

5. JESUS NEVER APPOINTED PRIESTS OR PASTORS TO BE CHURCH LEADERS

What the Christian scriptures have to say about authority and authorities is radical and shocking. It may, in fact, be the most paradoxical teaching in all of serious literature. It is nothing less than the complete opposite of what humankind usually understands under the label of leadership.

Paul described Christ's inverted understanding of authority when he wrote to the Philippians that they *should have the same attitude that was in Christ, who, although he was like God, did not regard equality with God a thing he had to grasp on to. Instead, he emptied himself by becoming a servant and by becoming like a man. And as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the extent of dying on a cross.*

What's described here is not merely a case of a man choosing to descend the ladder of prestige and influence. It portrays a veritable plunge into obscurity and humility. It is a course of action that goes strikingly against the grain of man who finds it natural and even laudable to strive for privilege and influence. Who would think it desirable to give up rights and privileges already enjoyed? Nevertheless, this attitude and this example is a core essence of the life of Christ and part and parcel of what he passed on to his followers.

Jesus saw prominence and leadership in a much different light than did the world around him. He called John the Baptizer the greatest of all men. It mattered not to him that John dressed like a shepherd, ate little better than the animals, lived much of his life in seclusion, and was committed to the goal that Christ should become greater and greater and that he should become less and less. This same John died in a prison cell, sharing a fate little different than that of Jesus himself.

The unmistakable teaching and example of Christ concerning the use of privilege and authority are to a significant degree ignored by the leadership of Christian institutions. This stands out as one of the most glaring contradictions of Christendom.

Authority and authorities in traditional Christianity

Traditional churches took giant steps of institutionalization by assigning many positions of authority. The plethora of leadership titles in churches and other religious bodies is astounding. There are popes, cardinals, archbishops, monsignors, professors, apostles, abbots, bishops, priests, superiors, superintendents, metropolitans, chairmen, trustees, committee heads, pastors, ministers, elders, reverends, worship leaders, youth leaders, founders, presbyters, overseers, deacons, and even kings and queens who function as the national heads of churches. Institutional churches array their particular lineup of leaders in various schemes of authority, though all are hierarchical in some form or another. Their decision-making processes range from democratic and conciliar to monarchical and dictatorial. The importance that has been assigned to the determination of authority is mind-boggling.

It is also baffling how little Christ is recognized as the absolute head of his ecclesia. Though his headship is often given lip service, actually letting Christ be the head of the ecclesia is seldom practiced. Instead, men assume temporal power in much the same way that any president or CEO functions as the boss in a secular organization. Church leaders simply do not believe that Jesus, the Christ, can actually lead his ecclesia, either from his place of honor in heaven or from his relationship of oneness with each believer.

Prestige and power are temptations

The desire for prestige and power is one of the three great temptations of man. It's one of the temptations that Satan used to test Christ. He set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said, *If you are the Son of God throw yourself down. God has to take care of you.*

How quickly men will assume their own importance, whereas Christ, who has every reason to make such an assumption, will not. This is why Jesus' words concerning issues of authority were not well received by those around him. They made the Sadducees and Pharisees livid with anger and they frustrated Jesus' own students. Today, these same words irritate and anger institutional leaders in Christianity when their authority is questioned.

Jesus said it was typical of the world that its leaders should lord it over one another, but that his students should not be like that. He instructed them to be servants of one another. The leader in Christ's ecclesia is a servant.

The hierarchy in the scriptures

This has been said before but in this context it bears repeating: The only hierarchy mentioned in the scriptures is the one in which the family father is made the highest of human authorities, closely followed by his wife. The order is this: first God the Father, then Christ, then the husband, and then the wife. This shows the central position that the family plays in God's plans. This cannot be emphasized enough. The family is at the very center of who God is and how He depicts Himself. Man was created as the image of God and he was created as man and woman, both complimentary and both endowed to be family. The ecclesia also reflects this image of God. It is specifically called the family (household) of God in the scriptures.

