

Spiritual Authority and Order in The Ecclesia of God

By

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The roots of authority go way back to the beginnings of humanity, when Adam was given the headship of the race as the original husband and father (Genesis 1:26-28; 3:16). The patriarchal customs and traditions observed by most nations and peoples from ancient times are based on the order that God established in the beginning. Of course, like anything else, this order has been greatly abused by males throughout history, resulting, quite understandably, in the rebellion of women against male dominance. But to try and reverse God's righteous order of authority, no matter what the reason, can only lead to chaos and destruction. This applies to every area of life, but especially in the family.

God's laws are there for our good and for the blessing of all creation, and they are based on love. He knows the rebellion of the sinful human heart and the damage that it causes, hence there is a need for authority (or subjection) in every area of life to some extent. And God is slowly teaching humanity the lesson of loving subjection, which is the only path to real freedom and peace. Christ Himself is the greatest example we have of subjection. On the one hand, He learned obedience to His God and Father, as a Son, and He has always been subject to Him, as God is His Head (1 Corinthians 11:3; Hebrews 5:7-8). And on the other, through this obedience, He will eventually subject humanity and the whole earth (and in fact, the whole universe) to God that God may be all in ALL (1 Corinthians 15:24-28; Hebrews 2:8-10).

Elders

The original founder of a people, tribe, clan or family was a male, and will always be a male, because the male contains the seed for generating further offspring. The father is the head of his children, whom he has generated, and he is also the head of his wife, because woman was created for man (1 Corinthians 11:3, 8-9). In the East, where the cradle of civilisation began, a wife was seen as the property of the husband, and though, ideally, she was supposed to be taken care of as his treasured possession, the woman was usually treated as an inferior being. This male position of responsibility is evident throughout the Scriptures and it was also taught by all of the apostles, although Jesus Christ did establish a new humanity where male and female are equal, in spirit (Ephesians 5:22-6:4; 1 Timothy 2:11-14; 1 Peter 3:5-7). Nevertheless, in flesh, the divine order of the sexes remains.

Another factor was that it was usually the males that did the fighting and defending of family and land, and they are therefore shown to be the stronger sex, generally speaking. Peter says that honour should be awarded to women as the weaker vessel (1 Peter 3:7). In other words, a woman inherently longs for love and protection from a man, and she should be treated as though she is a priceless vase. A female is the weaker vessel only in the sense that women are generally physically weaker than males, and smaller in stature, but in other respects, women can be stronger than men. For instance, how many men would put up with childbirth?

The chief leaders of a tribe or family, which were usually the fathers or the eldest sons, were known as Elders. They commanded great respect from the community and were seen as the final authority on all aspects of life, including the religious. Amongst the nations, the elders

of the people were often the priests or shamans of their religion as well, guiding the community in their spiritual walk.

In Genesis 50:7, it mentions *'the elders of Pharaoh's household and all the elders of the land of Egypt'* who accompanied Joseph to Canaan to bury his father Jacob. Even the mighty Egyptian Empire had its elders, who were amongst the ruling class. An elder was generally someone who was older, in contrast to a youth, and they were therefore considered to have more experience of life, and greater wisdom and knowledge.

The Elders of Israel

In Exodus 3:16-18, we have the first mention of the elders of Israel. During the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt, Yahweh sent Moses to speak to them about their coming deliverance. After the Exodus from Egypt, when Israel officially became a nation under Yahweh in accordance with the covenant established on Mount Sinai, Moses became the sole leader of the people of Israel under the authority of Yahweh as their King. Under the sound advice of Jethro, his father-in-law, who was priest of Midian, Moses chose numerous judges from amongst the people to assist him in ruling, teaching and judging the nation under God's Law (Exodus 18:13-27).

It doesn't say that these judges were all elders, although they were clearly leaders or chiefs amongst the people, men of trusted ability and faith in God, so therefore they were probably classed as elders. But in Exodus 24:1-2, 9-11, Moses and a select few are told to ascend the mountain of Sinai with seventy elders of Israel, and they are all then given the privilege of seeing Yahweh in His glory up on the mountain.

Some time later, after they had moved on from Sinai, Moses was feeling the burden of the people through their constant complaining. So He is told by Yahweh to gather together seventy elders from amongst the leaders of the community and bring them to the Tent of Appointment (or Meeting), that is, the Tabernacle. These seventy are then anointed with the Spirit of God and they prophesy, including two of them that had remained behind in the camp (Numbers 11:16-30).

