
Who Runs the Church?

“The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them . . . but ye shall not be so . . .” (Luke 22:25-26)

The disciples of Jesus were involved in a number of abrasive encounters over greatness and authority. They anticipated the establishment of an earthly kingdom and therefore sought for positions of power at the right hand and at the left hand of the throne.

In response to this, Jesus constantly reminded them that His kingdom was not of this world. The church of Jesus Christ was to be characterized by a radical and revolutionary concept of authority. It was to be totally diverse and distinct from the way that human governments functioned. However the church was to be run and men were to have influence, it was not to be like the Gentiles did it. Jesus proposed that greatness in His kingdom would be associated with service. At the last supper He demonstrated this profound lesson by girding Himself with a towel and washing His disciples' feet. “Know ye what I have done to you?” He inquired. The symbolic gesture with the basin and towel was representative of a concept quite basic to

Christianity. Service and greatness are inseparably associated. Christian leaders are specifically forbidden to "Lord it over" the people of God (I Peter 5:3).

Having said this, let us return to our question, "Who runs the church?" Almost everyone will agree that Jesus is the Head of His body, the Church, and that all authority has been given unto Him both in heaven and on earth. Since Jesus, however, is at the right hand of God, someone else is going to have to be making many minor decisions in the local congregation.

"Aye! There's the rub." Who does run the church? Is it the elders or the pastor? Is it the congregation or the "official board"? Is it a traveling evangelist or someone located in the community? Is it the men who think they run it, or their wives who meet on Tuesday to make quilts?

The Church is a Body.

At the very outset it must be remembered that the church of Jesus Christ is a body not a business. It is an "organism" more than it is an "organization." The body is not one member, but many. It is a team of individual members united together in Christ and specifically directed by Him. God is not the author of confusion, but of peace. When there is confusion in the body of Jesus Christ it is evident that some influence has been exerted which is diametrically opposed to God.

The presence of division in the Church at Corinth was therefore a matter of great concern to Paul. Even their regular meetings had become a negative influence so that they came "together, not for the better but for the worse" (I Corinthians 11:17). To correct this horrendous situation Paul reminded them that

"... there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all" (I Corinthians 12:4-6).

A body is composed of many members. Each has a different design and function so that we complement one another for the good of all. There are no vestigial organs in the body of Christ. Every member has a specific function to perform and was added to the body of Christ for a purpose.

A More Excellent Way

In the midst of this discussion about “gifts,” “administrations,” and “operations” Paul pauses to remind his readers about the priority of love. It is possible for a church to be endowed with all of the spiritual gifts and yet be characterized by confusion. Love is more important than angelic languages or prophetic mysteries. It is more relevant than miracle working faith or benevolent martyrdom. It is the divine catalyst which stimulates every member to function in harmony with Jesus and also with one another.

Love is patient, enabling us to wait on one another without murmuring.

Love is kind, that we might promote healing in the body.

Love is without envy, so that we can remain contented at our job.

Love is not boastful or proud, creating ill will and disharmony.

Love is not haughty, selfish, or rude, leading us to insult our brethren in Christ.

Love does not demand its own way and it is not irritable and touchy.

Love does not keep a record of wrongs or gloat over the errors of others.

Love leads us to be loyal to one another, to believe in one another, to expect the best of one another, and to put up with one another.

Love enables us to endure whatever comes.

A Multitude of Counselors

“For God so loved the world that He did not send a committee.”

Jesus did not choose one apostle to represent Him, he chose twelve. Every church in the Scriptures seemed to have a plurality of leaders. Antioch had five prophets and teachers (Acts 13:1). Paul and Barnabas ordained elders in every church (Acts 14:23). Titus was instructed to ordain elders in every city (Titus 1:5). The church at Philippi had “bishops and deacons” (Philippians 1:1). The church at Jerusalem had elders (Acts 11:30), and the church at Ephesus had elders (Acts 20:17), etc.

The principle of the jury system is that when you multiply judgments, you reduce error. This seems to be in harmony with a statement in the Proverbs, “Where no counsel is, the

people fall: but in the multitude of counselors there is safety" (Proverbs 11:14).

These and other considerations have brought many to the ridiculous notion that the committee concept is "scriptural," and that to entrust one man with "authority" is both "unscriptural," and "unwise."

The extent of our error is epitomized by the caustic little comment, "For God so loved the world that He did not send a committee." A church that is cursed with the committee concept is doomed to be little. The whole idea is so utterly irrational that it only survives in the church because we have been brainwashed into believing that it is "scriptural."

Let us go back to the Proverbs and reconsider what it means to have a "multitude of counselors." First, we need to ask the most obvious and elementary questions: Who is speaking? to whom? and under what circumstances?

Solomon was responsible for most of the Proverbs, and he was a king. As a king he had unlimited authority. He could order his brother killed and an infant to be cut in half and no one could have prevented it. He had the power to marshall the entire nation for battle or to acquiesce to an enemy in unconditional surrender. Under such circumstances it was wise for the king to be surrounded by knowledgeable men. Before going to war he needed to have at his fingertips the latest intelligence information and the wise counsel of a variety of men who were experts in their various fields. Once advised, however, the decision was his. There is a difference between a "multitude of counselors" and a "multitude of voters." Solomon was not the president of a democracy or the head of a giant corporation . . . he was a king.

Individuals vs. Committees

We have five children in our family. Our youngest is separated from the other children by eight to fifteen years. It has been my experience that an individual took better care of him than a group. If I wanted him to be in bed at 9:00 I would assign that responsibility to only one brother or sister. Everybody's responsibility is often nobody's responsibility. It is difficult to reward, or to prosecute a group or a mob.