One of the worst results of assigning authority to institutional church leaders is the defacto demotion of the family father. In many cases he has been reduced to insignificance being replaced by a pantheon of institutional church leaders who instruct his wife and children in his place. In addition, the home, which is supposed to be the heart of the ecclesia and the center of learning and nurture, is replaced by the sanctuary, the fellowship hall, the Sunday School classroom, the conference center, and the church school.

The loss of the father as the head of the home has not only been a tremendous loss to the women and children in the homes, but it has been the loss of the main training ground for responsible men in the ecclesia. The scriptures forbid that a man fulfill responsibilities in the ecclesia if he does not demonstrate that he is able to be the head of his own family.

Instead of recognizing the key role that mature fathers play in God's Kingdom, leaders in traditional churches are chosen according to institutional stipulations which usually include completing the course of studies at an approved school and receiving an appointment by those highest up the leadership ladder of the church organization. It is a normal procedure for many church institutions to appoint young men—or even young women!—just starting their families to positions of authority.

Leaders in the ecclesia are not like leaders in worldly institutions

Overseers (*episkopoi*), servants (*diakonoi*), and older men (*presbuteroi*) are mentioned in the scriptures as the responsible men in Christ's ecclesia. (Pastors and priests as church leaders are purely traditional inventions.) None of these three, however, was intended to be a power position in a worldly institution and they were certainly never intended to be positions in a hierarchy of authority. Only men who had proven themselves in their own families and who fulfilled a list of other qualifications were considered eligible to be one of these men who could be entrusted with important tasks. They weren't there to fill positions of authority, but to do tasks of service.

The verse that is most often quoted to prove the authority of church leaders is Hebrews 13:17: *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls and will give an account for their work.*

It is tempting for institutional churches to want to claim this instruction for the leaders they appoint, but this would be an anachronistic reading of the text. Rather, these men who are referred to as leaders are men whose genuine qualifications have nothing to do with the fulfilling of institutional guidelines. The men the scripture writer is referring to are men who have been tested in their homes, who have helped their wives and children to be students of Christ, and who are humble servants who neither demand nor desire authority. They are men who live their lives as Christ lived his.

A reading of the entire writing of Hebrews serves to place this instruction in its correct context. Previous passages speak of the readers' need to pay closer attention to the words of Christ, to grow to maturity in him, and to have the kind of sacrificial faith that was typical of so many earlier believers. Only such followers of Christ are able to recognize the tested leaders in the ecclesia of Christ. Men who are not qualified, however, can never be leaders regardless of how many institutional religious organizations might appoint them as such. Leaders in the ecclesia are leaders because they have effectively followed Christ in their own families and because they continue to follow Christ daily. Such men stand out, not because they've been given a title, but because of how they live and what they know. There are not many of them. They do not demand authority; they are humble; they follow Christ by living like he did. For those who have eyes to see, they cannot miss such men of faith. The instructions in the Hebrews passage concerns men such as these.

The institutional approach

Most institutional churches work from the premise that local churches have to have leaders and those leaders have to have leaders over them. Their educational systems are charged with training enough people to fill all available positions. Humanly speaking, it is a logical system, but the leaders it produces by no means have the qualifications of the leaders mentioned in the scriptures. Rather, they are heavily schooled in the theological, religious, and administrative traditions of the institution they are serving; they are taught the "correct" interpretations of the scriptures; they are taught the ins and outs of "church management;" and they are given much training in the art of the worship service. The result is leaders who are institutional representatives, managers, and religious professionals with priestly duties. These are not the sort of leaders envisioned in the scriptures.

Church schools and seminaries are the leader factories for institutional churches. It is interesting that even these training centers bemoan the fact that there are so few really good leaders to fill the many positions. To do it, they have increasingly had to turn to

women in recent years. Nevertheless, poorly qualified people—even in the institutional sense—continue to be “placed” with the assumption that the positions have to be filled.