These seventy are given a special place of authority under Moses as his deputies and administrators. These seventy elders are not necessarily the same as the previous seventy that had ascended Mount Sinai, although some of them may have been among them. We shall see the significance of these seventy elders shortly.

The Theocracy of Israel

There was another important branch of leadership in ancient Israel (besides the tribe of Levi being given the leadership in the religious affairs of the Tabernacle, particularly the sons of Aaron the priest), and that was the princes who were the commanders of the tribal army divisions. Specific details were given for the positioning of the camps around the Tabernacle and for the moving out of the camps, with the princes at the head. There were also other layers of authority within the tribal divisions (see Numbers Chapters 2 and 3); but their ultimate authority was God, as this was a Theocracy, with Yahweh as their King.

The original twelve tribes of Israel actually became thirteen tribes, because the tribe of Joseph split into the two tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh.

So the original structure of authority in the Theocracy of ancient Israel was this:

1. Moses
2. The leaders of the tribes (originally 12, became 13)
3. The seventy elders as the governing authority

4. The judges, officials and elders of the people
5. The heads of each family unit

This God-given structure was contained within the one true religion or ritual that God had established amongst humanity with the nation of Israel. Take note that this religion was established with only one nation, the nation of Israel. In the years that followed, after Moses' death, many anointed men of God replaced him. Joshua was his immediate successor, but after Joshua's death, various Judges were raised up to rescue Israel from the oppression of their enemies in the land of Canaan, due to their continued disobedience.

Eventually, the monarchy was established with the first king of Israel, Saul. The people, in effect, were seeking to replace God, Who was their rightful King, with a mere man, so that they could be like the other nations (1 Samuel 8). But even this foolish rebellion had a part to play in God's plan and purpose in relation to the coming King/Messiah. But Saul was rejected as their rightful king and David, a man after God's own heart, was divinely chosen to replace him. The Davidic covenant was then established by Yahweh concerning David's descendants and the coming of the Messiah as the ultimate King of Israel, and of the world.

During these times, and through the years that followed, God's spiritual authority resided in the kings, prophets and priests of Israel. And it must be noted that fleshly ties and genealogy were the main channels of passing on this divine authority, particularly that of kings and priests, although there were times when God intervened with this process as He saw fit, as in the example of King Saul. Yet even in this case, it was God's original purpose to establish the kings of Israel through the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:8-12).

The Sanhedrin

Centuries later, after the Babylonian captivity and the dispersion of the kingdom of Judah (the Jews) amongst the nations, there grew up the Jewish religion of Judaism, which built synagogues as places of worship throughout the world. This religion contained elements of the Law of Moses (the Torah) and was based on the Hebrew Scriptures, but it also contained numerous extra-biblical teachings and traditions of the emerging Rabbi's, hence the term Rabbinical Judaism.

Many different sects and divisions grew within Judaism, and by the First Century AD, the Jewish nation in the land of Palestine had formed a Jewish ruling council known as the Sanhedrin. This religious and political council consisted of seventy members of the elders of Israel, based on the seventy elders under Moses, as follows:

1. The Chief priest as presiding elder (figurative of Moses)
2. Twenty-four priests who were heads of the priestly courses. This included the party of the Sadducees.
3. Twenty-four scribes who represented the official interpreters of the Law and the rabbinical traditions
4. And twenty-two elders who represented the Rabbis and rulers of the local synagogues. This included the party of the Pharisees.

Jesus Himself taught His followers to respect the authority of the Sanhedrin, knowing that they sat in Moses' seat, although He also warned against their teaching, traditions and hypocritical acts (Matthew 23:1-10; 16:12). He also made it clear that the Messiah is to be the only One who has the official title of 'Rabbi' (or Teacher) and Master, and God is the only 'Father.' As the Messiah, Jesus knew that His authority was greater than that of Moses, which He displayed to the people with much power.

In the parable of the Vineyard Farmers, Jesus was revealing that that generation of Israel

would not accept the kingdom of God, but the kingdom would be given to a new spiritual nation who will produce the fruits of repentance (Matthew 21:33-46). The chief priests and Pharisees knew that Jesus was referring to them as those who were rejecting Him and His claims. He was also revealing to the people that there was now a transition taking place through His ministry, whereby He was establishing a new authority structure under God in accordance with the New Covenant.

