

Some thoughts on Biblical leadership

This study is intended to focus our thought on the Scriptural teachings about leadership, particularly spiritual leadership. Since our society has so many false teachings it is often extremely difficult to discern and understand the genuine article. And the genuine is found, of course, in the WORD of GOD.

In IITim.3:1-8 Paul describes the "difficult times in the last days" to come upon the Church. The passage describes various forms and manifestations of rebellion. Boasters, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, etc. One very graphic description is found in verse 8 and 9 referring to Jannes and Jambres. These two men are not specifically found in OT Scripture but Jewish tradition equates them to two of the magicians of Pharaoh's court who "withstood Moses", Ex.7:11. While no specific details are given it is clear that these two represented a particular type of rebellion, namely against spiritual leaders/leadership, which will become more pronounced in the last days.

This type of rebellion has at its heart an alignment with the purposes of Satan. He is the father of rebellion against spiritual authority, and through the ages he has propagated that rebellion as far as possible. We see it every day. Corrupt leaders in virtually every corner of our society have so jaded our senses that reaction *against the corruption* becomes blurred with rebellion *against the leadership*. Even well meaning Christians are often ignoring the clear teaching of Scripture in their "holy righteousness" to purge the corruption.

"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. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of GOD; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves." Rom.13:1-2

When this rebellious attitude flourishes in our society it should be no surprise when it begins to creep into the local church as well.

What are some of the signs within the church of this problem? How should the church leadership respond? What are the appropriate means of expression for a congregation? Is there a proper way to deal with poor leadership? I believe the answer to these questions is clearly taught in Scripture, and suggest the following for your consideration.

"The leadership is out of touch with the congregation." When this cry is heard it is clear evidence of a spiritual problem. Some individual or group of individuals have un-met needs. There is, I believe, a proper way to address such issues and there is an improper way. But fundamentally I believe the REAL statement should be, "The congregation is out of touch with the leadership"! There are many examples to demonstrate this in Scripture.

THE EXAMPLE OF MOSES

One of the first great spiritual leaders in the WORD is Moses. He was called to lead the nation of Israel. In biblical typology, Israel, especially in the wilderness, is like the Church. How did this relationship work? First, Moses became a leader by divine choice and appointment (Ex.3), and GOD led Moses. HE worked with Moses directly and held Moses accountable to HIM. Time and again the Word says, "The LORD spoke unto Moses...", Num.1:1;19;2:1;3:14 etc. In the dialogue between Moses and the LORD recorded in Exodus chapter 4, HE made clear the charge to Moses, and the pattern is established.

"I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what ye shall do". Ex.4:15-16

GOD would speak to (lead) Moses and Aaron and they were to speak to (lead) the congregation of Israel (Num.5:1-2;6:1-2;8:1-2;etc).

This pattern is VERY IMPORTANT. It was the divine order that GOD placed HIS authority in Moses to lead the people and held Moses accountable to HIM. HE placed the people in subjection to Moses and held them accountable to Moses. To see this illustrated consider Numbers 12:1-2.

"Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had married a Cushite woman); and they said, "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has HE not spoken through us as well?" And the LORD heard it." Nu.12:1-2

Here Moses is being challenged on his leadership because Miriam and Aaron disagreed with his personal life. Notice this was not even specifically regarding some leadership decision Moses had made. To paraphrase their challenge, "We are just as qualified to lead this people as you...". And GOD intervened, vs.4-8. Note particularly vs.8.

"Wherefore then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" Num.12:8

GOD brought about swift and immediate judgment as recorded in vs.9-10.

It is interesting that even after this divine display of wrath on rejecting GOD's authority placed in Moses that the trend continues. Chapter 14:1-2 outlines the formation of the great camp of the murmurers!

"Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. And all the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness!"... Nu.14:1-2

And what was their cry? "Would GOD that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would GOD we had died in this wilderness!" Paraphrased, "This leadership is out of touch with us"! Note that Moses very precisely identifies the REAL issue in vs.9.

"Only rebel not against the LORD...". Nu.14:9

That's it. Dissatisfaction with Moses was only the symptom. The issue was rebellion against GOD's authority in Moses.

Consider a few more cases of murmuring.

"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...". Nu.16:1-3

The record is clear. GOD opens up the earth and swallows them up! Interesting to note that Korah, the main leader, had been working in the background with his "gainsaying, rebellion" (Jude 11) to divide the assembly by using the influential men of the congregation (250 princes of the assembly, famous in the congregation, men of renown...). I believe it is especially fearful when you begin to see this kind of polarizing. Any person who attempts to divide the assembly by backroom organizing of influential leaders is following in some slippery footprints. Flee from such things!

And then consider the episode of the fiery serpents. Paul clearly draws this incident over to the local church.

"Neither let us tempt CHRIST, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition...". ICor.10:9-11

Note here that Paul is absolutely clear in stating that the rebellious attitude and its consequences for Israel are recorded as warning for the church today. Even a cursory look at Scripture reveals that GOD is greatly displeased with murmuring and murmurers. Stated positively,

"Do all things without murmuring and disputings". Phil.2:14

Interesting these two go together...

THE EXAMPLE OF SAMUEL

Consider Samuel who was chosen and appointed by GOD to lead Israel, ISam.8:4-6. When the people rose up and said (paraphrased) "Samuel, you are out of touch with the people. We want a king...", the sure Word of GOD calls it like it is.

"..they have not rejected you, but they have rejected ME...". ISam.8:7

That's how GOD sees challenging HIS leadership. Was Samuel right in his actions, vs.1-3? Probably not, but that's not the issue!! GOD would deal with Samuel. The people were to follow him.