According to the scriptures, however, there is no such thing as a leader who is not qualified. Either a person is qualified or not. A person cannot be made a leader by appointment. Only a qualified person can be a leader and recognized as such. A position does not define a leader. A qualified person defines a leader. If a qualified person is present, then a leader is present. If a qualified person is not present, then a leader is not present.

The workers are few

The fact is that the number of qualified individuals in the ecclesia of Christ today is extremely small. In most cases they are not only *not* leaders in institutional churches, but they are spurned by such churches and seen as a threat. Followers of Christ have to have their eyes open to recognize qualified leaders because they will not be authoritative individuals. They will be humble; their desire will be to serve; their passion will be to know and follow the instructions in the scriptures; they will identify with any and all believers; they will live modestly as did the Lord; they will desire no recognition from men.

Leaders in Christ’s ecclesia will desire above all to be students of Christ and to make students of others. They will be out and about helping others do this. This is how they will lead. They will lead in the same way Christ led others. They will not want anyone to become dependent on them. They will want to lead people to Christ and to dependence on him. They will have no interest whatsoever in denominational or institutional distinctives. They will emphasize learning the scriptures and the scriptures alone. They will have little interest in the traditions and theologies of men. They will understand the ecclesia of Christ to be like a family and not like an institution. They will be individuals who are in no way outwardly religious in their behavior. Rather, every day and every hour they will be concerned about following Christ. They will be concerned only about the private person that God sees and not the public person that men see. They will want to please God and not men.

These are the leaders in Christ’s ecclesia. They need no certificate; they need no diploma; they need no title; they strive to become less and less so Christ can become more and more.

The apostles were given the authority of eyewitnesses

The initial students of Christ—the ones ultimately called the apostles—had a unique position of authority according to Christ. It was an authority that was obviously intended to extend beyond their lifetime through their writings. The key word that

defines the sort of authority they embodied is the word *eyewitness*. They were the ones who were chosen by Christ, who accompanied him during his work on earth, and who were commissioned to make sure his message be made available to all the world through their testimonies.

An example of the eyewitness function of the apostles can be read in the beginning of the writing of scripture that has traditionally been called I John:

This is about what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life. And this life appeared and we have seen it. And we testify about it and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and appeared to us.

What we have seen and heard we also proclaim to you, so that you too may be of the same mind with us and indeed we are of the same mind with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.

These are things we are writing, so that our joy may be made complete.

These men had been given the task to be the scribes of Christ and to pen what it meant to *walk in the light as he is in the light*. This is the authority of the eyewitness. For all time, people's understanding of Christ was to be measured on the words of these first writers who had seen Jesus, lived with him, and heard his words.

The example of leadership

It can't be repeated enough that the picture of authority in the Christian scriptures emphasizes the father in the home. This is why the home is the testing ground for the men who are supposed to be the reliable ones in the ecclesia. Leadership in the ecclesia, however, is by no means understood in the same way that leadership in an institutional church is understood today. Instead, it should be understood in terms of the example of Christ with his students, or Paul with his students and fellow workers. In the same way that Christ's ecclesia is not a worldly institution, neither are the leaders in that ecclesia worldly leaders. They are there to serve, to care for others, and to be mature individuals who are examples of their words.

We see also that there is not a handover of authority from Christ to anyone in his ecclesia. He keeps the reigns of leadership and remains the head of his followers. He expects them to look to him for guidance through the scriptures. The result of the picture we have of authority in the ecclesia is unique in many ways: Christ continues

to have all authority; leaders are not to be clothed with authority but with maturity and humility; leadership is a service-oriented, family-related responsibility; the words of the eyewitnesses have the authority of God's commands; and the family father carries the highest title (father) and the greatest responsibility among men in God's scheme of things (though his authority is limited to his own family).

