are called to shepherd the church. Does anyone have a "right" to lead anyone else? What is the biblical basis for elders to shepherd the flock? Hopefully, the following "primer" on the nature and use of biblical authority will lay the foundation for leaders as they consider their responsibilities.

## **"Who Says?" An Introduction to the Nature and Use of Authority**

What does the Bible have to say about authority? What does it have to say about the rights and responsibilities of leaders to

exercise that authority? The New Testament speaks clearly of the existence and exercise of authority in the world. The Greek word “authority” (*exousia*) is rich in the biblical lexicography. At its most fundamental level *exousia* is the “right to do something or the right over something.”<sup>22</sup> The biblical case must be made that elders, as God’s shepherds, have *exousia*, “the right to act” on behalf of the Good Shepherd. There are five brief observations to be made concerning authority as it relates to the shepherd-elder.

1. *All human authority is derived.* “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me’” (Matt. 28:18 NIV). Ultimately, all authority is the Lord’s. “All authority in the church belongs to Christ. From his place of authority at God’s right hand, Christ gives the keys of his kingdom; he validates in heaven what is done in his name on earth.”<sup>23</sup> In a later section, we will take a closer look at the concept of “the keys” as a human expression of God’s authority. But the Bible is clear that only *God’s* authority is underived. Any and every human authority is delegated from the Lord above. Paul writes, “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority (*exousia*) except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God” (Rom. 13:1 NIV). Pilate claimed to have authority to crucify Jesus. Jesus reminded him, “You would have no power (*exousian*) over me if it were not given to you from above” (John 19:11).

The authority of the elder is from above as well. Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that the “Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts 20:28). This note is echoed in Peter’s words

22. Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:562.

23. Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 202.

as well. “Peter could not have warned the Asian elders against ‘lording it over those allotted to your charge’ (1 Peter 5:3) if they had no authority. As shepherds of the church, elders have been given the authority to lead and protect the local church.”<sup>24</sup> All authority comes from the Lord and is exercised on his behalf. Ultimately, it is *his* authority.

2. *The exercise of authority is designed to serve the well-being of those under its care.* In referring to the authority of the civil authority, Paul writes, “he [the civil authority] is God’s servant to do you good” (Rom. 13:4 NIV). Certainly, in the Lord’s flock, leadership among God’s people is always servant leadership. Peter writes that those who shepherd God’s flock should do so “not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, *but eager to serve*” (1 Peter 5:2 NIV).

The Son of Man, the Chief Shepherd, came “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28 ESV). The authority of the shepherd-elder must also be exercised for the well-being of the flock bought with Jesus’ own blood (see Acts 20:28). In subsequent chapters, the specific responsibilities that shepherd-elders perform for the welfare of the flock will be outlined.

3. *This authority is to be directed by God’s Word.* In the shepherd-elders’ “right over” the sheep and “right to act” they are under the authority and direction of the Good Shepherd himself. Elders are responsible to look to him for wisdom and direction in caring for the flock. This wisdom and direction is to be found in God’s Word through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. “Church

24. Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 1995), 97.

authority, grounded in the Word of Christ, is also limited to it. Christian obedience to church rule is obedience in the Lord, for His Word governs the church, not the other way around.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the exercise of authority in the church must always be grounded in the Scriptures and, conversely, loses its legitimacy when it calls those under its care to ignore, contradict, or contravene the truth found therein.

*4. All who hold derived authority are ultimately accountable to the One who gave that authority.* Inasmuch as the elder’s authority or “right to act” comes from the Lord, it follows that they are answerable to him for the manner in which they act. It is an accountability to the Lord for their care for his flock. The writer to the Hebrews reminds his readers with the following imperative: “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you *as men who must give account* (emphasis added)” (13:17).

In commenting on this verse, Philip Edgecomb Hughes writes,

They [leaders] are men who will have to give account to God, and this solemn consideration should affect not only the quality of their leadership but also the quality of the obedience with which the Christian community responds to that leadership.<sup>26</sup>

This concept is not new inasmuch as the “shepherds” of Israel were held accountable for their failure to care for God’s flock.

25. Clowney, *The Church*, 203.

26. Philip E. Hughes, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 586.

“This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them” (Ezek. 34:10 NIV). As we saw earlier, rather than caring for the flock, these shepherds were taking care of themselves at the expense of the covenant people. Ideally, the final accounting to the Lord will result in blessing to the undershepherds of God so that “when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away” (1 Peter 5:4 NIV).

5. *The flock is called to submit to the authority of the elders.* Human authority is to be respected for the very reason that, ultimately, the authority is from the Lord.

It is the Holy Spirit who has made them overseers, and they are delegated by the head of the church. It is the obligation of the people and the elders to recognize that the rule exercised by the latter is by delegation from Christ and to him they are responsible.<sup>27</sup>

This theme is made abundantly clear in the New Testament. The reason that citizens are to be submissive in paying taxes to the civil authorities is that “the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing” (Rom. 13:6).

