

4.

THE FORM OF A SERVANT

We have been discussing in these chapters the subject of spiritual authority. We have examined together the two types of authority found on earth today, i.e. positional, delegated authority and spiritual, "transmitted" authority. We have investigated the necessity of being able to recognize genuine spiritual authority and to distinguish it from the earthly variety. And we have seen how it is that God prepares His vessels and then manifests Himself through them to the church.

With all this in mind, we are brought to one particularly important question concerning authority. That is: what are a person's motives for exercising authority? When anyone is acting or speaking with authority, inevitably they have a purpose behind what they are doing. Furthermore, these motives clearly reveal the source of such authority. For example, when the impulses are from God, the authority is His. He is the One being revealed. On the other hand, when a desire to dominate arises from within the individual, selfish ambitions are certain to exist. Consequently, understanding the motivations behind the authority which we see displayed, both in ourselves and others, can be a valuable tool to understanding the source of such authority. Let us remember that the thoughts and intentions of the human heart (especially our own) are often very difficult to see. There is a great need therefore to sincerely open our hearts and minds to the illumination of the Holy Spirit and humble ourselves before Him as we examine the scriptures together.

Since our Lord Jesus Christ was the ultimate example of true spiritual authority, let us take a look together at His life and teaching. When Jesus walked on the earth with His disciples, He spent a large portion of His time teaching them. His methods of teaching were diverse and unique. Often He instructed them through graphic illustrations as well as with words. It was just before the culmination of His work on earth, while they were together eating what we call "the last supper," that Jesus chose to make a powerful demonstration for them concerning authority. The time He selected for this action, the very climax of His ministry, is evidence of the tremendous importance which He attached to the subject.

While they were eating together, Jesus got up from the table, took off His clothing and put on a towel. He dressed Himself like a servant. Then He proceeded to perform the function of the lowest slave—wash the disciples' feet. Here was God incarnate, the Creator of the universe, the One who had the right to exercise all authority, acting like a personal attendant. Undoubtedly, He was trying to convey an all-important message. He was pointing out, as emphatically as He could, the true attitude and position of those who exercise spiritual authority and leadership. While He was performing this act He said, "You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for

so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example that you should do as I have done to you" (Jn 13:13-15). He then concludes this message by saying: "If you know these things, happy are you if you do them" (vs 17).

This then reveals for us the scriptural motivation of true spiritual authority. Those who are used by God to convey His authority are to be servants. Their attitude and their disposition is not to set themselves up as "something," i.e. masters and lords, but to take the lowliest position. They are to use their God-given gifts to serve others instead of to elevate themselves and/or build up their own "kingdom" or "ministry." Jesus' actions are far more than just the basis for a new foot washing ceremony in the church. Here our Divine Instructor has shown us a tremendous principle which governs all the exercise of spiritual authority among His people.

What does this then mean in our practical experience? It means that when God begins to use someone as a channel of His authority and consequently they begin to be elevated in the eyes of other people, they themselves have no interest in being so elevated. Their hearts are not set on themselves or on some kind of "position" but are instead bent on serving others. They have been humbled by God and so have become, in every sense of the word, servants. Their life's ambition is no longer to become "something" in the church themselves but to raise others up to be what God's wants them to be. "Self" is no longer the motivation. Instead, the good of others has become the dominating force governing their actions. These are the people who have really understood God's message and thus have become very useful in His kingdom. Alternatively, if someone in their heart of hearts does not have this attitude, then they are not truly qualified for spiritual ministry.

Those who are really the instruments of God are not trying to "build up their own ministry." Their motivation is never to "build a bigger church than someone else's" or to keep as many as they can under their influence. They are not creating their own empires and kingdoms using the name of Jesus and the word of God as a disguise for self-serving living. These are not people who enjoy controlling others and basking in the aura of being the "man or woman of God." They are simply servants working for the good of others. Such authority is never hard or demanding because the person manifesting it does not stand to gain anything personally from it. It is an authority with an entirely different motivation from anything human. This type of leadership can only come from another source. It displays the true character of God.

