

AUTHORITY and submission

A Major Factor in the Church of God, even in the Present Era, is the Dynamic of the Authority granted to the ministry. Certain organizations have declared that "It's all about Government". What role does "Government" rightfully play in the Church, and How should WE Respond to it?

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Authority, and the exercise thereof, is not a new thing among the communities of men. From the time of Nimrod, at least, we have documentation of the feral desire, embedded deep within the human drive mechanism, to scheme, connive and to fight to take control over other individuals. Nimrod was declared a *"mighty hunter before the Lord"* as early as chapter 10 of Genesis. Nimrod is mentioned specifically as being a founder of cities, no doubt under his own firm control. It says of him in verse 8 of Genesis 10 that *"he began to be a mighty one on the earth"*. In these ancient biblical genealogies few are given the amount of narrative as Nimrod.

Not long before the reign of Nimrod, the earth had become hopelessly corrupted, making necessary the Great Universal Flood, which effectively erased and started human society and religion all over again.

But we need to consider what Nimrod represents, as there are characteristics in his nature that well illustrates what's wrong with society, even religious societies, and the way they operate, right up to the present day.

"Before the Lord"

Hidden in the text is a seemingly minor comment. Various commentaries recognize that Nimrod for the tyrant he was. Josephus rates him as a despot,¹ *"Now it was Nimrod who excited them to such an affront and contempt of God. ... He also changed the government into tyranny, -- seeing no other way of turning men from the fear of God, but to bring them into a constant dependence upon his power."* Nimrod's being "a mighty hunter **before** the Lord" isn't as clear in our translations as it could be. He

actually stood **before** the Lord in a sense of being an interloper, in his case becoming a demigod in the eyes of people. Using his prowess in managing the wild animal threat to the lives of his citizenry, he gained a reputation as 'protector'. He in effect used that to take control of the political power structure in his day² becoming a potentate without equal. It was under his regime also that the ancient pagan religions, that we find embedded traces of in modern religion, were forged.

But the lesson of Nimrod is that he illustrates how governments of men, sooner or later, exhibit the characteristic of wanting to get in-between the people and God! Christ alluded to the prevailing phenomenon in Matthew 20:25-28. *"But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. 26: But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; 27: And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: 28: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many."* In other words, they were not to structure the Church in the likeness of the civil governments of the world. We aren't so fortunate in all situations to see Church leadership in full agreement with this clear prohibition, as we see demonstrated by their actions.

(Also in this passage there's a unique perspective on the definition of the term "minister". Few see it for the insight it offers. Being 'ministered unto' as He used the term, indicates a person being served

¹ Antiquities, Book 1, Chapter 4, Paragraphs 2 & 3

² Haley's Bible Handbook suggests he might have lived thru almost all of the four centuries between the Flood and the days of Abraham.

in some way, not that minister being in position of power over the person being served. The person(s) being ministered unto occupy the greater position of regard in this picture. Notice that!)

(A second consideration in this narrative is that the desire of a person to be used as a servant (minister) can come from within. In some organizations, any apparent self-desire in that regard is a death knell to **any** likelihood of promotion into their ministerial ‘ranks’. More likely, it marks them for deliberate exclusion! ³)

Now, there’s a third aspect of this brief but potent narrative: that being ‘chief’ requires we **serve** in a greater capacity, not merely directing or controlling the activities of a wider echelon of underlings!

He further addresses the primal motive of men to gain supremacy over one another in Matthew 23. Even the as-yet unconverted Disciples (still awaiting the receipt of God’s Spirit) fell into this natural trap! He said in response to their inquiries about becoming prominent: *“The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat: 3: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but **do not ye after their works**: for they say, and do not. 4: For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. (does this sound like selfless servants of the people?) 5: But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, (they aggrandize themselves) 6: And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the **chief seats** in the synagogues, 7: And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi. 8: But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and **all ye are brethren**.*

(Once a hierarchy starts to develop, the focus on the sufficiency of Christ as our True Master becomes complicated.) 9: *And call no man your*

³ Despite the scripture in 1st Timothy 3:1, *“This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, (overseer) he desireth a good work”*, anyone exhibiting such personal desire is viewed as ‘suspect’ in established hierarchies. One can understand why IF being considered from a desire to be an ‘overlord’, as many within the establishments are themselves.

