

LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH.

Part 1

Any consideration of the subject of Church leadership, and any endeavour to establish guidelines for today, has to begin with a clear recognition of the fact that the churches of this twentieth century world, and indeed those of many previous centuries, differ radically from the Church as it existed in New Testament days. Indeed J.N. Darby went so far as to say that the New Testament Church is now nowhere to be found. What did he mean by that?

In the New Testament era there was but one Church. It was only possible, if you were a Christian, to belong to that one Body. There were, of course, geographical separations, and local churches existed, but always as expressions of the one undivided Body. In our day the situation is so totally different, that the world is unable to see the Church, and the views of most Christians about the Church are grotesquely distorted by the present realities. Now, we have a multitude of organisations bearing the name of churches, divided from one another by various lines of demarcation, doctrinal, organisational, and governmental. In any one locality there are likely to be any number of such organisations and the Church, as it was known in New Testament times has been replaced by the divided, multiplied churches. Read the church notices in your local paper to confirm!

All this is important and acutely relevant to the subject under consideration, because it means ***that you cannot simply take the New Testament terms concerning the Church or leadership in the Church and transfer them as equivalents to what we have today.*** There is little common ground between the unified New Testament Church and our multiplied churches of today. This is not to deny that the Church exists. It does, but no longer visible, clearly known and evidently unitary, as it was then. Instead, what the world sees is a confused conglomeration of religious organisations, some going by the name of churches and others with a vast array of designations, ministries, missions, societies, associations etc.

The Church as we see it in the New Testament was patently and indubitably the creation, not of man, but of God through the Holy Spirit. It is inexplicable in any other terms. It was the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon that company of 120 in the upper room in Jerusalem which fused those diverse, frightened and bewildered disciples into a powerful living organism, the Church. Not only was the Church created by the Spirit, but it was obviously also sustained and directed by the same Holy Spirit. The headquarters of the Church was in heaven, where Christ risen and exalted was seated at the right hand of God the Father. The Church was not the brain child of man. It was a living organism indwelt by a supernatural life, not an organisation conceived and maintained by human ingenuity and administrative ability.

In this living organism which was the Church there was order, as there is in any living thing. It was not anarchic. Part of that life-rooted order was in the realm of leadership, but never was leadership confused with headship. The sole Head was the risen, exalted Lord Jesus Christ exercising direction and authority through the Holy Spirit and humbly obedient people. There were no denominations with their pyramidal

hierarchies, no Pope, no Archbishops, Right Reverends, Presidents or super-star Pastors. No para-church organisations existed. There were Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, elders, deacons. Now 1 Corinthians 12:28 says, "God has appointed in the Church" these various functions. They were all exercised by men gifted through the life of the Holy Spirit within them, functioning under the direction of the Head, and raised up by Him. They did not appoint themselves, or choose themselves. *The life of the Holy Spirit flowing freely within the new-born Church produced its structure. It is most important to recognise this order of things, life producing structure, and not structure producing life.* One of the fundamental errors of modern church life is to think that, if you can imitate New Testament structure, you will have New Testament life. But it has become very evident that simply to have men designated Apostles, Pastors, Elders etc. does not of itself give rise to such life. Giving men these titles does not automatically reproduce the New Testament equivalent, because, as we have shown, the churches of today do not reflect the one Church of the New Testament.

THE FIRST LEADERS

Now let us come to those very foundational leadership people, the twelve Apostles. It is plain that these men had a leadership function within the Church. They were chosen, called and trained by the Lord Jesus Himself, and eventually empowered by the Holy Spirit for their God-ordained function. So, their choice, calling and preparation were not of man or by man, and the power and authority in which they operated were from heaven by the Spirit.

In the course of their training Jesus several times spoke to them about leadership. They themselves had strong ideas about leadership, as well as ambitious desires to exercise it. There was considerable striving and grasping among them for pre-eminence and power. The Lord Jesus had to show them that *leadership in His kingdom was utterly different from leadership as conceived by the world.* Their preconceived ideas of leadership would have to be completely up-ended and a wholly new concept of leadership be grasped. To this end the Lord taught them both by word and by example. To these we now give our attention.

THE LORD'S TEACHING

Mark 9:33-35. Here the punch line is, "If anyone would be first (leader) he must be the last of all and servant of all."

Matthew 18:1-4. "Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Luke 9:46-48. "He who is least among you is the one who is great."

Mark 10:42-45. "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be the slave of all."

Matthew 20:20-28. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so with you: but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Luke 22:24-26. "But not so with you, rather let the greatest among you become as the

youngest, and the leader as one who serves."

So, we see that Jesus' idea of leadership was characterised by a servant attitude, even a willingness to be a bond slave, humility and a readiness to be the least. There was to be no authoritarianism and lording it over people. There had to be a radical change in mind-set about leadership and a total overturning of worldly conceptions of it. "***It shall not be so among you.***" is perhaps the key phrase which needs to be particularly emphasised.

It is to be feared that among the followers of Jesus today, many are still like these first disciples, grasping for power, contending for primacy, loving the exercise of authority and selfishly ambitious. How we need to hear these teachings of Jesus deep in our hearts, and to allow all worldly ideas of leadership to be washed out of us until we have the mind of Christ on the matter.