NEW TESTAMENT "TITLES"

The "titles" which the New Testament uses to describe God's servants reflect the above truth very strongly. In the original text, the thought of men and women in the church reigning and ruling over one another is completely absent. However, in many cases, the true meaning of the terminology has been greatly twisted or even lost entirely to our modern generation. Perhaps the best example of this problem would be the word "minister." Today, a "minister" is someone who "runs" the church. This person has an official title, a religious position, perhaps also has certain special garments which he wears to distinguish himself from the others and, in general, is elevated above the people. Often a large degree of respect is expected from the members, similar to what one might give to a political dignitary.

However, the scriptural revelation of what being a "minister" means is much different. There are actually three different Greek words which are translated into this

one English word "minister." The first one is DIAKONOS. It means "servant" or "attendant." The second word, LEITOURGOS, refers to someone who served the public in a special capacity at his own expense. The third word, HUPERTEs, originally meant "under rower" which was a lower order of seaman. It later came to mean any subordinate acting under direction from another. Some other words which are related to the thought of spiritual service are: DOULOS, "a bonds slave;" OIKETES, "a household servant;" MISTHOIS, "a hired servant;" and PAIS, "a servant boy." (Definitions from Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words.)

Nothing in any of these words suggests the concept which we commonly encounter in the churches today. Servants do not tell those whom they are serving what to do. They are not the ones reigning and ruling over the others. Instead their function is to be of assistance to others by serving them in a lowly fashion. In these terms we discover no exaltation of self, no elevation in the eyes of the world and no special position of social respect. In fact, just the opposite is true. The use of such terminology suggests that such persons have humbled themselves and become genuine servants, following the example our Lord Jesus throughout His life (Phil 2:8). From this brief investigation it appears that this word "minister" has become so misapplied in its usage in today's church as to mean virtually the opposite of what it did in Jesus' time.

SERVICE FUNCTIONS

I believe that it is time for all of us to do a serious re-examination of our concepts about what God is trying to convey to us in His word. When such terminology as apostle, prophet, minister, elder, etc. is used, exactly what is the thought of our Master behind it? From our foregoing discussion it is plain that these cannot be titles or labels signifying special positions of importance or "offices" in the church. This would be in direct contradiction to the clear teaching and example of Jesus. Therefore, we must seek further until we see in the light of God a revelation which is in harmony with all of the scriptures. [It should be noted that the word "office" which is found in some English translations of the Bible referring to the ministry of the bishops and deacons (I Tim 3:1; 3:10; 3:13) actually represents no word in the original Greek text but is the invention of the translators.]

Instead of being regarded as positional titles, these words such as "minister," "apostle" and "elder" could be understood simply as descriptions of certain service functions in the body of Christ. This is perhaps best illustrated by using earthly analogies since we do not have any religious preconceptions concerning them. For example, anyone can go fishing. But when someone fishes often and becomes adept at catching fish then you might say that he is a "fisherman." This is not their title or some kind of position but a description of what they do. Similarly, many people can fix a leaking faucet, but when they regularly do that sort of work and become good at what they do, then they are regarded as a "plumber." So it is in the church. God has assigned to each one special tasks. We might today call them "ministries." These are unique areas of service through which we nurture the body of Christ. When someone regularly is used by God in the area of prophecy and they become known for their exercise of this gift, then they could be called a prophet. When someone is specially sent by God to establish and feed the churches, then they become known as an apostle, which means "sent one."

When these words, which today are thought of as titles or positions in the

church, are seen as merely descriptions of service functions, all conflict with the teachings of Jesus disappears. Instead of being a means of elevating certain talented individuals above the rest, they are in reality simply a means of describing the kind of servant these people are. This idea is strongly supported when we examine how these words are not used in the New Testament. For example, the scriptures never use the phrase the "Apostle Paul" thus signifying a title. Instead we read of "Paul, the apostle," the servant, the one who has been sent by Another to perform a service to His church. We never encounter "Elder Peter," "Reverend James" or "Pastor John" in the holy word. Something entirely different than this is in the mind of God.