*father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. 10: Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ. 11: But **he that is greatest among you shall be your servant**. 12: And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.”* (At least in the eyes of God!)

The point here is that we were called upon to reject the typical human authority structure and the manner in which it operates. Would that all our religious leaders were attentive in this area.

A Danger with Intermediaries

Where it matters is where the tendency among men resurfaces; something that needs constant vigilance. Even as seen among the true Disciples, mentally envisioning themselves as ‘greatest’ over one another, the whole approach needs to be carefully considered. Without such care, we stand ready to slide back into the same approach mechanism that creates an authority structure in the Church that’s in violation of Christ’s intent.

An authority structure **is** represented in the New Testament Church. We could cite many passages which refer to a degree of oversight and ‘authority’ on the part of those who serve the brethren in a ministerial way. Unfortunately, that structure was taken hostage in the latter part of the first century, gradually morphing into the ‘universal church’, with its apostate doctrines. (Referred to as ‘Nicolaitanism’ in Revelation 2 & 3. (Nicolaitanism was a conquest of the people! That’s what the word means!)) An astounding reference to that religious entity was made in the mid-1980’s within the Church of God, with statements made that “the only thing that church had right was government”! Even promoting as being right the idea of the ‘supremacy of Peter’! Such was the mindset as it developed among some of us after the late 1970’s.

Keeping any Wolf at Bay

Things can work well when there is organization within the congregations. But only to the degree that the fundamental problem that is inevitable among men is kept at bay does the situation have merit.

Unfortunately, the record on that issue isn’t clean.

All too often a **hierarchical movement** takes root and the simple but effective establishment is overwhelmed and muscled out of the picture. A hierarchy that reintroduces the same competitive spirit with its striving for prestige and supremacy is more the norm than the other. Those ‘others’ are often referred to as a ‘primitive’ church.

What is lost under that approach is the climate of love and service, but even more, the condition of there being no intermediary between the individual Believer and his God.

Wonderful organizational charts were drawn up decades ago to show who was in charge, who was the Leader, but even more importantly, making clear who is NOT! There always was acknowledgement that Christ is the Head of the Church, but then a chain-of-command of ‘offices’, under God, was posed, occupied by human leaders: apostle, prophet, evangelists, pastors, teachers, on down to the ‘lowly’ member. (e.g. citing Romans 12:4-8) This structure is often placed in between the member and God, not so much with intent to isolate the member from God (that would take a lot of brass!) but to establish the authority chain of the structure as it involves our ‘obedience’ and particularly our ‘submission’ to that authority structure.

Consider the propriety of an elder brother getting between parents and their other children. Perhaps with good intentions, or perhaps to further some inappropriate personal objectives, it’s easy to see how such a situation could become conflicting and relationship-straining within the family. Why does a similar situation escape our notice when it’s within God’s Church? And, what does such action do for the atmosphere of love?

It is at this very juncture that an organization stands or falls. We lost one major religious entity that had so much right doctrinally, with such potential to carry out The Commission, due to this problem. It got top-heavy with ‘organization’, operating more on the basis of obedience (submission) to Government, and not Love of the Brethren. Further, an indirect effect of that approach was to subtly place an intermediary between the member and God, at least as Church operations were involved. It helped create a ‘Diotrephesian condition’ both locally and organizationally. (Read the epistle of 3rd John) In

that situation, if Love is called for, it typically comes in second to the requirement of being submissive to “Church Authority”. The member (or congregation) needing Love then becomes a *second* consideration after the control objectives of the organization are met.