One of the characteristics of the Good Shepherd’s sheep is that they hear his voice and follow him. In turn, they are to follow those shepherd-elders called by him and given authority over various folds in the world. Paul encourages

27. John Murray, *Collected Writings* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976), 1:262.

the Thessalonian believers to “respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you” (1 Thess. 5:12 NIV).

Them that “are over you in the Lord” is not an official description of a technical order of ministry, but it is difficult to see who could be meant other than office bearers in the church. The verb may be used of informal leadership, but it is also an official word, describing the function of those who are officers.<sup>28</sup>

Of great interest is the fact that the word translated in the New International Version for “respect” is the verb *eidenia*, a form of the verb *oida*, which means “to know.” Here, it means, “respect, appreciate the worth of.”<sup>29</sup> Paul adds, “hold them in highest regard in love because of their work” (1 Thess. 5:13 NIV).

The author of Hebrews encouraged his readers to “obey [their] leaders and submit to their authority” (Heb. 13:17). He says this is necessary not only for the sake of the leader, but for *their* sake as well. “Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Christian leadership is intended for the *advantage* of all, not just for the advantage of those who hold positions of authority, and good and successful leadership is to a considerable degree dependent on the willing response of obedience and submission on the part of those who are under authority.<sup>30</sup>

28. Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 166.

29. James Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1912), 192.

30. Hughes, *Hebrews*, 585.

Therefore, not only are the shepherds to know the sheep and take responsibility for them, but the sheep are to know, that is, to respect and appreciate, those who are over them in the Lord. This is the nature of the shepherd-sheep relationship with shepherds lovingly caring for the sheep and the sheep submitting to their loving leadership. This is the biblical framework within which leaders fulfill their responsibilities as shepherds. These principles should be taught within local congregations not only for the benefit of the “leadership” but in order that members will understand the importance of “followership,” that is, that the proper exercise of authoritative leadership is for the benefit of the sheep and the glory of God.

Great vigilance must be maintained to assure that the biblical view is embraced and practiced. Unfortunately, there are always pressures to move to one extreme of the “authority continuum” (“lording it over” the sheep) or to the other (reluctance to embrace biblical authority structures). The closing section of this chapter will give an example of each “extreme.”

### **The Pendulum Swings: Extremes on the “Authority Continuum”**

The “Shepherding Movement” of a generation ago represents an example of the extreme of “lording it over” the sheep. The “emerging church” movement represents what I call a “flattening” of leadership structure and authority. These examples are instructive because they serve as reminders and warnings to us all that our sinful tendency is either to abuse authority or to neglect its proper use.

### *The “Shepherding” Movement*

There may be some who in reading these pages about shepherding felt a knot in their stomachs and a skepticism born of difficulty in their own negative experiences at the hands of domineering church leaders. Jesus extended a clear warning about the inappropriate exercise of authority:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant. (Matt. 20:25–26)

In Peter’s words to his fellow elders he reminded them that they were to shepherd the flock, “nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3). Unfortunately, there have been too many examples where the biblical teaching about authority has been distorted into an inappropriate “lording it over” the people of God.

One such movement was the “shepherding movement” of the 1960s and 1970s. This movement was largely centered in charismatic churches and was motivated by the need for a greater focus on commitment, discipleship, and discipline among the surging numbers of the “Jesus Movement.” Believers in each church were placed under the authority of house-group leaders who took responsibility to make sure that the members were fulfilling their commitments as believers. The house-group leaders were then accountable to the elders. So far, so good. The trouble began when practices such as “covering” were introduced. “Covering” means that a church member must have any important decision, and sometimes less important ones, ‘covered’ or approved by their house-group leader,

elder or pastor.”<sup>31</sup> Again, this sounds innocent enough until the extent of the covering in some contexts is seen. “Examples of decisions for covering by an elder or more mature Christian are: moving home, employment, marriage, even an appointment with the doctor.”<sup>32</sup>

Again, who wouldn't appreciate input on important decisions from an elder or a mature Christian? However, the difference is that such input was not merely recommended, but *required* by church leadership and was binding upon the church member. In some cases, the counsel of the elders was given the revelational weight of prophetic utterance. It is one thing for elders to provide counsel; it is another thing for them to dictate decisions for matters such as doctor appointments and the choice of marriage partners, claiming to be the revealed will of God. While the motives may have been good, the methods were not.

Other examples could be given of the “lording it over” extreme of the exercise of authority.<sup>33</sup> Unless properly understood in the context of the Scriptures, the authority of church leadership can deteriorate into cult-like control. Leaders must take their responsibilities seriously but must remember to exercise care, especially the care of church discipline, with constant reference to the directives and conditions set in the Word of God.

### ***The Emerging Church Movement***

If one end of the authority continuum demonstrates an overbearing “lording it over” the sheep, the other extreme is

31. Jerram Barrs, “Shepherding Movement,” in *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 639.

32. Ibid.

33. See, for example, Ronald Enroth, *Churches That Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

a reluctance to embrace and express authoritative leadership at all. One example of this reluctance can be found in various representatives of the emerging church movement.