Not only are these various ministerial descriptions not used as titles in the New Testament, Jesus strictly forbade the use of titles among his followers. When He said to His disciples, "Do not call anyone on earth your father" (Mt 23:9) this was not simply a prohibition from using this one single word. It was clearly an instruction against the elevation of some individual to a position of prominence by the use of a title. He explains saying, "For you are all brethren." You are all equal. You are all on the same level. No one ever gets to be bigger, better or greater than the other. He reinforces this truth by insisting, "Do not be called 'teacher,' or 'master' (some ancient Greek texts have 'leader' for 'master')" (Mt 23:7-10). This clearly indicates that all use of special words to distinguish and elevate one believer above another is against the clear teaching of God's word. Praise God, all the titles are reserved for Jesus! He is "King of kings" and "Lord of lords."

THE DIVINE ORDER

Today in Christian circles, many people are teaching about divine order. The basic thought behind this instruction seems to be that there exists a kind of hierarchy, a sort of chain of command, within the church of God, and that when we recognize it, submit ourselves and "get in line," we will fulfill God's will and experience a blessing. In this "chain of command" the apostles are at the top, then come the prophets, evangelists, etc.

Other groups perhaps put the "pastor" as the leader, the elders next below him and then the deacons, Sunday school teachers, and so on down the line. Although there are many variations on this theme, the fundamentals are generally the same: that is that there exists a kind of pyramid structure, similar to an earthly corporation or government, within the church. Furthermore they insist, it is through this structure that God leads His people.

With this in mind, let us read a scripture together. "But Jesus called them to Himself and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many'" (Mt 20:25-28). In Luke's account we discover that these kings who exercised lordship were called "benefactors." In other words they are ruling for the "benefit" of those under them. The idea of one believer exercising authority over another, even if it seems to be "for their benefit" is expressly forbidden. Jesus says, "But not so among you, on the contrary, he who is greatest among you let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves" (Lk 22:25-27).

Here we find the true divine order. Within the church it is to be exactly the

opposite of the way it is in the world. While the world has a hierarchy and a chain of command, in the church of God we should find nothing like this. This activity has been strictly forbidden by our God! It does not matter what others are doing. The popular practice or custom of our day has no bearing on the matter. We have been called to obey Jesus. Many of us commonly state that we believe the Bible and that the words recorded therein are of the greatest authority. How then can we allow popular opinion and methods to govern our work for the Lord?

TRUE LEADERSHIP

This then is God's plan. Those who are being used by God to transmit His authority have a completely different attitude than those who have authority in the world. They have no intention of "exercising authority" over another brother or sister but are simply conveying the will of God according to His leading. These men and women are never arriving at a position of being higher than another or being "over" them but are servants using their gifts to build others up. Paul himself says concerning the authority manifested through him, "Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy" (II Cor 1:24). Although some English versions of the Bible translate I Thess 5:12 as if someone were "over" another in the Lord, the word in Greek here is PROISTEMI which means basically "to lead," not to rule over. As we have been seeing, the whole concept of Jesus and of the scriptures is to become a servant, not a ruler. Although some may be ahead of others in terms of spiritual maturity, this does not indicate that they should dominate the body of Christ.

Perhaps it would be useful here to investigate just exactly what the concept of leadership entails. To "lead" in the Biblical sense does not mean to command, to order or in any way to exercise authority "over." Instead, it means that someone goes in front as an example. The rest, seeing this example, realize that it is from God and follow. This is exactly the way a real shepherd functioned in Jesus' day. He developed a close relationship with his animals. They knew him well and they trusted in him. So, when he left the fold, they followed him believing from experience that he was heading for greener pastures. These shepherds did not drive the sheep from behind. They did not send an order for the sheep to move to a certain place. It was their example and their faithfulness which made them leaders. This is New Testament authority. It is a service of love, showing by example and faithfulness the will of God.

