

The Limits of Pastoral Authority

by David A. Huston

This paper is presented as a response to the abuse and misuse of pastoral authority in a local assembly.

***‘The elders who are among you I exhort...:
Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers.’
1 Peter 5:1-2***

THE ELDERS OF AN ASSEMBLY ARE CHARGED with the responsibility of providing pastoral oversight, which includes protecting the God’s people from spiritual dangers, teaching them the Word of God, praying for those in need, and training and organizing God’s people for evangelism, discipleship, and fellowship. Within this context they have certain authority. For example, as a pastoral elder I have the authority to tell a person not to steal, because that is the Word of God. My authority is in the Word. But I do not have the authority to tell a person whether or not he can go on vacation. That is beyond my sphere of authority and is within the authority of each man’s home. For me to intrude into a man’s authority at home is to cross the line.

The overseers of an assembly also have the authority to make certain decisions that have to do with the assembly at large. For example, someone has to decide what time a meeting will start, or what color the carpet should be, or whether to buy or rent a copier machine, or who will be speaking or leading worship in a particular meeting. These are the kinds of issues the leaders of an assembly must have the authority to deal with. This is not to say that elders have to handle all these matters directly, only that they must accept responsibility for them. Many can be accomplished by deacons or other members of the assembly. But even when this is the case, those doing the work must do so under the oversight of the elders.

Another area of authority, which applies generally to all believers, is the authority we have over demons and diseases. I don’t believe I have the authority to arbitrarily boss people around, but I definitely have the authority to boss demons around.

In the kingdom of God, authority is always exercised for the benefit of those under authority. It is never for the exclusive benefit of the one exercising authority. The Bible says that God gave Jesus Christ to be the Head of the Church. He did this to bless us, not because Jesus had a compulsive need to control other people. The fact that Jesus has authority over us as our Head is a great benefit for us. Without it we would all be like sheep without a shepherd.

Authority With Grace

Authority is not a matter of controlling people, manipulating people, coercing people, or simply ordering people around. This is how the Gentiles rule. But Jesus said it shall not be so among us, in whom dwells the loving and gentle Spirit of God. Jesus is concerned that authority not be abused or misused for the purpose of heaping special privileges and benefits on those in authority.

The Bible says that Jesus is full of grace and truth (John 1:14). Truth has to do with structure, which is why it really does matter whether an assembly has one leader or multiple leaders. Jesus has not given us the liberty to build any way we please. We must build according to His pattern, which means building according to the truth as recorded in the Bible.

But building the right structure is not enough. The same knife can be used to carve a turkey on Thanksgiving or to slit a man's throat. This is where grace comes in. A group of leaders can dominate people's lives just as ruthlessly as a single individual. So in addition to having the right oversight structure, we must also work hard at developing the right oversight spirit. We are told not to lord it over people. Paul wrote that he did not have dominion over anyone's faith but was rather a fellow worker for their joy (2 Corinthians 1:24).

Jesus Christ is the model of all spiritual leadership. He was certainly not limp-wristed or compromising, but neither was He oppressive or domineering. He was strong and firm, yet gentle and kind. This is grace. We ought to be filling the world with local assemblies of which it can be said they are full of both grace and truth.

Questions About Authority

We have been asked the following questions pertaining to the practical functioning of a biblical eldership and the proper use of authority.

- 1. How are disagreements between elders on doctrine and standards handled?**

We pray together and discuss these matters together. We would tend to allow the more extreme standard to prevail (better to go a little too far than not quite far enough). To date we have always managed to come to a common understanding of all essential doctrinal issues and matters of holiness. Our aim is never to simply come to agreement; it is to find the mind of the Lord. Once we do that, the matter is settled.

2. Does the authority of the elders include setting standards such as no professional sports, TV, etc.?

We deal with these matters by teaching rather than by making rules. For example, we have no rule preventing parents from allowing rattlesnakes to crawl around in their homes. We feel we don't heed such a rule. In the same way, we don't have a rule about TV, we simply warn people of the dangers. The same is true of professional sports. We consider it to be idolatry. So we preach against idolatry and those who love Jesus and want to worship him alone get the idolatry out of their lives. We have found that these issues are never a huge issues for people who love Jesus.