The Authority of Jesus

As Israel's promised King/Messiah, the son of David, Jesus was replacing the Old Covenant, given through Moses, with the New Covenant, which would be established through His sacrificial death and resurrection. During His ministry, Jesus originally chose twelve apostles (although Judas Iscariot was subsequently replaced) and in later years, He also chose Paul, who could be termed the thirteenth apostle. They were given power and authority as Christ's deputies and administrators, and for the duration of His ministry, He trained them for these positions of power in the coming kingdom (Matthew 10:1-11:1; 19:28-30; Acts 9:1-31).

They were also the chief leaders of the new ecclesia (or 'church') of God, which became fully established in Jerusalem after the coming of the Holy Spirit on the feast of Pentecost in 33 AD. The number 12 symbolises Divine Government or Kingdom Administration - and the original Apostles represented that Government in Christ. (The number of the full elect of God as the heavenly Israel is 144,000, that is, 12,000 x 12,000 - Revelation 7).

This Jewish Bride assembly began during Christ's ministry and it consisted of those who believed in Jesus as the Messiah (John 3:27-30). This ecclesia (meaning 'called out' group) became distinct from the rest of the unbelieving nation. But Jesus also chose seventy disciples during His ministry and sent them out with the twelve apostles to proclaim the evangel of the kingdom in power and authority (Luke 10:1-24; it is possible that the Twelve were included in the Seventy). The number 70 is 10 x 7, which symbolises spiritual fullness through world-wide divine rulership and law. Multiples of 70 x 7 speaks of the Jubilee and ultimate Restoration and Forgiveness, i.e. abundant Grace!

In doing this, Jesus was declaring a new structure of kingdom authority as follows:

1. Jesus as the King/Messiah was replacing Moses and David etc. as Israel's ultimate Prophet, Priest and King. In fact, He is Yahweh Himself
2. The 12 Apostles (13 including Paul) were in effect replacing the commanders of the tribes, as fleshly military conflict is no longer needed in the kingdom
3. The 70 disciples were symbolic of the new administration of the kingdom, replacing the man-made Jewish Sanhedrin of the Elders of Israel
4. Local elders in the various ecclesias in the cities
5. Heads of the family unit

The Authority of the Apostles in the Ecclesia

Shortly after Jesus had returned to the heavens, the awesome event of the coming of the Holy Spirit occurred on the Day of Pentecost 33 AD. This happened while the small group of about a hundred and twenty disciples were in the temple courts celebrating the feast (Acts 2). God was declaring through this event that the believers of Christ's ecclesia were now His spiritual temple, and that the physical temple of that day was void of God's Presence, as Jesus had prophesied, '*Your house is left to you desolate*' (Matthew 23:38). In fact, Yahweh's Presence resided in Jesus' body as the true Temple (John 2:19-22), and now this was to extend to His spiritual Body, the Ecclesia or Church. The desire of Moses, that all the people would receive the Spirit of God, was fulfilled at Pentecost (Numbers 11:29).

Now with Jesus not being present on the earth, the apostles had the authority and power to baptise all believers (in water and in spirit) into the spiritual ecclesia of God. They had received this commission from Christ Himself. This work began in Jerusalem and spread to Judea, Samaria and out to the limits of the land of Palestine, and through Paul's ministry it went out to all the nations of the world as well (Acts 1:4-8).

As each new assembly was being established in various cities, elders were appointed by the apostles to oversee each ecclesia. But the apostles still had the final authority. Like the apostles, the local elders were also given gifts of healing and powers which could be applied to the ecclesia when needed, often through the symbolic ritual of anointing with oil (James 5:14-18). So, initially, the Apostles and Elders of the ecclesia at Jerusalem were the spiritual governing authority for all the local messianic assemblies in the land, as well as covering all the assemblies of the nations under Paul's ministry. This is evident from the account of the Jerusalem Council in Acts (Acts 15 and Galatians 2:1-14).

So the new structure for the ecclesia of God, as they prepared for the coming of Christ and the full manifestation of the kingdom, was as follows:

1. Jesus as Chief Priest and King
2. The Apostles and Elders in Jerusalem
3. The Overseers of the ecclesias, including Prophets and Teachers (who were also local elders)
4. The Servants of the ecclesias
5. The heads of the family unit

Teachers, Pastors and Elders

During this era, the New Testament was being written primarily through the apostles and prophets, which, since its completion, now represents the authority of the apostles and prophets for all believers, as the foundation for Messianic truth (Ephesians 2:20-22). In the meantime, during the transition, in accordance with the signs and powers of the kingdom, spiritual gifts were given to the believers of the ecclesias to give them guidance. There was a specific order to the gifts and callings in the ecclesia (1 Corinthians 12:27-30).

