

STUDY 7

The Noble Task

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Our title for this study is taken from 1 Timothy 3:1. Paul says, ‘If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task’.¹ The passage continues by identifying the qualities and aptitudes that such a person should have. Paul is probably doing this to strengthen Timothy’s hand in his care of the Ephesian church, and to assist the churches to identify those who may have been leading the church astray from ‘sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God’ (1 Tim. 1:10–11).

By nature of the case, not everyone exercising a Christian ministry will be an overseer, but if we can have a clear view of this task, it will be helpful for all to whom is given some responsibility to care for God’s people.

After clarifying what the work of an overseer may be, we will need to ask why Paul called it a noble task. In particular, we will note the importance of people desiring to do this work. After that, it will be important to see what kind of authority is involved in this work of leadership among God’s people.

LEADERSHIP

What is the nature of Christian leadership? The apostles do not give us much detail about the structure of the churches that arose through their ministry, or of how the leaders of those churches went about their work. However, they do refer, on the one hand, to the gifts provided by Christ for his whole church, to equip the saints for service and build up his body and bring it to unity (Eph. 4:12) and, on the other hand, to the leaders needing to be appointed in particular churches.

The gifts given by Christ to his whole church are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. We note that a pastor (ποιμην, *poimēn*), in particular, is part of a range of gifts that are needed to equip the church and that they all have to do with speaking the word of God. A pastor who operates without regard to the other gifts would be ‘short-changing’ the church he presumes to care for. We may say that a pastor, being responsible for a particular congregation, must represent to his congregation the apostolic truth and utilise the people the Lord gives to help with that work.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the English Standard Version.

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Various terms are used to describe leadership at a local level. The word ‘overseer’ (ἐπίσκοπος, *episkopos*) is used in Philippians (1:1), the pastoral letters (1 Tim. 3:1–2; Titus 1:7) and in 1 Peter (2:25; 5:2). The first reference in 1 Peter shows us that Christ is the Shepherd (ποιμην) and Overseer (ἐπίσκοπος) of our souls and that he fulfills his task by bearing our sins in his body so we may live for righteousness; that is, he heals us. No wonder we return to this Shepherd and Overseer! The second reference is addressed to the elders (πρεσβυτεροι, *presbuteroi*) and they are told to shepherd (ποιμαινω, *poimainō*) the flock of God, exercising oversight (ἐπίσκοπαω, *episkopaō*). All this is to be done by example rather than by domineering, and done until the Chief Shepherd appears. The inference is that the terms elder, pastor and overseer may be used interchangeably but, more importantly, these two references make it clear that leadership of the church is exercised by representing to believers the ministry of Christ himself, in his presence and with a view to his reward. Small wonder, then, that it is called ‘a noble task’!² Those in Christian ministry must, as Charles Wesley’s song says, have their hearts ‘full of Christ’ and long his ‘glorious matter to declare’.

The nobility of this task cannot be derived from the place it gives certain people above others or the status that it may provide for them in this present world.³ Christ’s leadership is clearly above us; he is Lord, but his lordship has been expressed in his service of us and in his willingness to be abused by us, and all of this so that he could redeem us. So, if this is the nature of the authority we represent, it is not surprising to hear Paul say that he thinks apostles must be ‘the scum of the world’ (1 Cor. 4:13). He refused to take his sense of personal worth from anything other than his being a slave of Christ and a steward of God’s mysteries (vv. 1–4). Those who had reason to respect him as their spiritual father (v. 15) should regard him in this way.

The same general picture may be derived from Paul’s encounter with the elders (πρεσβυτεροι) at Ephesus. He says they have been appointed to be overseers by the Holy Spirit, and that they are to shepherd (ποιμαινω) the flock or the church of God which he has purchased with the blood of his Son (Acts 20:17, 28f.). Clearly, there is a correspondence (variously defined) between being an elder, an overseer (see also, Titus 1:5, 7), and doing the work of shepherding or being a pastor (ποιμην). For our purposes, we will take them together and note that, at the local level, it is needful for there to be elders, overseers or pastors who, in concert with all the gifts provided by Christ, give leadership to God’s people gathered in particular churches. Elders are to manage or rule God’s people (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:4; 5:17).