Spurring a Dead Horse

With it becoming increasingly clear, as time passed, that the old organization **would not repent** of its way of thinking,⁴ God found it necessary to close out that particular organization in a most dramatic and irreversible way. Yet more than one successor, missing the point entirely it seems, attempts today to recreate the political situation that once was: “Raising its ruins” as though that is God’s great desire. What if it is not? What we saw happen should provide a clue. There is a lesson in those events, that we must correctly learn.

Structural Danger

Where we embrace the greatest danger, is when we create an authority structure that intrudes into that area of responsibility between ourselves and God. There must be no person or structure of persons between an individual Saint and Christ. First, there are personal responsibilities that no organizational structure can or should pre-empt. We are called upon to ‘*study to show ourselves approved unto God*’. All too many in that environment wait like babes to be spoon fed, never maturing as God requires. Second, we are in receipt of God’s Spirit personally and directly. There is no intermediary channel of control of that flow, though some pose the idea that “there is” as a measure to promote resolute loyalty. Any action perceived as ‘disloyal’ could put ones salvation in jeopardy, it is claimed. (But then, ‘disloyalty’ can be highly subjective, where one minister might define matters quite differently than another.)

Though being oft reminded that we are ‘leaders in training’, the practical counter-position to that is that it’s **not** for now! Use of one’s God-given

⁴ In fact, as time progressed, the situation worsened. Moving from the “Petrine Supremacy” premise, to “God always works through just one man”, to “the only thing the Catholic Church has right is government”, the Church lost touch with and spurned its primitive Christ-ordained foundation.

Talents, as they develop, must be duly ‘authorized’. A positive side of that position is that it could dampen over-zealousness, and prevent mistakes that could prove offensive enough to cast a bad light on the organization. But, carried to the other extreme, it dampens the zeal of those who are being invested with Spiritual Talents by God, discouraging the development of those Talents. The greater effect is to dampen a positive momentum that could exist. Politically, it facilitates control, but it works to dampen congregational vibrancy. There is a balance.

Shepherds Guard the Door

One in an ‘overseer’ position, (and there **should** be such in God’s Church) should competently monitor and guard what goes on that could affect the membership. First Timothy 3 goes on to provide us with some criteria. But there’s a difference between protecting the flock and exploiting them, especially where there is intent to achieve little more than bolstering ones personal preeminence! Where overseers use their responsibilities to ‘lord it over’ the membership, rather than educate and help develop their Talents, they risk missing the whole point of Leadership, as Christ sanctioned it!

Another danger of super-elevated leadership is that there is a danger of facts being warped. We **saw** much of that. ‘News’ of what was going on was carefully managed. The official rendition had one thing, and the ‘grapevine’ another, with the grapevine being the more accurate in too many instances.

Doctrines long regarded as ‘truth’ even came to be repudiated in a most spectacular way. Things can work well when the leadership is led by God’s Spirit, but when it’s not, a desperate situation can develop! This is the primary reason Paul identified the role of the Church membership as he did in 1st Timothy 3:15, calling **them** “*the pillar and ground of the Truth.*” It is the ‘Berean’ characteristic that is the ‘executor’ of this essential function: Proving and preserving God’s Will and Truth!

Brethren All!

With his God-given responsibilities, a minister remains under the **same** authority as are the general members. This tells us something important. Nothing makes the point better than Matthew 23:8,

speaking to His soon-to-be Apostles, “*But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren.*” They weren’t to consider themselves as elevated above one another in rank, except as their God-given Talents allowed them the means to effectively serve! Then, for all to be under the same authority, it must be that of Christ, not some subordinating authority structure below Him.

This situation well illustrates our predicament when men are elevated into ‘offices’ within a religious hierarchy. Members are expected to hold high regard for the office-holder in his office irrespective of his being duly inspired of God and fruitful in the use of God’s spiritual Talents! Such is the nature of man made appointments. We become tacitly obligated to honor the elevations of men, irrespective of whether or not God truly sanctions their elevation. (Keep in mind, the early Church was highly commended (not faulted) for examining the credentials of the apostles in their day, and, issuing their verdicts! (Rev. 2:2))

The next logical step is to allege that to criticize the actions of that officeholder is tantamount to judging Christ! Carried to its extreme, it might even be suggested that the officeholder need not be right! No matter. God will correct him, we need not even worry about it! Such approach puts the organization at great risk, as we’ve seen.