Another very relevant and supremely significant scripture is ***Matthew 23:1-12***. Here we have Jesus looking at the religious leadership in Judaism and analysing it and subjecting it to the light of His standards. See what is revealed! Leaders who preach, but do not practise; who pile up back-breaking burdens and lay them on men's shoulders and do not themselves lift a finger to help. Here are leaders who do all their deeds to be seen by men, who love to be accorded places of honour at feasts, and front seats in the synagogues and salutations in the streets and being called "Teacher" by men.

Then, having drawn attention to the prevalent characteristics in the religious leadership of His time, Jesus went on to give some very specific and definite instructions to these foundational leaders of the Church and to the listening crowds.

a) "You are not to be called Rabbi, (Teacher)." (R.S.V.) "You must not seek to be called by titles such as 'Teacher', for you have one Teacher and you are all brethren." (Norlie)

b)"Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven."

c)"Neither be called leaders, for you have one leader, the Christ." (Emphasised N.T., Rotherham.)

Then Jesus adds for good measure, "He who is greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

It is to be noted that these instructions of Jesus were general ones, addressed to the crowds and to His disciples, so they are fully applicable to our present situation. ***ONE TEACHER..*** From Christ's discourse in John 14-16 there can be no doubt as to the identity of the Teacher. He is the Holy Spirit.
ONE FATHER,, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ .
ONE LEADER,, the Lord Jesus Himself.

In these three God has made full and sufficient provision for the care, instruction and leading of His Church. Our place is in an attitude of humility, and I like Andrew

Murray's definition of that quality: "It is simply the sense of entire nothingness, which comes when we see how truly God is all, and in which we make way for God to be all."

Put the patterns and structures of leadership in the churches today alongside this plain and simple teaching of our Lord; the names, the titles, the honours, the distinguishing vestments. Listen to and read much of the current teaching on leadership in churches and see how worldly it is. We must surely repent in dust and ashes that we have departed so very far from that which was in the heart of the Lord for His people.

THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

Not only did Jesus teach these first leadership men by word, He also set before them an example whose power is utterly devastating to worldly ideas of leadership. The supreme example is recorded in **John 13:1-17**. This is a passage which we should read, reread and meditate upon, praying for the revelation of its truths to our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Read it now with a hushed and reverent spirit:

"Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right for so I am. If I then, your Teacher and Lord have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example that you also should do as I have done to you. Truly truly I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."

The point I am making is that these teachings and this example of the Lord Jesus are the touchstone for all leadership in the Church. This is Christian leadership and it is diametrically opposed to the world's ideas of leadership, such as are current in politics, business and which have to a large degree infiltrated the churches.

This teaching and example of Jesus must be uppermost in our minds when we come over into the Epistles, and when we read there instructions and information about leadership. ***Whatever the Epistles mean by leaders, they must exercise their leadership according to Christ, His teaching and example, and not according to the world.***

I find it interesting that the only use of the English word "leader" in the King James version of the New Testament is in Matthew 15:14, where Jesus, talking to the Pharisees (religious leaders of their day), said they were, "Blind leaders." There are of course other leadership words, but perhaps this very fact alone should make us reflect about the strong emphasis today in many organised churches on human leadership. Such is not the emphasis of the New Testament.. There the emphasis is on the headship of the Lord Jesus, the Lordship of the Holy Spirit in the Church, and the absolute otherness of Christian leadership from worldly leadership.

As in the body each member and organ has a specific function, so in the Church, each one has a particular function as appointed by God. The exercise of any particular function does not elevate one above another. We must not forget the saying of Jesus, "You are all brethren."

Those of us who, in obedience to a call of the Lord, have left organised church life to seek from our Father His way, are often confronted with questions about church leadership. "What about the fivefold ministries of Ephesians 4:11?" we are asked. The inference in the question is that these ministries can only exist within a humanly organised church. Similarly, questions are asked about elders and deacons with the same inference. We are invited to observe that the churches to which the questioners belong have officials bearing these New Testament titles, whereas none bearing such designations of office are to be seen among those who have quit the organised systems. Therefore, conclude our interrogators, we must have departed from the Way. But they conveniently forget that the New Testament apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, along with elders and deacons functioned within one Body and not in diverse denominations. For example: Paul instructed Titus to appoint elders in each town. The only division Paul recognised was geographical and not denominational. Today one denomination sometimes will not recognise the ministries of another as valid. Just observe all the wrangles concerning ministry and its recognition in movements for organisational unity among churches.

The truth is that *those in leadership in the Church of the New Testament were never "officials" in an organisation; rather they were men, gifted by the Holy Spirit and functioning in certain roles within the one unified Body of Christ.* An organisation is not necessary for the appearance and working of all of these ministries.

From my own experience of nearly sixteen years now outside all organised church life, I can testify that I am able to identify, among brothers and sisters of like heart, at least some of these New Testament functions. Yes, I do know those who function as elders, some who are teachers, others evangelists, and yet others exercising pastoral gifts. Prophetic function too is evident in some. But I know of none who goes about bearing a title or an office or who elevates himself above others. True all this is as yet embryonic and in process of developing, but I do know we are beginning to get things back in right order and are allowing the life of the Spirit in the Body to produce the functions required for its health. That means life first, then structure and not the other way around. We are discovering the truth of *Ephesians 4:15-16* . that as "We grow up in every way into Him who is the Head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love." Only in such organic Church life will true New Testament leadership appear and function. *As long as churches perpetuate denominational divisions and rely on human organisation, they may boast of officials with New Testament titles, but they will never know the true functioning of Holy Spirit life-created leadership such as was known in the first powerful years of the Church.*

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