Various names are now given to leaders of churches but the fact of leadership is established as necessary to the wellbeing of the church and is, in fact, part of the way in which Christ himself serves his people. They are his gift to his people so that they can function fully now and come to their goal in glory. Whatever particular forms of governance and care are provided in a particular church, pastoring or shepherding must be at their heart. The nobility of the task of overseers is immediately apparent. The church does not have ‘a life of its own’ but is Christ’s body, and provided for by his gifts. The Spirit appoints its leaders and they are answerable to God who has manifested his love and made atonement for his people by the blood of his Son.

The book of Hebrews refers to those who lead (ἡγεομαι, *hēgeomai*), by speaking the word of God, by their manner of life and faith and by keeping watch over souls

² The task is noble or fine (καλος, *kalos*—beautiful, precious, honourable).

³ Augustine notes that overseer is ‘the title of a work, not of an honor’ and that ‘he who loves to govern rather than to do good is no bishop’ (quoted in Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus*, John Knox Pr., Louisville, 1989, p. 140).

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(Heb. 13:7, 17). The pastorals mention giving instruction in sound doctrine and rebuking those who contradict it (Titus 1:9), being able to teach and to care for God's church (1 Tim. 3:2, 5). Christ rules his church by his word, so the ministry of the word is at the core of all pastoral ministry.⁴

DESIRE

Paul tells Timothy that those who *aspire* (ορεγομαι, *oregomai*) to be an overseer of God's people *desire* (επιθυμew, *epithumeō*) a noble task (1 Tim. 3:1). The first word suggests reaching out for something (e.g. for money) and the second refers to a longing, which could be either good or bad.

So why would someone desire the office of overseer or pastor, or any other Christian ministry? There may be false motives for desiring to hold an office but clearly Paul does not have that in mind here. His own desire to be an apostle was an experience of grace (Rom. 1:5; Eph. 3:7) and what he shared with others was the grace of God (Acts 20:24). He tells us that he is controlled by the love of Christ (2 Cor. 5:14). Surely this is the desire that he expects will raise up pastors for the church of God.

A call to ministry is not primarily a call to a particular place or task so much as God taking hold of a person, recreating them in his own image, insisting that their life is in Christ and that it is nothing apart from him. We see Paul's insistence on this when he calls on believers who love one another to love 'more and more'. He knows that nothing is achieved in life or ministry apart from love, and love that is growing ever more warm and constant and purposive. Certainly, the powers of darkness are not going to retreat before complacency.

If we see someone reaching out for or longing for something, they need to be reckoned with. Desire in a human being is something quite powerful. The question is whether the longing is the constraint of love or whether the desire has more to do with ego or with the relieving of an evil conscience.⁵

Properly speaking, every person who comes to take office among God's people should be there because they cannot do otherwise. Given the truth of the gospel, people who merely 'do jobs' is not good enough! For a start, Christ will not be impressed and, secondly, the discouragements that are involved will soon bring on a resignation or a redefining of the work so that it comports more with the world than with the kingdom of God. The first task of every leader among God's people is (to quote George Müller) to have their own heart 'happy in God'. Everything in Christian ministry must flow from deep contentment and joy derived from the presence of Christ among us. Only this will provide a true heart for Christian ministry.

⁴ Archbishop Trench asks why Jesus, in speaking to Peter after his resurrection, returns to the analogy of feeding his sheep after asking him to tend them. Following a suggestion of Dean Stanley he says:

Feeding the flock and finding them spiritual food is paramount and should not be superseded by any other concerns. Often in false ecclesiastical systems the preaching of the Word loses its preeminence, and the *boskein* recedes into the background and is swallowed up in the *poimainein*. In such situations, the *poimainein* is not true *poimainein*, because it is not a *boskein* as well, but is the sort of "shepherding" that is denounced by Ezekiel (R. C. Trench, '25, boskō, poimainō', *Trench's Synonyms of the New Testament*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1989, p. 102).

⁵ Calvin said, 'Thus a bad conscience is the mother of all heresies' (*The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, Calvin's NT Commentaries, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1991, p. 202).

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AUTHORITY

Clearly, to oversee a church, to pastor it or act as an elder, is to exercise authority with regard to it. Paul calls it managing (προϊστημι, *proistēmi*; cf. 1 Tim. 3:4; 5:17; 1 Thess. 5:12). Those who are so cared for are to be subject to their elders (1 Pet. 5:5).