The same principle applies to the church. An individual may not be able to move a piano, but he can be responsible for having it moved. If the buck stops at his desk he can round up

enough manpower or equipment to get the job done. The committee, on the other hand, is unwieldy and indecisive by its very nature. Strong personalities often cancel one another's effectiveness, and domineering individuals sometimes use their committee as a cloak for personal vendettas.

It is not at all unscriptural to assign great responsibility to an individual. God did this to Moses, Joshua, and all the judges. It was His "modus operandi" in the age of the Hebrew prophets and it will still work today.

The concept is quite compatible with the plurality of leaders we observe in the New Testament Church. There is a difference, however, between having eleven men on a football team and in having eleven quarterbacks. This brings us back to where we began. The kingdom of Christ is not to be run like the Gentiles would run it. Greatness and authority are not to be conferred by titles and positions, but by ministry and service. One young minister said to me, "The elders of our church have all of the authority and no responsibility, and they have given to me all of the responsibility and no authority." This is precisely the kind of leadership which the Scriptures explicitly forbid.

In I Corinthians 12:28 and Scriptures teach that God placed "governments" in the church. The Greek word translated as "governments" is "kubernesis." It is the word used in Acts 27:11 of the man who steered a ship. The welfare of the ship and two hundred seventy-six souls were in his charge. When it was time to turn into the wind or weigh anchor, he did not have to call a board meeting, or ask for a show of hands from all the passengers. Steering such a vessel called for many decisive and immediate decisions and the captain's background and experience made him the logical one to make these judgments.

One reason why many modern churches do not need someone to exercise the governmental gift is that they aren't going anywhere. As long as the ship of Zion stays anchored in one place, you can afford to table matters until the next board meeting. Once you cut loose, however, and get on the move for God, you will see the immediate need of guidance and direction . . . and you may not have time to convene a committee.

Barnabas and Saul

“. . . The Holy Spirit said, 'separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them . . .'" (Acts 13:2)

There is something to be said for the disciples of Jesus working pairs. The Holy Spirit did not say just Barnabas, or just Saul, but Barnabas AND Saul. Jesus, you will recall, sometimes sent out His disciples "two by two." This would not prevent individuals like Timothy and Titus from receiving personal assignments all by themselves, but it does provide an interesting variation of the way the Holy Spirit works.

If power corrupts, then absolute power will corrupt absolutely. How aptly this was illustrated in the life of the late Jim Jones. This self-styled Messiah who spat on the Holy Bible obtained a tyrannical hold upon the minds of his followers. Like a malignant growth, this power so corrupted his mind that he came to believe that virtually everything was his to use or abuse at will. He did not believe that his followers had any rights to their money, their bodies, and ultimately even their lives. Over nine hundred individuals perished in a shocking murder, suicide fiasco in the jungles of Guyana.

Working in pairs may serve to mitigate some of the dangers of working alone. Like the two wires essential to completing an electrical circuit, two personalities may provide a positive and a negative approach which enable each to function at full capacity.

Diotrephes and the Nicolaitans

Diotrephes is distinguished in the Bible as a man who loved to have the preeminence (III John 9). He prated against the Apostles with malicious words and refused to receive the brethren. He cast out of the church whom he would and demonstrated by his behavior that he was not of God.

The doctrine of the Nicolaitans may have been associated with the conduct of Diotrephes. The word itself comes from *nikao* which means to conquer or overcome, and *laos* which means people. It literally signifies to conquer people.

Jesus came to serve, not to be served. Someone has compared Him to Alexander the Great by this stunning contrast. Alexander the Great conquered the world at thirty-three and it killed him. Jesus was killed by the world at thirty-three and He conquered it. The bottom line involves our relationship with people. Those who "lord it over" their fellow men will not be guiltless before God.

Conclusion

Who does run your church? Is it the pastor? the elders? the board? the congregation? Thus far we have sought to demonstrate that legalism does not help us to arrive at the proper conclusion and the question before us is again no exception.

Legalistically speaking, I think that I can present a better case for the authority of Paul as an apostle than you can for the authority of your pastor or your church board. Paul was an apostle of Christ and his credentials are quite impressive. Yet he did not use his authority to lord it over people. He "greatly desired" that Apollos journey to Corinth with the brethren. Apollos didn't do it! (I Corinthians 16:12) Without rancor or bitterness Paul simply remarked that ". . . he will come when he shall have convenient time . . ." To Philemon he preferred to appeal, rather than command regarding the beloved Onesimus, whom he begat in his bonds (Philemon 8-10). To the Thessalonians he was gentle like a nurse cherishing her children. He was so much in love with them that he was ready not only to impart the gospel but his own soul, because they were dear unto him (I Thessalonians 2:7-8). To the Corinthians he made the contrast between a father and a teacher. They could hire ten thousand instructors who would serve for a paycheck, but Paul loved them like a father. He pleaded with them to imitate this kind of love (I Corinthians 4:14-16).

Instead of sitting around pouting about your authority, may I suggest that you search for a basin and towel and begin to serve. The people on your block are lonely and desperate. They are like sheep without a shepherd. When they visit the gathering of believers they could not care less about "who runs the church" but they do care if you love one another.

"By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35).

Questions for Discussion — Lesson Ten

1. Why did the apostles of Jesus think that He was about to establish an earthly kingdom?
2. Did Jesus give to some apostles more authority than others?
3. Is Jesus great because of who He is, or what He did?
4. Why are committees so prevalent in American churches?
5. Would it be "unscriptural" for churches to function without committees?

6. To what does the word "governments" refer in I Corinthians 12:28?
7. How does pride sometimes prevent us from learning from people who are wiser than we are?
8. The disciples of Jesus were free to leave Him (John 6:67).
9. How do Christian people sometimes "lord it over" one another?
10. How can a church make the transition from an "authoritarian" leadership to a leadership based on "service"?