Questions of authority have plagued the institutionalized church for centuries

Powerful leaders of the institutional church have grabbed reigns of power and exerted much influence over many people. They initiated wars, carried out inquisitions, built rich and powerful churches, demanded complete obedience, lived lives of much pomp, penned authoritative writings, and founded movements with distinctive teachings. Such behavior has nothing to do with the Kingdom of God. It is always a travesty when puny men in the name of Christ allow themselves to become powerful authorities who invest themselves with titles and positions, put on the vestments and insignias of royalty, and at the same time have the audacity to call themselves servants of Christ.

It's often been said that the best way to change people for the worst is to give them a little authority. It easily goes to a person's head. Suddenly they have a title, some clout, a position, and an ego that springs to life.

The world needs authorities

Authorities are a necessity in the world. It would be ludicrous to suggest that a company or a government or a school could be run without authorities. But the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed was not an earthly kingdom. Was it nevertheless supposed to have authorities like any worldly institution? Most traditional ecclesiastical organizations have answered this question in the affirmative. The most powerful authority in Christendom is the pope who resides in his own papal state nestled in Rome. He presides over a vast hierarchical dominion of lesser entities, each presided over by a leader who is part of a hierarchical network of authorities.

Many other traditional Christian institutions also have hierarchical leadership structures, not necessarily as tiered and elaborate as the Catholic Church, but nevertheless sporting the typical superstructure of a hierarchical system. Even at the local level most churches have a leader with considerable authority, usually a priest or a pastor.

The question of authority is a particularly lethal one in the world of Christianity. The atrocities and religious hypocrisy of Christianity in the past are to a large degree the result of institutional authorities who have used their positions in a personal quest for power, pleasure, prestige, or possessions. And they did this even though some of the most remarkable characteristics of Christ were his humility, his unwillingness to

conduct himself as a manipulative person, and his refusal to wear any of the outward insignias of power.

Recognizing leaders in the ecclesia of Christ

A person who desires to follow the Jesus Christ of the scriptures is faced with the challenge of how to find fellow believers and how to recognize leaders in the ecclesia. This is a big challenge for a person who has grown up within the parameters of one or more of the many institutions of Christianity. In these familiar churches the members call themselves Christians and various kinds of clergy are the accepted leaders. For them, it is practically impossible to imagine that this constellation, which in some cases is ancient, cannot be the truth and nothing but the truth.

It is not difficult to recognize the facades of Christianity, however, if one is willing to give priority to the scriptures. That is all that is required. Let the scriptures identify what is of Christ; let the scriptures explain what it is that makes a believer in Christ recognizable; let the scriptures describe what characterizes a leader in the ecclesia of Christ. The ecclesia is Christ's. The message of the Kingdom is Christ's. It only makes sense to let him have his say. The student of Christ will value his words above all others. The scriptures are there to help a follower distinguish what is of Christ and what isn't.

In order to get the insight for recognizing believers in Christ and leaders in his ecclesia, it is important to begin first with observations from the scriptures and not with examples from the religious culture.

Thus, instead of assuming that the cultural church is the best starting place for "seeking to do the will of God," it is best to look to the scriptures for the initial input. Since this is no small undertaking, the wise thing to do is put off certain practical matters until one has had enough time to do a thorough study of the scriptures. This is the way of any student. First comes the learning and then the doing.

The Christian scriptures are the big voice to which too few people pay attention. Most folks are too quick to simply listen to the next best piece of advice and go with that. No one, however, can make a mistake by taking the time to search the scriptures. They offer the input that represents the perspective of Christ and his students. Anyone interested in following Christ should want all of their information to be as fresh as possible from this original source.

What do the scriptures teach about the essentials of following Christ? What did John write about believing in Christ? What did John write about walking in the light as Christ is in the light? What did Matthew write was the example of Christ that we should follow? According to Luke, what are the written sources we should accept?