Exercising authority in a creation that has rebelled against its Maker will, by nature of the case, be fraught with difficulty. It is often claimed that democracy is the best way to avoid the abuse of authority and it is easy to demonstrate that much has been achieved in this way. However, if we think that democracy has cancelled the need for authority, we would not have begun to understand the creation as it really is. More particularly, for our purposes here, we would not have begun to understand the Lord by whom we have been saved, or the nature of his ministry among us. Looking at another recent phenomenon, post-modernism gives emphasis to questioning all authorities, claiming that they are always instruments of control—that is, those in authority making others to be pawns in their own schemes. While this may often be the case, it does not lessen the fact of authority, or the practical need of it in daily life, or the need for it in God’s church.

Authority has been established by God. The creation story shows that the sun and moon are placed in the creation to determine the length of our days and years. Daniel discovered that spiritual authorities do much to control the affairs of this world, and Paul took full account of this in his own understanding of spiritual battle. The apostle John was shown that angelic elders lead the worship in heaven. The Psalmist tells us that man is given authority over the creation, and Jesus told Pilate that he would have no authority unless God had given it to him.

So, what is the authority for the church of God? We need to see this from three perspectives: firstly, as to what it is; secondly, as to how it operates; and thirdly, how it is effective.

What Is the Church’s Authority?

Clearly, Christ has been given all authority in heaven and earth, and has been given this authority so that the mission of the church can be fulfilled (Matt. 28:18). The early church constantly made reference to Psalm 110:1 to express their faith that Jesus Christ was now sitting at the right hand of God until his enemies were all submitted to him. This was the authority under which they had been formed and by which they lived and hoped. Under this Christ, sin, death, the devil, the world and the flesh had lost their potency and were doomed. Under this Christ, they had life and love and fruitfulness. This authority was the air they breathed, and they were not really concerned about any other authority, and certainly not their own.

When the apostles in Jerusalem were arrested, they protested that they should obey God rather than man. They did not oppose their authority to another earthly authority, but any other authority to God’s. The authority they exercised and the leadership they gave to the church in this situation was nothing other than their obedience to God.⁶ The authority under which they worked and witnessed had been demonstrated in God raising Jesus from death and installing him at his right hand.

⁶ P. T. Forsyth notes that democracy in its modern form arose because the free churches in England insisted on worshipping God according to their conscience rather than according to King and government.

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While it is true that the fact of authority is built into the creation, for us, this authority has come to us as redemption. The one who unrolls the scroll taken from the Creator's hand is the Lamb (Rev. 5). Only he is worthy to exercise authority in this world, and his credentials arise because he is the world's Redeemer. The leader who tries to use his station in life, or abilities or credentials, to exercise authority has not begun to understand this. It is certainly right and good for people to respect those to whom respect is due, but not for leaders to count on it.

Any churchly authority that is not the representation of Christ's authority to the world and the church, is a misrepresentation of God and does much harm. It is also ineffective because the powers against which we are arraigned are strong and will not yield to other than the immediate authority of Christ.

From this consideration, it is clear that the authority that guides the church must be, first of all, a proclamatory authority—telling people what God has done. The extent to which the church has adopted the modes of this world can be seen most clearly when it begins with human beings as the people responsible for change rather than the Saviour of this world and the eternal change he has effected by his death and resurrection and intercession.

How Does this Authority Operate?

Christ himself modelled how he wanted his church to be led and confronted his disciples with their false modes of action. He modelled this form of leadership in his death, saying that he did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). We note, in passing, that his form of leadership was not just servant-like but redemptive. He did not merely please people but pleased people for their good (Rom. 15:2).

Paul also left many examples of his pastoral leadership. He was gentle like a nursing mother, and encouraging like a father (1 Thess. 2:7, 11). He spoke with the meekness and gentleness of Christ (2 Cor. 10:1). He rose up with indignation if the gospel of Christ was compromised and solemnly warned believers not to forsake this way, either by belief or action.

Peter also, calling himself and elder, said that his fellow elders should do their work in the wake of the Chief Shepherd. He writes:

... shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you, not for shameful gain, by eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock (1 Pet. 5:2–3).

Eduard Thurneysen, in his book *A Theology of Pastoral Care*,⁷ gives an example of how this may work out in a situation of pastoral counselling. He describes true pastoral conversation as one that concludes with both pastor and parishioner together under the authority of Christ, hearing the same word, and the word they hear is forgiveness.

⁷ Eduard Thurneysen, *A Theology of Pastoral Care*, John Knox Pr., Richmond, 1962.

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How Is this Authority Effective?

