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**SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY**

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## *Introduction*

Last February I encountered God at the Ignite the Supernatural Children's Pastor Conference. The conference was a gathering of Children's pastors who were desperate for God's Spirit to come upon their children and believed that today is the day for supernatural visitation. It was a time of refreshing and I returned from the conference changed and on fire. The Lord dealt with a number of things in my life. I gained more confidence as a young pastor and I received confirmation of my call as a children's pastor.

One of the themes the Lord placed on my heart was spiritual authority. During the conference, one minister felt led to change his sermon and confront some of the rebellious attitudes he felt in the room. He explained that many youth and children's pastor are in rebellion because they do not submit to their senior pastor or they attempt to run with their own vision that may be contrary to the church. That night I examined my own life and ministry and although I did not feel I was in rebellion, the Lord placed it on my heart to connect with my senior pastor on a deeper level and submit to proper spiritual authority.

This experience has led me to examine spiritual authority further. John Chryssavgis insists that, "There is with reference to tradition and spirituality in the Church, no subject more essential and at the same time more often misunderstood than that of authority."<sup>1</sup> Stephen Crosby suggests that the authority people are most familiar with in the church is positional or delegated authority.<sup>2</sup> This authority is exercised by leaders, pastors, ect. In his book *Authority, Accountability, and the Apostolic Movement*, Crosby outlines eight distinct levels of authority in

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<sup>1</sup> John Chyrssavgis, "Obedience--hierarchy and asceticism: the concept of spiritual authority in the church." *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 34, no. 1 (1990), Database online: ATLAReligion [9 April 2008], 49.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Crosby, *Authority, Accountability, and the Apostolic Movement*. (Enumclaw, WA: Pleasant Word, 2006), 77.

God's kingdom listed by rank.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this paper is to recognize these levels of authority and build upon my theology of spiritual authority.

### *Sovereign Authority*

Jesus Christ is the sovereign authority. He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. According to Philippians 2:9-11, "God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."<sup>4</sup> God's chain of command is this: "Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ." (1 Cor 11:3) Jesus' sheep belong to Him and Jesus declared, "His sheep hear his voice and know him". (John 10:4) The first authority in the life of the believer is the sovereign authority of Jesus as he speaks intimately to his followers.

No man, church, organization, leader, pastor, apostle, or prophet has the right to usurp this authority in an individual believer's life. God's leaders serve as his under-shepherds. The Lord is our shepherd and a leader is at best, a steward of Jesus' inheritance.<sup>5</sup>

### *The Authority of the Word*

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory." (John 1:1,14) God is the Word and the Word is God. The Word of God is alive and is the literal expression of His person. God's Word carries his sovereign authority and it requires the same submission.

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<sup>3</sup> Crosby, 76-77.

<sup>4</sup> All Bible quotations taken from the NASB version

<sup>5</sup> Crosby, 77-78.

Dreams, visions, prophecies, or insights cannot hold the same stature as the revealed Word of God. These revelations may be edifying but they need evaluation and discernment not obedience. Pastors and leaders must fully equip their congregation to handle the Word of God accurately for themselves. The call of a pastor is not to impress the congregation with their latest revelation but to place the believer and the Lord into a hand to hand and face to face relationship.<sup>6</sup>

According to Estella Horning,

God's people are those who discover the authority of God's word in the Bible in life, in reality, and in history, and who witness to that word. The word of witness in scripture and in life becomes the source of renewal, assurance, and creativity for God's people, for those who bet their lives on that witness. The church is that community which defines its life by the word of God. It is the community of the living word.<sup>7</sup>

The authority of the Word of God is what gives the church authority on earth. A church that does not define its life by the Word of God is not submitting to the authority of the Word.

#### *Legal Authority*

Civic affairs, legal matters and contracts fall under this authority. When questioned about taxes, Jesus responded, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." (Mt 22:21) Jesus respected government. Paul wrote Romans 13:1-7 during Roman government rule. The Roman government had recently put Jesus Christ to death by crucifixion. Further, the Roman government was not a democracy, was known for the viciousness of its soldiers and was by no means pro-Christian. In spite of this, God said that all authority is established by God and he admonished us to be subject to governing authorities (Rom 13:1-2). For government is "a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the

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<sup>6</sup> Crosby 79.

<sup>7</sup> Estella Horning, "Biblical authority: God's word for God's people," *Brethren Life and Thought*, 18, no. 3: (1973), Database online: ATLAReligion [9 April 2008], 148.

sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.” (Rom 13:4) Christians are not above the law of the land. Short of causing us to deny our faith or curse God, the believer is to comply with civil authorities.<sup>8</sup>

### *Authority of Conscience*

Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, “But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.” (Rom 14:23) “All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify.” (1 Cor 10:23) It is in these areas that the authority of conscience prevails.