The apostles and prophets were the highest rank, but since their deaths, shepherd/teachers (a shepherd or pastor is also a teacher; one who feeds and guides the flock) and evangelists within the Body of Christ have replaced them. Their main function is to bring the whole 'church' into the mature teaching of the gospel, particularly as expounded by Paul, by adjusting the saints to understand the present truth, so as to prevent them from falling into deception (Ephesians 4:7-14). It is evident that the Apostles had all these gifts and callings rolled into one. Paul was most definitely a Prophet, a Shepherd/Teacher and an Evangelist, and he seemed to have virtually every spiritual gift available. God will give whatever grace-gifts are needed to accomplish His work.

There is some debate as to whether God still raises up Prophets in the same way as the prophets of old, who gave us the Scriptures. On the one hand, I believe that the ancient prophets of both the OT and the NT were unique, and I don't believe that God continues to raise up prophets in this way anymore. Yet having said that, the meaning of 'Prophet,' as one who prophesies, is one who speaks forth the mind of God. In that sense, there are most definitely many true prophets whom God has raised up to speak forth His word. These can also be Teachers or Evangelists - or anyone really - anyone who is anointed to speak forth God's Truth. So, in this sense, I will include Prophets along with Shepherd/Teachers and Evangelists.

Anyhow, getting back to the early church, the power and manifestation of the Holy Spirit of

God was very evident in that earlier era, in both a negative and a positive way, with many in the ecclesias being judged severely through death, as well as healings and other miraculous signs occurring. This was a sign of the apostles' authority, under Christ, and of the righteous and holy behaviour expected in the kingdom (Acts 5:1-16; 1 Corinthians 5:1-5; 11:27-32).

The elders of the local ecclesias were chosen by the apostles and those immediately under their authority. Paul especially had an apostolic team under him, which included Timothy, Titus, and many others. The instructions given in the Greek Scriptures on the principles of Eldership are still applicable today. Even though elders are not chosen by apostolic authority today, anyone who claims to be an elder under God needs to follow the instructions laid down by Paul.

An elder is to be spiritually mature, with many good characteristics (Titus 1:5-11; 1 Peter 5:1-7). In 1 Timothy 3:1-13, Paul speaks of the qualifications of a supervisor or overseer, and also of the servants as well (see also 5:17-20). The Greek word for elder is *presbuteron*, from which we get the English word Presbytery. The Greek for an overseer is *episkopos*, which is mistranslated as bishop in some versions. It is essentially describing one who watches over others for their guidance and protection.

The Greek word for servant is *diakonos*, which is translated as deacon in some versions. The first official servants in this capacity were the seven Hellenistic Jews chosen by the disciples under the authority of the Twelve, which included Stephen, who became the first martyr for Christ (Acts 6:1-6). The primary role of the servants of the ecclesias is to attend to the more practical issues of the believing community. The overseers are the spiritual elders, who primarily attend to the more spiritual matters of teaching and prayer, and the general governing of their assembly. Yet having said that, it is also clear from the teaching and example of Christ Himself, that *'the greatest among you shall be your servant'* and we must be willing to submit to one another as God's servants. Christ's overseers are not to be overbearing and controlling as the authority of the world tends to be.

The Religion of Christendom

Many centuries after the apostles had died, in the Fourth Century AD, the religion of Christianity officially came into being under the Emperor Constantine, which became the basis for the Holy Roman Empire that arose later to dominate the world for over a thousand years. This was the real birth of Christendom in its various forms, which sought to usurp the true spiritual authority of the Body of Christ Ecclesia, although corruption of the truth had already been present for some time. This religion of Christendom was the Apostasy that Paul had prophesied about (2 Thessalonians 2).

Even today, there are numerous structures of authority within the various denominations and sects of Christendom, some of which are more scriptural than others. Most of these post-Reformation denominations were originally formed because they broke away from the authority, and much of the error, of Catholic and Protestant Christianity.

Yet, even before Paul had died, there was already a falling away from the truth and this meant that there were many false 'apostles' and teachers who were attempting to alter the authority structure of the 'church' even in the First Century AD! (1 Timothy 1:18-20; 4:1-2; 2 Corinthians 11:1-6, 13-15; 2 Timothy 1:15; 2:16-18; 3:8-9). Many of the leaders of that era could not be trusted even then.