P. T. Forsyth, in his book *The Principle of Authority*,⁸ demonstrates that the only authentic and the only effective authority for sinners is a redemptive authority. No one can give obedience from the heart to an authority that is not redemptive. The whole being of a sinner revolts from relinquishing his essential person to another. Only Christ can secure the willing submission of his subjects. Paul says, ‘you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed’ (Rom. 6:17). The conscience must be set free from nagging accusation. The heart must sing with confidence in a gracious Father. The neighbour must be rediscovered as a fellow creature rather than as a competitor or enemy.

Sometimes authority must be exercised to protect the flock from danger. Paul exercised this kind of authority with regard to false teachers, demonstrating what these falsehoods were and warning people against them. We may speak of this as erecting fences. However, the prevailing use of the authority used by the apostles is to show the relationship between what is happening ‘on the ground’ and the revelation of grace in Jesus Christ. We may call this lighting the fire of the gospel. This can be seen operating clearly in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Are they divided? Christ isn’t. Are they clever? Christ isn’t and his message isn’t. Are they eloquent? Paul needs the aid of the Spirit. Are they tempted with immorality? They are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. In each case, Paul comes to them, effectively, with another exposure to the gospel, showing them who they now are and how inappropriate their actions are to what they have been given. He knows that this is the one power he has available to make any change in this world or in the world to come. Evangelical authority is more of a fire lit in the heart of his people than it is a fence erected around them, though the fence model has its place.

False authority can be readily recognised by its shrill sound,⁹ its bleating ineffectiveness, its complaint and its manipulation. Only Christ knows how to deal with sinners, and he has! If we must preach law—as I believe we must—then let it be the law given to those who know that the Lord is their God and who live under his promise of life. Only God has resources in himself to deal with rebels and his answer to our self-will and moral weakness has been the death and resurrection of his Son.

If the first line of pastoral authority is the gospel we preach, the second line is prayer and the answer of God to our prayer in whatever signs or vindications of his truth he chooses to provide. Paul said the obedience of the Gentiles was the result of what Christ had accomplished in him by word and deed, including the power of signs and wonders in the power of the Spirit (Rom. 15:18–19). Clearly, he is referring to miracles that authenticated Paul as a messenger from God (as in John 3:2), but the principle is clear that only God can authenticate what is his own authority being expressed in the faithful preaching of his word.

We also must resort to prayer because none of us can possibly know how grace will work in the life of another person. It takes all of the Spirit of grace, he who enabled our Lord to effect redemption, to bring another person to know that grace and

⁸ P. T. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority* . . . , NCPI, Blackwood, 2004.

⁹ The story is told of a cleaner who found her pastor’s notes still in the pulpit after the Sunday service. She was bemused with the choreography recommended in the margins, particularly one which read, ‘Shout loud. Argument weak!’

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submit to Christ. We fool ourselves if we think our administration of authority will bring about anything in and of itself. The classic example of this, outside of our Lord himself, is Moses. At every key point of movement and development in the story of Exodus, Moses is found praying. In fact, he could be called the meekest man on the earth, but he wielded enormous authority over Egypt and over Israel. But then again, he knew it was nothing to do with his authority and everything to do with God's gracious authority effecting the redemption of his people.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that the authority for this creation is Jesus Christ and that his authority is redemptive. Any exercise of authority that does not have this in mind is invalid and stands under the judgement of God. In the new world, only what God has created will remain. We may extrapolate from this and say that any authority that does not have in mind the wellbeing and, in fact, the redemption of others, will come to nothing.

We have seen that the Lord of the church appoints leaders for his people who desire that this reign of Christ be faithfully represented to his people. They are eager for this work because that very eagerness has been formed in them by their call to ministry. They cannot but speak of Christ and the new reign of grace that he has established.

We have seen that only the gospel can create a submissive spirit and, of course, authority is of little value unless there are those who will receive the benefit of it. For this reason, a large measure of the exercise of churchly authority is bringing the word of the King to his people, and rightly representing that in their actions.

The church must not turn to the world to learn how leadership may operate. Having said this, I am sure that there are skills of management that are natural or learned that are a benefit to any people, but that is different from letting this world's skills shape or motivate the way we exercise authority. Rather, I am sure that those who learn from Christ how their noble task is to be done, those who know that this Christ has never left them in charge but personally directs all of his Church's affairs, it is these who will learn the skills they need in caring for God's people and who will bring into the world of civic and international life the redeeming elements so needed everywhere.