When issues are left to conscience, an individual choice may be wrong, but that is the nature of our growth in a free atmosphere. Often times greater education and spiritual growth occurs when a person learns from what they have done wrong than what they have right.

According to Crosby,

There are many areas of life in which the Scriptures are silent, vague, unclear, or in tension. In those areas, our conscience is the higher authority to which we must yield . . . we are not free to sin. But we must be free to make big mistakes . . . Making others come to our view on marginal issues is not our calling. Our calling is to lay down our lives for one another, not coerce each other into ideological and behavioral conformity.<sup>9</sup>

The authority of conscience is regularly violated by leaders today. They exercise authority to enforce conformity in certain areas or they fail to yield to the authority of conscience because of fear of wrong decisions. The authority of conscience needs to be reevaluated by many leaders and pastors who appear to have commitment to biblical accuracy, but really are exercising power, authority and control.

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<sup>8</sup> Crosby, 81.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 81-84.

### *Authority of Family*

Before God established the church as an institution, he established the family. The family is the smallest church unit. Crosby points out, “The church and its leaders have no authority to tell you how to run your family except in those matters that are explicitly sin. The church has authority to demand and require that sin cease.”<sup>10</sup> Leaders and pastors should always offer wisdom and advice, but demanding compliance in areas that are not sin is usurping the authority of the family.

Many pastors and leaders abuse their authority by telling people who they can or cannot marry or what job they can take. This authority is often taken from the parents and parents play no role in the decisions of young adults. The problem lies with not recognizing the appropriate line of authority. Authority of conscience and family are higher authorities than ministry office.<sup>11</sup>

### *Functional Authority*

Ministry in the early church was conceived of in terms of Ephesians 4:16, “from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.” Paul described it, “For the body is not one member, but many . . . But now there are many members, but one body.” (1 Cor 12:14,20) There is a variety of ministries (12:5) and every person in the body of Christ is given a manifestation of the Spirit (12:7). Paul also writes in Romans 12:3-8 concerning the various gifts. Not all members have the same function, but the Spirit makes use of them for the body of Christ and they are to be employed so the body would function well.

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<sup>10</sup> Crosby, 84.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 85.

According to Stephen Crosby,

Authority is based on ministry, and ministry is based on death and resurrection. There is no ministry without authority and no authority without death and resurrection. When authority exceeds ministry, it is positional and has no spiritual substance. Functional authority originates in the area of my expertise. It is the place of effective service, activated by the Spirit.<sup>12</sup>

Functional authority comes from serving others in not just your area of giftedness, but through the manifestations of the Spirit and gifts that are received at conversion. In the context of the local church functional authority is exercised when people are equipped and released into the areas of ministry for which they are suited.

An example of how functional authority might work is if a gifted children's pastor has a conflict with a family concerning children's curriculum and the senior pastor does not have any children's ministry experience. Who should have the authority? The one who is functionally responsible and gifted.

Functional authority may be hard to grasp because of our long-standing traditions of positional and hierarchical authority structures.<sup>13</sup> Jon Zens argues that the church experienced a shift that has affected the function of the body today. He writes, "The great tragedy is that from about 180 A. D. onwards the increasingly institutionalized church began to assign ministry more and more to the officers (the "clergy"), and less and less to the common people (the "laity")."<sup>14</sup> This shift occurred because the office of the bishop or pastor was focused upon because it was the institution most effective at containing the threats to the Christian movement. The New Testament does not emphasize one person occupying the office of pastor; rather the emphasis falls upon

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<sup>12</sup> Crosby, 86.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>14</sup> Jon Zens, "Four tragic shifts in the visible church," *Searching Together, Vol. 21, No. 1-4: (1993)*, Database online: ATLAReligion [9 April 2008], 4.

exhortations that involve all the members of the body. At least 58 times in the New Testament believers are commanded to fulfill responsibilities relating to “one another”.<sup>15</sup>

Traditions regarding church government and authority have suppressed the “one another” perspectives of the New Testament. There is much grief and pain happening in Churches by those who do not understand functional authority or are too insecure to acknowledge it.<sup>16</sup> This shift has hindered the church’s understanding of functional authority and has hindered the way the body of Christ ministers as a whole. How many churches place the responsibility of ministry upon “the minister” and not the congregation? John Chryssavgis states, “Authority in the Church is not the monopoly of an ordained few (Eph 4:11-12) whether bishops or clergy but the responsibility of all (Eph 5:34).”<sup>17</sup> Churches must recognize functional authority and encourage, facilitate, and equip their congregation for their function in the body of Christ.