3. How is it decided who preaches or teaches at a particular gathering?

All I can speak to is how we do it. We are not proposing that this is the only way or even the right way. Each of our weekly meetings has a different purpose, so each is handled differently. For example, our Sunday morning services are always evangelistic. By that I mean we are targeting the visitors. The messages are always simple "come to Jesus" type messages. Our aim is to see people born again. For Sunday mornings, we have set up a rotation with me and four other men. This means that I preach once every five weeks. Of course, that schedule is always subject to change if we have someone from the outside or if we feel the Lord leading in a different direction.

Our weekend evening service is inspirational, primarily directed toward the church. Since I am the only member of our team who is currently being supported by the church, I am more available for preparation. Also, I am older and have more experience. I also have the most developed teaching and preaching gift. Therefore, our plan for now is that I do the preaching on the evenings unless I'm out of town or someone else feels that he has a message for the assembly. In such cases we meet and discuss it and usually decide to give that person the pulpit. We have never had any trouble recognizing what the Lord wants us to do in those situations. Also, I have developed the wisdom of being willing to yield (James 3:17).

Our Thursday evening meeting is called Christian Education. This meeting is for teaching (unless the Lord leads otherwise). We plan these meetings out two to three months in advance. We discuss what subjects would help the church and decide who will teach what. I do some of the teaching, but certainly not all of it.

The four of us seek the Lord together in determining who will speak and what subjects need to be addressed. Since none of us have a pulpit lust, we are able to work together very well. If one person believes he has something specific for the assembly, we tend to yield to that person. I don't believe seeking God for direction is necessarily synonymous with spontaneity. I believe the Lord can tell us two or three months in advance what He wants us to do.

4. How would you respond to those who say that to question the authority of a pastor is like the gainsaying of Core and speaking against authorities and dignities?

As I have explained above, I believe in pastoral authority. But I also believe it is common for it to be misused and for some leaders to overstep the bounds. There is a difference in being submissive and being obedient. If my boss were to tell me to lie for the company, I can remain submissive toward my boss yet refuse to obey what he is telling me to do. Submission is more of an attitude.

I think it is vitally important for anyone who is questioning the authority in their assembly to keep a submissive attitude. David is the ultimate example when we see how he behaved toward Saul. An excellent book on this subject is *A Tale of Three Kings* by Gene Edwards.

I do not think that asking questions is equal to rebelling or rejecting authority, although I realize that some pastors see it as such. Here is the counsel that Jim McKinley and I are placing at the end of some of our writings:

We have published this material for the primary purpose of inspiring thought. We believe the matters we have addressed need to be brought up, discussed, and considered in the light of God's purpose for the Church. It is not our intention to attack or insult any person who is presently serving in a leadership role; neither is it our desire to stir up any believers against their spiritual leaders. Believers who are convinced that change is in order need to take their petitions to the Lord Jesus and approach their leaders with humility and grace.

We recognize that there is no quick and simple process for transforming an established assembly from the single leader model to the multiple leader model. For those who desire to move in that direction, we encourage a prayerful,

careful, and thoughtful approach, keeping in mind that the structure of oversight is not the only consideration. An assembly under the leadership of immature, proud, biblically unqualified men is in danger of shipwreck.

This is not to imply that we are free to choose whatever form of oversight structure we want, as though one is just as good as another. It is simply to affirm the present reality and to emphasize that for profound change to take place without endangering the flock, many deeply ingrained concepts will need to change within the hearts of both the leaders and the led. This will require patience and the Holy Spirit. To pour new wine into old wineskins accomplishes nothing of value.

5. If the multiple leader system is biblically correct, then shouldn't we all just drop what we're doing right this minute and form home group churches with multiple elders? Are any apostolic assemblies actually doing this?

It is not quite so simple as to drop what we have been doing for centuries and just start doing what they did in the book of Acts. It requires everyone learning a whole new way of having church. Entrenched ways of thinking do not change overnight.

We have been working to establish a biblical eldership for eleven years now (as of the year 2004). It started with me and my wife. We presently have an assembly of around one hundred. We meet weekly in home groups. Virtually every committed person in our assembly participates in a home group, which is all most of them have ever known.

As we began to see mature men rise up, we started a process to develop a team of elders to oversee the assembly. As of today, there are four of us who work together to shepherd the flock. We all teach and preach and we are all involved in decision-making. We share the responsibilities of oversight, which is a great relief to me as the founder. Believe me, once you get up around 40 or 50 people, the load gets very heavy for one man.

Anyone who would like to experience this system of church structure in operation is invited to visit our assembly in Carlisle, PA. You will be welcomed to attend a home group meeting and to sit in on our leadership meetings.

Note to the reader:

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www.RoshPinnah.com RoshPinnah@aol.com

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