What did Paul write about how the ecclesia was supposed to function? What did Peter write that followers of Christ should emphasize in their lives? These and many other questions are addressed in the scriptures. The answers to them should be built into the foundation of a follower's life.

It's equally important to know what the scriptures do not teach. Much today is labeled as "Christian" or "biblical" that has little or nothing to do with anything that Jesus, Peter, John, or Paul ever taught. This should not surprise us. Jesus also came to a culture that was deceptive in terms of its actual relationship with God. It was a culture that called itself the children of Abraham and the people of the Law of Moses. Jesus, however, often pointed out that there was much about the leaders and the people of this culture that had nothing to do with either Abraham or Moses.

The same is true today in much of what is called Christianity. Although the institutions of Christianity use the name of Christ and although their leaders point to the scriptures, they nevertheless emphasize in their teaching and practices much that was never taught by Christ and much that was never a part of the example of Christ or his first students.

This is why studying the scriptures requires courage and intense focus. They must be dealt with thoroughly and with an eye toward their application. A student should allow the scriptures to explain and dissect one's own culture and beliefs and not allow them to be subjected to surrounding influences. The scriptures should be the judge and culture should be the judged, not the other way around.

It is essential that a follower of Christ first concentrate on understanding the scriptures because their view of how the Kingdom of God should function in the world is much different than what is demonstrated by the leaders and institutions of Christianity. Jesus, himself, is the very best illustration of how different this is.

It's also important to remember that locating qualified leaders has always been difficult. Jesus once described this situation best when he said to his students, "The harvest is great but the workers are few." That is certainly true today. Though the number of people who call themselves Christians is huge and the institutions of Christianity are many, rich, and powerful, the actual number of men and women who take the words of Christ seriously and who seek to follow his example are few. Jesus' followers, now as then, are only found on a narrow road as a small minority.

Believers should simply keep their eyes open for mature men of faith who have the qualifications of a leader. Knowing those qualifications will make a leader stand out unmistakably. As has been noted already, such a man is very different. He will demonstrate a commitment to the scriptures alone, the willingness to live a humble life like Christ, the courage to speak the truth, be an impeccable example in the family, and be actively involved in making students of Christ. The sum total of these qualifications

is so unusual and so remarkable that there will be no questions as to whether such a person can be trusted as a mentor.

Lack of servant leaders does not mean lack of leadership

If no qualified men are available—not an unusual possibility—then a follower of Christ should have the goal of becoming a qualified person. By no means, however, should someone thrust another person into the role of a servant leader because “someone has to do it.” Either a person is qualified or not. If there are no qualified people around, it is best to proceed with one’s life without them. At any rate, no one in the ecclesia is ever without leadership. That role is always Christ’s and Christ’s alone. Nor is any believer ever without practical instruction because the scriptures are the concrete and detailed expression of God’s will. Anyone willing to work in the scriptures and take them seriously is in touch with the leadership of Jesus Christ.

One should also be aware that anyone pushing themselves into the role of a leader or demanding that they be recognized as a leader, is a person who is automatically disqualified. Leaders in Christ’s ecclesia are not concerned about having authority. They are content to let Christ have all authority. They are content to be recognized for their qualifications and are content to deal with other believers in the same way that Christ dealt with his students. No one was forced to follow Christ. Each was free to leave at any time. Jesus did not try to manipulate or coerce his students. He was completely satisfied to empty himself of any rights or demands, and he was content to identify himself with a group of men who had little worldly reputation.

A servant-leader in Christ’s ecclesia will always reflect the attitudes of Christ; he will know well the words of Christ; he will have the same goals as Christ; he will have the courage to confront traditions that are not scriptural; he will have no worldliness about him.

Given these qualities of life, it should not be difficult for a follower of Christ to recognize servant-leaders in Christ’s ecclesia. They will stand out for those who have eyes to see them. Those looking for leaders with worldly qualifications, however, will overlook the truly qualified men.