Crosby concludes.

“Professional” ministerial functions such as pastor, teacher, apostle, prophet, elder, etc., are delegated functions. They are the King’s delegates, acting under His authority. However, these delegated positions do not supersede our functional authority as fellow members of the brotherhood/body. Therefore, delegated authority must submit to functional authority.<sup>18</sup>

Chryssavgis agrees, “The function of the hierarchy must serve to reinforce the freedom of the faithful.”<sup>19</sup>

#### *Delegated Authority*

Jesus has all authority and He has delegated it to His church (Eph 4:11-13). Jesus is “the head of the church” (Eph 5:23) and “the chief Shepherd” (1 Pt 5:4). The church rightly belongs

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<sup>15</sup> Zens, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Crosby, 90.

<sup>17</sup> Chryssavgis, 51.

<sup>18</sup> Crosby, 90.

<sup>19</sup> Chryssavgis, 51.

to Christ, and He is the authority over it (Mt 16:18). The believer is the extension of Christ's life and ministry on earth. Delegated authority is the first level of authority at which any mortal has authority in relationship to another mortal on earth. Delegated, often referred to as positional authority, is not necessarily dependent on age, ability, training or giftedness but assignment from higher authority.<sup>20</sup>

The pastor of a church is first an elder, and along with the other elders, the pastor is responsible to do the following: Oversee the church (1 Tim 3:1), rule over the church (1 Tim 5:17), feed the church (1 Pet 5:3), and guard the doctrine of the church (Tit 1:9). 2 Timothy 2:2 describes how the teachings of the apostles were to be committed to "faithful men" because preserving the integrity of the gospel is one of the pastor's highest callings.

Delegated authority is often misused by pastors who see their role as an overseer meaning that they have to have their hand in everything. Not only is this exhausting for the pastor, but it also usurps the functional authority of others and it can hamper others from using their gifts. Michael Root concludes that, "The answer lies not in reducing the dignity of the pastoral call, but in seeking new ways to embody the dignity of all ministry and the mutuality among gifts which Paul praises. That will be a challenge for the new church, a challenge set for us by the New Testament."<sup>21</sup> Chyrssavgis agrees, "Existing institutions are not to be abolished, but they must become less imperious, less patronizing and more profitable in service in ministry."<sup>22</sup> This challenge must be faced head on by pastors who recognize and understand spiritual authority. A

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<sup>20</sup> Crosby, 90.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Root, "Called to the office of ministry: The New Testament and today," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 12 no 3: (1985), Database online: ATLA Religion [9 April 2008], 166.

<sup>22</sup> Chyrssavgis, 59.

church with a “one-man show” is not following the biblical model of a plurality of elders and deacons that assist the pastor.

To “rule” the church is sometimes taken to extremes as well. Delegated authority is not about domination and control. All delegated authority outside Christ-like love is tyranny, while authority lived in the laying down of life for ones neighbor is creative and life giving.<sup>23</sup> Crosby suggests, “It is about assuming the responsibility for guiding into destiny and fulfillment from a posture of care. Delegated authority never extends beyond the sphere of caring responsibility for which someone has been endowed by the Spirit to fulfill.”<sup>24</sup> 1 Peter 5:3 contains a wonderful description of a balanced pastoral ministry: “Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being examples to the flock.” Delegated authority should not be used to rule the church; rather a pastor should be an example of truth, love, and godliness to the church.

#### *Authority of Custom*

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” This quote is from patristic literature. It was advice given by the church fathers to Christians who asked how they should behave when visiting a church that did not share the same practices as their own. Our Christian liberty needs to yield to local custom when a potential conflict arises.<sup>25</sup> Paul dealt with the authority of custom in 1 Corinthians 11. In the matter of women’s head coverings, he stated “But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.” (1 Cor 11:16) That issue was a local issue that did not apply to other churches. Paul did not expect every congregation to have the same sensibilities on all issues and neither should Christians today.

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<sup>23</sup> Chyrssavgis, 60.

<sup>24</sup> Crosby, 91.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 93-94.

## CONCLUSION

Understanding spiritual authority is essential to the calling of every pastor. For too long spiritual authority has been a misunderstood concept in the church. It is time for pastors, leaders, elders, and seminary students to re-examine the biblical use of spiritual authority. As I researched spiritual authority, I realized how important it is to the Church and I do not want to fall victim to its misuse. For the body of Christ to function properly it must recognize biblical spiritual authority. I look forward to examining this topic further. My desire is to properly function in my authority so that I can equip the body of Christ and be an example of truth, love, and godliness.

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