Emerging movement leader Scot McKnight has proclaimed that “the emerging movement is an attempt to fashion a new ecclesiology [doctrine of the church].”<sup>34</sup> Upon what is this new ecclesiology to be based? At the heart of the emerging movement’s view of leadership is that the “hierarchical” approach to leadership is severely flawed and is a vestige of the church’s capitulation to modernism.

What organizational structures did modernity hand to today’s church leaders and members? During the twentieth century, the church, already hierarchical and rationalized, became even more so as it mimicked Henry Ford’s hierarchical, assembly-line construction to maximize productivity, resulting in dehumanization and disempowerment. As the twentieth century progressed, characteristics of McDonaldized society reigned inside the newest forms of church as well.<sup>35</sup>

The driving concern of the emerging movement is the concept of authority or power of those in leadership. This criticism of “modern” leadership flows from the modern view that God is “a willful God who commands all reality through his awesome power.”<sup>36</sup> The following conclusion emerges. “Modern churches resemble this modern God. Their leadership is based on power, control, and submission to authority. For the church to resemble

34. Scot McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church,” *Christianity Today* February 2007: 37.

35. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 20–21.

36. *Ibid.*, 192.

the kingdom of God, current notions of church power must be drastically altered.”<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, in view of this, “all previous power structures are made relative.”<sup>38</sup> “Hierarchy” seems to be the bad word. Lest there be any doubt about this, “Emerging church leaders are opposed to any hierarchical understanding of leadership out of the conviction that it inevitably stifles people and creativity.”<sup>39</sup> In asserting the need for the new model of network development Gibbs places the network over against the hierarchy:

Rather than developing and replicating an organizational machine by way of an expanded bureaucratic hierarchy, network expansion is more akin to the growth of an organism. In this regard leaders have been likened to gardeners who plant, prune, fertilize, cultivate and harvest. The leader does not *control* but *cultivates*.<sup>40</sup> (emphasis original)

What does this look like?

Emerging churches, in their attempts to resemble the kingdom, avoid all types of *control* in their leadership formation. Leadership has shifted to a more facilitative role as emerging churches have experimented with the idea of leaderless groups.<sup>41</sup> (emphasis added)

You can see that many in the emerging church movement have reacted to their view that any church structure is “modern”

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid., 194.

40. Eddie Gibbs, *Leadership Next* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 63.

41. Ibid.

by not only “flattening” church structure but by a reluctance to move away from affirming those whom the Lord has called, gifted, and authorized to serve as leaders in his church in favor of “leaderless” groups.<sup>42</sup> It is fascinating to note that, in the discussion of the emerging movement, the expression “emerging *leaders*” is used without pause. How do these individuals become *recognized* as leaders? Who *authorized* them to speak for the movement? Is it because they are ones who have the most influence? As the saying goes, “if everyone is the leader, then no one is the leader.” Unfortunately, in the effort to address “disempowerment,” the very source of power and authority is at risk of being disempowered.

In all fairness, the concept of authority is not completely disenfranchised by everyone in the emerging church movement:

Even in postmodernity, there can be no leadership without an appropriate exercise of authority. Such authority does not arise from a leader’s position or title but originates in the trust built up on the basis of character, competence, respect, and consistency. Authority is based on the twin pillars of responsibility and influence, and leaders are not simply those who impose their own wills but are individuals from whom opinion is sought.<sup>43</sup>

While it cannot be disputed that such a description fits into the biblical picture of the *exercise* of leadership, it falls short in its description of how this leadership might *arise*, that is, the source of that authority. The authority of the leader does not “originate” or “arise” with the people but with the Lord.

42. See Rom. 12:8

43. Gibbs, *Leadership Next*, 66.

It is on that basis, and on that basis alone, that leaders can act with confidence.

The attempt of the emerging church movement to reverse the “disempowerment” of the people of God through deconstructing the modernistic hierarchy found in the church may just be throwing out the baby with the proverbial bathwater.

There is a great danger of doing disservice to the biblical view of authority and its ongoing exercise through the ages. The danger of abusing authority, on the one hand, and neglecting its appropriate exercise, on the other, are all too real. “Authority without compassion leads to harsh authoritarianism. Compassion without authority leads to social chaos.”<sup>44</sup> Hopefully, this chapter will have introduced you not only to the cultural challenges facing those who would lead God’s people but to a balanced biblical responsibility incumbent upon those who are called by him to shepherd the flock. Having laid this foundation we will now consider exactly what the shepherd is called to do.

### **For Further Reflection**

1. What evidence do you see of the deterioration of respect for authority in the culture?
2. What evidence do you see for the deterioration of respect for authority in the church?
3. Why is a proper understanding of authority important in the context of shepherding the flock?

44. Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 247.

BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

4. Do you think that people of your church have a clear understanding of the biblical principles outlined in the “Authority Primer?”
5. Do your officers have a proper view of their responsibilities as elders?
6. Can you think of other examples of the “extremes” on the authority continuum?