It is interesting that God chose to use terms such as "elders" and "fathers" to describe those who were more mature in the Lord. These terms (as opposed to "general" or "governor" for example) were carefully chosen to convey God's thought. If you think about it, you will realize that there is an important aspect of being a father or grandfather which is quite different from one who is in command. Simply put, a father has the welfare of his children in mind. It is no problem for a good father if his children become greater than he. In fact, it is his goal for them to do so. If they can be better educated, happier, richer, have a better home and life, it is only a joy to him. His goal is to serve them and help them to prosper in every area. Fathers are to be in a very real way the servants of their children.

Similarly, the objective of any true servant of God is to build others up. His work is to manifest the reality of Jesus to them in a manner that will encourage them to become real disciples. Our task is to serve others, not ourselves. Our privilege is to encourage others to follow Jesus in such a way that, if possible, they could become "greater" than we are. If they become wiser, more powerful, more used by God or

more recognized, this should be for us a source of the greatest blessing. Since we are their servants, it is only a joy for us when they are exalted. This is a fulfillment of our ministry: to have others become all that God wants them to be.

Let us then contrast this with what happens in the world today. In politics, business, sports, theater and every other activity, people are scrambling for the top. They want to be the biggest and the best, the richest or the most famous. Many times this competition to be great becomes an ugly manifestation of the fallen human nature. Power struggles, lies and deception become part of the process. Not admitting weakness or failure, not letting others know how you really are inside—these are absolute necessities for getting ahead. Appearances become much more important than reality because this is what influences others. Hypocrisy thus runs rampant. In short, many inhabitants of this earth are daily involved in a power struggle. They are trying to rise above others while at the same time trying to keep the rest from beating them to it and putting them down.

WHAT IS OUR CONDITION TODAY?

How then do we find the situation in the church today? With which of the above two examples could we compare the practices which we encounter in the house of God? Sadly, it is often the latter of the two which describes the situation in the church. The human desire to elevate oneself is found in many pulpits. The tendency to keep others down is also there. The desire to become more and more powerful, influential and famous motivates more than a few ministers today. The norm of our day is to discover "how many people" a leader has in "his" church. How many churches does he have affiliated with his ministry? What are the numbers? How much success? How great has this "servant" become?

This practice has gone so far that I understand some Bible schools even teach future leaders special techniques to maintain their authority. They realize all too well that if people see the human side of these leaders they will have trouble recognizing their authority. So they instruct them to keep aloof from the congregation. They admonish them not to become friends with "those in the pews" and not to let others know about their personal problems. If they do, then the people will not respect them or obey their authority. Not only does this result in the establishment of a false kind of authority in the church, it also dooms the leader who is so encumbered to an isolated, and therefore incomplete Christian experience. This earthly kind of authority is utterly foreign to the New Testament understanding of the church.

Also it is not uncommon to find Christian leaders fighting to keep their position in the church. When someone else begins to be raised up by God in the congregation and be recognized and respected by others as having a message from God, then the present leader may find a way to get rid of that person. Send them off to Bible school. Let them get their own church. Accuse them of being rebellious and throw them out. Any method is O.K. as long as it preserves the position of the one in front. Accusations, fears and competition all form the basis of a fleshly power struggle.

True spiritual authority, on the other hand, flows from God. No one really used by God ever needs to fight to gain a position or ministry. Jesus is the one who raises up leaders among His people. Genuine leaders never raise themselves up by their own abilities to preach, teach and in general influence others to think well of them. King David for example was a lowly shepherd, but the Lord chose him to lead His people. Many of the prophets were nobody and nothing until God touched their lives and

began to flow through them. Ministry is not a product of ambition but a result of intimacy with God. Those who are really used by God are those serving others rather than their own egos. These are the works which will stand the test of judgment day.