THE EXAMPLE OF DAVID

And so we come to David and his ministry with Saul. David had immense respect for Saul even though he was behaving in a very ungodly manner. Time after time David refused to mistreat or speak against Saul because at this time Saul still had a measure of the divine authority of GOD upon him. And David, in complete subjection to GOD was also in complete subjection to Saul. Consider just the one example at the death of Saul. IISam.1:1-16 recounts the story of David defending Saul, even after death, vs.14-16.

"How wast thou not afraid to stretch forth thine hand to destroy the LORD's anointed?" IISam.1:14

David's judgment fell quickly. This was a case of "ultimate murmuring" being judged.

As I have restudied these passages there is one thing which really grips my heart. I don't ever want to be in the camp of the murmurers! That is extremely dangerous ground. Disagree, yes. But be ever so careful to not be disagreeable!

APPLICATION TO THE CHURCH TODAY

So how does all this apply in the NT church? The answer, I believe, is exactly the same. The basic principle involved here is that there is **ONLY ONE SOURCE OF AUTHORITY**, and that of course is GOD. Pastors, elders, deacons, parents, husbands, etc have no inherent authority. Only that which GOD bestows upon them. But rejecting and challenging that authority is always tantamount to rejecting and challenging HIS authority. Here, I believe, is how HE intends the church to function.

In Eph.4:11-13, Paul describes the structure HE has given. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor-teachers. And for what purpose? "to perfect the saints, do the work of the ministry, edifying the body of CHRIST..". NOT to "be in touch with the people"! Rather, to be in touch with GOD and lead the people. What an incredible difference that is.

The office of elder is identified specifically as one of leadership for the church. In Acts 20:17-38 is

the account of Paul's last meeting with the elders from the church at Ephesus.

"And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church...Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the HOLY SPIRIT has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of GOD which HE purchased with HIS own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert... Acts 20:17,28-31a

Notice particularly in verse 28 that he identifies the elder-congregation relationship as "...the flock among which the HOLY SPIRIT hath made you overseers..". There is a statement that is so incredibly important. GOD's authority is placed in the elders for leadership. HE holds them accountable to HIM, just like HE did with Moses. And the people are held accountable to them, just like the children of Israel were accountable to Moses. Murmurers are probably inevitable, but they will be judged!

It is important, I believe, to understand a little better how the elders and congregation are to relate. First, consider the elder.

The elder is to be among the best the local assembly has to offer. The qualifications in 1Tim.3:1-7 are high indeed.

"This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop he desireth a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach; not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of GOD?). Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil." 1Tim.3:1-7

Notice that these qualifications are intensely focused on character and integrity. Does an elder immediately become "inerrant" or sinless when assuming office? Of course not. Moses wasn't, Samuel wasn't, Saul wasn't, and neither are we today. What happens when an elder sins? First, it must be carefully validated.

"Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses. Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear." ITim.5:19-20

If valid, the rebuke is to be public so that others (probably the whole church) will fear. Since elders are to be associated with teaching (apt to teach), the passage of James 3:1 is particularly relevant here.

"My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation." James 3:1

Elders will receive a much greater (higher expectation) judgment than the congregation (non-elders). Knowing this and the direct accountability to GOD for the leadership of HIS precious Bride, why would anyone ever become an elder??

The answer, I believe, is that the HOLY SPIRIT stirs up and gifts some men to be just that. Paul opens ITim.3:1 with "If a man desire the office of bishop he desires a good work". And in ITim.5:17 there is to be a benefit of respect or honor to them that serve well. I believe that "looking out" (voting) by the congregation those who DESIRE the office and who meet the qualifications of elder is an excellent biblical principle. Being coerced to the office is probably unwise.

IPeter 5:1-4 identifies how the elders are to do their work.

"The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of CHRIST, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed. Feed the flock of GOD which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over GOD's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away." IPet.5:1-4

There would appear to be a special crown for good service here. So eldership is a two edged sword. Great blessings and reward and greater judgment of service! Not to be entered into lightly. To the elder, be sure of your calling. To the congregation, be sure of your choosing.

And what about the elder-congregation relationship? One of the clearest statements in the New Testament regarding this is Heb.13:17.

"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."

Note that GOD is holding elders (at least) accountable for the congregation and vice-versa. The elders will apparently have to give account one day of how their flock followed. Best not to be in the camp of the murmurers on that day...

Much more could be included in a study like this. But I believe the main point is clear. GOD's plan for the church is HE leads the elders and the elders lead the church. HE holds the elders accountable to be submissive to HIM for their leadership. HE holds the congregation accountable for their submission to the elders. HE will judge poor leadership. HE will also judge those who murmur and challenge the leadership, even if it's poor leadership at the time! If I am in leadership I want to be challenged by the Word on doing it well. The standards are higher. The accountability is higher. The consequence of sin is higher. When I am not in leadership, I want to be careful to not join the camp of the murmurers. GOD is clearly displeased with this group and the Scriptures give ample evidence of HIS corrective actions.

Are there ever times when it is appropriate to disobey the spiritual leadership in a church? I believe the answer is yes, but very carefully. If the leadership is clearly and unrepentantly violating the WORD then don't follow that leadership. But remember David and Saul. Saul was absolutely wrong, but David still had respect and honored him because he was in the position of authority set up by the LORD.

May GOD give each of us a sober understanding of our role in HIS Church and an unflagging zeal to serve HIM.

In Him,

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