More confusion arose when it became clear that the earthly kingdom promised to Israel was no longer in view, and the power and authority of the original Apostles was slowly dwindling. Many since then have tried to claim apostolic succession, the Roman Catholic Church and its pope being the foremost example, because they recognise the authority of the original office of Apostle.

So before Paul, the great apostle of the nations, died, he was inspired, in his final letter, to give the following instructions to Timothy concerning the spiritual authority structure within

the Body of Christ:

"Have a pattern of sound words, which you hear from me...

Endeavour to present yourself to God qualified, an unashamed worker, correctly cutting the word of truth....

Be remaining in what you learned and verified, being aware from whom you learned it...

For the era will be when they will not tolerate sound teaching, but...

they will be turning their hearing away from the truth, yet will be turned aside to myths...

Of this you are aware, that all those in the province of Asia were turned from me...

And what things you hear from me through many witnesses, these commit to faithful men, who shall be competent to teach others also..."

(These are excerpts from the following verses - 2 Timothy 1:13,15; 2:2,15; 3:14; 4:3-4 CV; see also 2:16-19, 24-26; 3:1-13; 4:5-8,16-17)

The Spiritual Body of Christ Ecclesia since the 1st Century

Now, a common question (and a good one) is this: As the Apostles of the 1st century eventually died, what is to be the true authority in the Ecclesia of God since that time? To that, I would say this. In this Administration of Grace, the genuine authority within the Body of Christ ecclesia are those who are called and gifted by God to be Prophets and Shepherd/Teachers and Evangelists, walking under the authority of Christ as the Head of His universal Body, recognising the authority of the writings of the apostles, particularly Paul's writings', contained in the New Testament. They are called from all walks of life and from the most unlikely places, with some of them having official 'degrees,' but most are not officially educated as scholars or preachers.

Some are called to work within 'the Church' (or more correctly termed Christendom), but many are outside the organised religion, having fellowship, and sharing the Word, with whoever calls on the Name of the Lord with a clean heart and sincere faith, seeking to walk in love and righteousness (1 Timothy 1:5; 6:11-12; 2 Timothy 2:19,22). They should only recognise the One Body, which is invisible and universal. Yet these characteristics should ideally apply to all believers in the Body, not just those in authority.

The gifting of these elders can only be truly accepted by those who are spiritual, and who look beyond all manmade authority. The real Elders in this administration should not enforce their authority through earthly power and miracles, because the 'Body' represents a spiritual, invisible, celestial kingdom and it is not supposed to be a visible, political or religious governmental organisation (or kingdom). So therefore these elders are generally hidden to those who are not spiritual.

Of course, these things can still be abused and misused by the religious leaders, in just the same way as the leaders of ancient Israel did, and many anointed servants of God can begin in the Spirit, but sadly, they can end up ministering in the flesh, with many even falling away into gross error. In instances like these, it is advised that the true disciples of Christ Jesus should 'come out of her, so that you will not be a participant in her sins' (Revelation 18:4).

But as far as the local 'churches' are concerned, scriptural principles still apply in relation to

all forms of authority and order. All will be held accountable before God for their acts, particularly those within 'the Church' structure who claim to belong to Christ, whether they are leaders or not, and whether they truly belong to the Body of Christ or not. But those in positions of leadership will be held more accountable (James 3:1; 1 Timothy 3:12-13).

So wherever one meets with other believers, whether it be in a building or in a home, the present authority structure for the Body of Christ ecclesia is this:

1. Christ as the Head
2. Prophets, Shepherd/Teachers and Evangelists (spiritually in the place of the Apostles)
3. Elders of the local assemblies, the Overseers
4. Servants of the local ecclesias (those with other positions of responsibility)
5. Heads of the family

Although the heads of the family unit are placed last in the list, this does not mean that those above them can usurp the authority of a husband and/or father concerning his family. This structure primarily applies to the gathering of the believing community and the spiritual authority within the Body. For example, in a home fellowship, the head of the house should have the final say on order and behaviour, although he or she may not necessarily be a spiritual elder.

The words of Jesus sum up this issue of the fellowship of the saints.

"Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

(Matthew 18:19-20 NIV)

For a list of scripture quotes that speak of the difference between the true servants of God and the false ones, and the credentials for a spiritual Overseer, see *Signs of a False Apostle, Prophet or Teacher*.