The Role of the Membership

When **we** allow ourselves to regard the ministry as functioning overlords rather than as servants, we risk envisioning the ministry being set in an authority structure above us, and more problematically, in-between ourselves and God. When a ministry sees **itself** as being in a preeminent position, it must naturally set aside any ‘eminence’ the congregation might have. The problem is, a certain congregational eminence is **God-ordained**. We’ve considered 1st Timothy 3:15 earlier. The Church (membership) is rightly called “*the pillar and ground of the Truth*”! God expects them to stand fast, upholding His Truth. Truth not limited to just a few basic doctrines.

Another mandate is also set forth. Those without preeminent regard (common members) are called upon to sit in review of internal matters of dispute.

This extends beyond basic doctrine. Paul instructs them to self-evaluate in certain matters. In 1st Corinthians 6:1-4 Paul says, “*Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not **before the saints**? Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life? If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, **set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church.***” Paul instructs them in how to function as a viable entity. Such is rarely allowed in God’s Church today, especially in the ones set up in the image of the former establishment. Paul then follows up his above instruction by stating, “*I speak to your shame.*”

When Diotrephes asserted his preeminence in his congregation (3rd John 9) he had to preempt any the congregation might have had. They were not only denied any say, but if they exhibited any ‘independence’ of his authority, even such a slight as having contact with God’s beloved Apostle, they were expelled from his congregation! (v.10)

Congregations Must Weigh In

Those many examples we find in the New Testament, where congregations rendered or affirmed decisions, speak volumes. It shows there was a standing tradition of **involvement**. They weighed-in on the selection of deacons (Acts 2-5), they expressed agreement with a matter of judgment (Acts 15:22), they evangelized their region on their own, with no mention of their minister being the point man or if they even had one! (1st Thess. 1 & 2). When matters of dispute arose between members, the Church was called-upon to render an opinion. (Matt. 18:17 & 1st Cor. 6:1-8). The Church was to act when their resolutions were rebuffed by offenders. The collective body was involved in disfellowshipping. (1st Corinthians 5:4)

There is no situation that can affect greater stability in God’s Church than an informed and involved membership. Congregations can be our underlying strength, if we let them. Structured hierarchies can exploit our most insidious weaknesses. Consider how different it could have been had there been a membership base functioning in an oversight

capacity when the modern day apostasy was being imposed.

In this modern era, with all the tools of rapid communication, and the inherent capabilities to gather and influence greater numbers of Saints under a single exclusive ‘ministry’, there is all the more need for a strong, cognizant congregational base. Under the mindset of the recent past, we remain vulnerable to a repeat of what happened. In order to counter that possibility, there needs to be a congregational body with the **will** and **faith** to **work** on behalf of the people against over-lording ministers who disregard Christ’s explicit mandate.

In the end time, there will be a small number of concerned Saints who will remain in communication with each other. Malachi 3:16-18 speaks of them. “*Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and **a book of remembrance** was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up **my jewels**; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him. Then shall ye **return, and discern** between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not.*” Those who speak often to one another are a cause of major anxiety within some organizations. But God sees them as His jewels. These will be used of God in a discerning capacity in His Kingdom, in large part because they had their senses exercised daily in life. (Heb. 5:14) Where does that leave the rest who choose to look the other way on matters of importance?

In all of the institutions of man, religious ones being no exception, there is need for checks and balances. Isn’t that what ‘*pillars and grounds*’ are?

Authority is defined as ‘the right to take action’. We have a direct mandate to do so in places such as 1st Corinthians 6, 1st Tim. 3:15 and Hebrews 5:14. Our concern for the health and welfare of Christ’s Bride should reflect His own. When we think about it, most of the divisions we have experienced over the last generation have originated within the ‘ministerial’ echelon. We do ourselves and them a disservice when we fail to add the stability into the situations that we are called upon to provide. 