

THE CHARACTER OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

by R H Johnston

Christian leaders must not rule like worldly rulers

Christian leadership is shown at its highest in the Lord Jesus Christ, in the way He handled and instructed His disciples. Mark 10:42-45 shows the contrast between His way of leading and that of worldly rulers. Worldly rulers "rule" (Greek: *archo*) by "lording it over" (Greek: *katakuriuo*) them and "exercising authority over" (Greek: *katexousiazo*) them. All three words have a very strong meaning. But such rulership is not to be permitted among Christians: rather, whoever would be great must be a servant (Greek: *diakonos*) and whoever would be first must be a bond-slave (Greek: *doulos*) of all. Jesus cites his own example in Mark 10:45. This shows the true character of Christian leadership. Throughout history this command and example have been frequently ignored, and authoritarian rule substituted. This is because it is easier to rule in an authoritarian way than to live out the kind of life demonstrated in the Lord Jesus, and it is less spiritually demanding for those who are led. Authoritarianism is the insistence that followers do as the ruler commands on the ground of his holding a position. Some people seek to justify authoritarian rule from other scriptures: it will be shown that these scriptures use a different terminology which disallows authoritarianism.

Qualities required of Christian leaders

In 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-10, the qualities required for supervisors (Greek *episkopos* = "overseer, supervisor, one who looks over (the work of others)") are very exacting. They are to have the kind of character which will enable them to lead by example and supervise the work of others without strain. A man who is not able to bring his own household into a happy submission to his leadership of the family will have a correspondingly bad effect on the church (1 Timothy 3:5). The same skills of personality, persuasion and sure leadership are required. Titus 1:9 requires supervisors to have the ability to exhort by sound teaching and convince those who would contradict. Few men have these qualities, but they are essential if a supervisor is to lead without having to assert himself in a domineering fashion in order to cover his personal weaknesses. Since few men possess these qualities, correspondingly few should be formally recognised as exercising such leadership. Neither passage allows the selection of the best of a bad bunch: both passages positively require all these qualities. This is why Paul had not been able to formally recognise such men previously (Titus 1:5). Compromising on these standards has allowed authoritarianism to take a strong grip on many Christian organisations.

Willingness to be persuaded

In Hebrews 13:17, "Obey those leading you and submit to them", the Greek word for "obey" is "*peitho*", here used in the passive voice. It means "to be persuaded", and Vine's Expository Dictionary states that "the obedience suggested is not by submission to authority but resulting from persuasion". "Those leading" is "*tois hygoumenois*" from "*hygeomai*" meaning "I lead". This is the same construction as Hebrews 13:7 and Hebrews 13:24. The emphasis is on the function exercised rather than on an office. The Greek word for "submit", "*hupeiko*", literally meaning "I retire or withdraw", is here used metaphorically of yielding to those who are leading. This word is not used anywhere else in the New Testament. Thus this verse does not imply an unquestioning obedience to a ruler endowed with personal authority, but a **willingness** to be persuaded by those who are leading the way that their way is right. This provides protection for both leaders and led, because the leaders must provide good reasons for their actions and suggestions. Having to persuade their followers successfully will reveal to the leaders any weakness in their proposals and so prevent wrong paths being taken, provided that the leaders do not ignore dissenting voices. The principle of becoming united in one mind and judgement (1 Corinthians 1:10) is vitally important, as it reveals the extent to which we have the mind of God.

Leaders must show themselves worthy of esteem

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 is similar to Hebrews 13:17: "We ask you brothers to recognise those labouring among you and taking the lead of you in the Lord and admonishing you, and esteem them highly in love because of their work". The word for "taking the lead" is "*prostymi*", literally "I stand before". It is also used at 1 Timothy 5:17. The ground for respect in both verses is the character of their work, and the quality of work to be so esteemed is shown in 1 Thessalonians 2:9-12. Leaders have to earn their respect as leaders as a result of demonstrating that the authority of the Lord is really with them through the character of their service. Then the esteem will be readily and easily given "in love", not superficially or unwillingly. Further characteristics are given in Hebrews 13:7: they speak the word of God, and their faith and conduct are exemplary. Such leaders are worthy to be yielded to (Hebrews 13:17): they persuade as much by their lives as by their words (compare 2 Corinthians 10:11). The leaders in view in the Hebrews and Thessalonians passages need not necessarily be those formally recognised, but any genuine Christian who is leading another in the Lord.