Also, there is never a necessity to defend our "position" or ministry. A real servant has no position to defend. He is simply at the disposal of God to be used or not as his Master sees fit. When Moses' leadership was challenged, his response was to fall upon his face before God. He knew that it was the Lord who was using him and it was His power that was keeping him. Human strength and reasoning would only pollute the testimony of what God was doing through him. God will defend that which is truly of Him. Nothing will prevent His will from being done in the course of time. There is never a need for human effort to secure the work of God.

Strife, contention, debates, power struggles, etc. are the works of the flesh. Lowliness, gentleness and meekness are an evidence of the Holy Spirit. If we are biting and devouring one another, it will certainly cause destruction in the family of God (Gal 5:15). If we have been touched deeply and humbled by God to be a servant to His people, our work will bring blessing and ministry to all those around. This is a great necessity of our day: not to hear those who are using the things of God to elevate themselves and build their own ministries, but to receive from those lowly ones through whom God is manifesting Himself.

One day when the twelve were walking with Jesus, they began having an argument. They were fighting about who would be the greatest when Jesus became king. The Lord used this opportunity to try to show them again something about how He intended His body to function. He took a little child and set it there beside Him and said something so profound: "He who is least among you all will be great" (Lk 9:48). Another time two of the men were making a special request for positions of authority. Jesus again made a pronouncement which is exactly the opposite of our normal, human way of thinking. We read, "Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— just as the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Mt 20:26,27). These things are not meant to be just nice religious philosophies. Jesus said these words so that we would seek to enter into the reality of them.

THE DANGER OF RECOGNITION

We have been speaking about the necessity of humility in the service of God and how a true leader is really a servant. However, it is inevitable that when God begins to use a human instrument, some people will begin to be impressed and, at least in their own minds, elevate him to some kind of position. When true spiritual authority is expressed, it often results in individuals gaining a kind of earthly authority in the eyes of men. In fact, people will often try very hard to give this kind of authority to their leaders. This puts the servant of God in a very dangerous position. Once men, even if only in their own minds, have placed such a person in this situation, it is a constant temptation to use this earthly authority. Instead of continuing to rely upon God, it becomes possible for the servant of God to resort to human tactics. When difficult situations arise, it becomes easy to make their own decisions and take matters into their own hands. Interestingly, the more the vessel is used by God, the greater this danger becomes.

Again Moses' story becomes an example for us. He was a man who became a conduit for God's authority in a very remarkable way. He proved to be almost

completely obedient in this ministry. But once, just once, he lost his temper and chose to use his positional authority to meet the people's need. Instead of obediently speaking to the rock as Jehovah had instructed, Moses angrily struck the rock with his staff. God honored him in this position and poured water out of the rock (Num 20:11). However, this action cost Moses dearly. Through this one use of natural, human authority, his entrance into the land of Canaan was denied him. This account demonstrates clearly how important God considers the distinction between these two kinds of authority.

All servants of God should take this to heart. When God uses them and they are elevated in the eyes of the people, they must be careful to only manifest the authority of the Spirit which flows through them. Any natural or positional authority is disqualified even if it seems to be achieving the needed result. God's will may be quite clear. His direction may be obvious to the leaders whom He is using. But any appeal of natural authority, "office," gift or ministry, to the fleshly nature will not produce spiritual results. In fact it cannot. The scripture reads: "That which is crooked cannot be made straight" (Ecc 1:15). Nothing which begins in the earthly realm can ever produce spiritual fruit.

This then is God's way. The man or woman who wishes to please God must become a servant. We are to humble ourselves before the Lord and our brothers in Christ, rather than taking the way of the world. Instead of seeking exaltation in the eyes of men so that we can control them and thereby "help" them to walk in God's ways, we are to choose to be lowly. In this way, only those who are truly willing to hear the voice of God will hear Him speaking through us and be obedient. This is exactly the way our Lord Jesus Christ lived while He was on the earth. Not only did He have the right and the authority to demand obedience, He had the power to force things to go His way. However, instead of using this power we read: "Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Phil 2:5-8).

Dear brothers and sisters, this is the way. It is a wonderful Person. May we enter into the full experience of His reality.