All Ministry must be tested

1 Thessalonians 5:21, the requirement to test everything, also eliminates any grounds for authoritarian rule. In Titus 1:13-14 and 2 Corinthians 11, especially verse 20, there is reference to Christians wrongly submitting to forms of

authoritarian rule, through not weighing the character of those who sought to lead them and the truth of the things they taught. These Christians were reprov'd for allowing themselves to be taken in like this. All ministries have to be tested, particularly apostleship (Revelation 2:2; Acts 20:28-31), showing that it is especially important to test those who have the greatest and most prominent ministries. The teachings and commands of those who fail the test, and the men themselves, must be emphatically rejected in order that the truth be preserved (Galatians 1:6-9; Galatians 2:5; 2 Corinthians 11:12; Colossians 2:8; 2 John 1:7-11). 1 Kings 13 shows that it can be fatal for a man to yield to an assumed but groundless authority.

Authority comes from the commands of God

Titus 2:15 is addressed to one who is in a leading role. "These things speak and exhort and reprove with all command. Let no one disregard you". The Greek word for "command" ("authority" in AV, RSV and NASB) is "*epitagy*", meaning "commandment". It also occurs at Titus 1:3. This word "stresses the authoritativeness of the command" (Vine). Thus it is not Titus himself who is endowed with the authority but the nature of the commands given earlier in the chapter is such that they have authority. The commands do indeed commend themselves to any right-thinking person. The ground from which Titus will be able to say these things and avoid people being able to disregard him is that he fulfils them in an exemplary manner himself (Titus 2:7) and he can therefore "affirm confidently" these things (Titus 3:8).

Elders to be examples

1 Peter 5:1-5 is addressed to the elders (Greek: *presbuteros*). They are forbidden to "lord it over" (Greek: *katakuriueo*, the same word as Mark 10:42) those in their charge, but instead they are to be examples. Likewise Paul did not "lord it over" (Greek: *kurieuo*) the faith of the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 1:24) despite the many problems there were in that church. Instead he saw his own relationship with them as being rather like that of a father, since it was through his ministry that they had heard the gospel (1 Corinthians 4:14-15; 9:2, compare 1 Thessalonians 2:9-12). The relationship of a Christian towards the one through whom he came to know the Lord is a unique one, and as with natural fatherhood, no one else can take that place. But even this relationship, special as it is, is not to stand as a substitute for a relationship with the Lord (Matthew 23:8-12). God hates harsh rule over His sheep and punishes this very severely (Ezekiel 34, especially verses 4,10). The biblical standard is that there should be a **mutual** submission to one another (1 Peter 5:5; Ephesians 5:21) serving one another in love, humbly and sacrificially (Mark 10:42-45; Galatians 5:13; Colossians 2:1-11).

Leaders must not do the work of the church, but facilitate it

It was never God's intention that the leaders should take over all the work of those who are led. There is an essential difference between the Old and New Covenants in the nature of leadership. In the Old Covenant, only a few special people, the kings, the judges and the prophets had the anointing of God's Holy Spirit. The rest of the people did not have the Spirit themselves, which is why they needed to have intermediary priests to represent them before God and to be intermediaries between them and God. As a result the ordinary people played a largely passive role in their dealings with God (e.g. 2 Chronicles 5-7; Ezra 3).

The prophecy of Joel (Joel 2:28-32) prophesied a day, fulfilled at Pentecost, when all God's people would possess the Holy Spirit themselves and they would no longer need their leaders to be their intermediaries. All Christians are taught by God (John 6:45), and can offer acceptable worship. Moreover the purpose of the various ministries is revealed in Ephesians 4:11-13: these ministries are provided for the bringing to maturity of the whole body of Christ. The ministries are for serving the church, not for controlling it or for doing the work of the church. The exercise of the ministries of a few people is no substitute for the proper functioning of the whole body (1 Corinthians 12).

Regrettably, because of their misunderstanding of the nature of true Christian leadership, which has been outlined above, many leaders have reduced those whom they lead to passivity. All many Christians are now allowed to do is to take part in corporate activities, mainly singing songs, which are determined and closely controlled by a few leaders. This is in blatant disregard of the pattern of mutual up-building, with "each one" bringing his own unique contribution to the meeting, that is revealed in 1 Corinthians 14. The objection that the size of our churches and events makes such a meeting impossible is unbiblical: if necessary we must change our traditional patterns of meetings rather than make void the word of God (Matthew 15:6).

Reference

Vine W E Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words Oliphants 1952

These notes not comprehensive but should stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author (email: rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk) (First Edition Sept 1982, revised 5th March 1994, correction 18 May 2006, 2.9.2018)
© R H Johnston 1994, 2006,2018. This paper may **only** be copied **in its entirety** for private non-commercial use. All other usage requires the written permission of the author.