

Checks on Power and Authority in the New Testament

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One problem in the Church is that people fail to be accountable to others. Another problem is that when people are accountable, often that willingness to be responsible is abused by leaders.

1. Have you ever had a Christian leader imply that you were either rebellious or disobedient to God because you didn't take their advice?
2. Have you ever had a Christian leader tell you that you had an evil spirit or a spirit of rebellion simply because you asked questions?
3. Have you ever challenged a leader and they saw this as an assault on their authority?
4. Have you ever felt that a leader (or leaders) was (were) lording it over you?
5. Does it ever bother you when a Christian group, community, or Bible study all look, act and talk alike?
6. Has another Christian ever told you that they were your shepherd?

If any of these questions ignite a positive response in you, you may be involved in an aberrant and potentially destructive relationship or group.

The New Testament gives us some basic guidelines to protect us from getting involved in relationships which are destructive both emotionally and spiritually.

I. PETER

Peter was accountable to others. He carefully explained his position to eat with and baptize Gentiles. He did not presume that his position as an apostle was beyond question. He explained his actions and answered questions. HE DID NOT SEE THIS ACCOUNTABILITY AS AN ASSAULT ON HIS AUTHORITY.

A. Acts 11:1-4 The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

1. Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened: "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth. Wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'"
2. I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'
3. The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.
4. Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying."

B. Acts 11:18 When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying "so then, god has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

II. PAUL ENCOURAGED CHALLENGE

Paul encouraged the Corinthians to judge his words and evaluate them to see if they were appropriate or not.

A. I Corinthians 10:15 I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.

III. PAUL AND PETER

When Peter, who was an apostle before Paul, moved from grace to legalism as the way of faith, Paul confronted him. Paul did not say, "I CANNOT QUESTION THOSE IN AUTHORITY OVER ME."

A. Galatians 2:11-14 When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the Gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it then that you force the Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

IV. PETER AND CORNELIUS

Peter was open and answered questions about his behavior with Cornelius. Subsequently the apostles and elders met to consider the issue once more, as there were many questions and disagreements. They did not say, "PETER IS A SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY OVER US SO WE CANNOT CHALLENGE HIM." (Study Acts 11 and 15).

V. PROBLEMS DID NOT CAUSE DESPAIR

Problems arose between Peter and Paul before the whole congregation, (Galatians 2:11-14), between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark (Acts 15:36-40), and between Paul and the Corinthians over many issues (2 Corinthians). THESE PROBLEMS NEITHER ENDED THEIR RELATIONSHIPS NOR CAUSED DESPAIR THAT THE UNITY WAS NOT ACHIEVED INSTANTLY. Paul and Peter, Paul and Barnabas, and Paul and the Corinthians worked through these difficulties in time.

A. Galatians 2:11-14 (Printed above).

B. Acts 15:36-49 Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

VI. THE NEW TESTAMENT ASSUMES THAT ELDERS MAY NEED CONFRONTATION AND HAVE THE CAPACITY TO ABUSE AUTHORITY

We are not to be like the world, lording it over one another seeking status for ourselves afraid of losing face before others. OUR CONFIDENCE IS IN CHRIST AND NOT IN OUR POSITIONS OF AUTHORITY.

A. I Timothy 5:19, 20 Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.

B. Luke 22:24-27 Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest.

Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves."

C. 1 Peter 5:3 Not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

D. Luke 11:43 "Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces."

E. Luke 20:46 "Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the market places and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets."

VII. NO AUTHORITY STRUCTURE WILL USHER IN A UTOPIA

Paul assumes problems will always exist and we need to deal with them in a certain manner. This includes leadership as well.

A. Colossians 3:12-15 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

GOD IS THE ONLY PERSON WHO NEVER HAS TO APOLOGIZE. IF PETER COULD GO OFF BASE AFTER PENTECOST, SO CAN LEADERS TODAY.

VIII. JESUS AND SHEPHERDING

Jesus did not force His disciples to submit to Him. He did not duplicate Himself in them. He always left them with their personalities and attitudes.

A. Jesus went into the garden to pray. He asked the disciples to pray, but they went to sleep. His discipleship program left them with wills of their own. They chose to sleep. He did not force His will in the matter.

1.) Matthew 26:37-46 He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with Him, and He began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then He said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

Going a little further, He fell with His face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Then He returned to His disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

When He came back, He again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So He left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Arise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

B. During Judas' betrayal you do not see Jesus commanding Judas to submit and straighten up. He allowed the man to break rank and to rebel.

1.) Matthew 26:47-50 While He was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. Jesus replied, "Friend, do what you came for."

C. The disciples rebuked a man because he was not one of their group. Jesus then rebuked them. He informed them that the man was of Him even though he was not in their group.

1.) Mark 9:38 "Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

D. After the crucifixion the disciples were so disorganized and confused that they didn't even know that Jesus was the Christ. If He had exercised a strong authority over them, they would have been forced to believe in the resurrection.

IX. The New Testament and Closed Meetings

Jesus took the disciples out on a special retreat, and five thousand people went with Him. He taught them all the same things. They did not have greater truths belonging only to a select few.

A. Paul makes the point that unbelievers were present in New Testament meetings.

1.) I Corinthians 14:16 If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying?

B. God called Saul directly. He didn't use the apostles to speak for Him. Ananias baptized Paul and he was called a disciple not a shepherd.

1.) Acts 9:10-18 In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized.

C. There is no evidence of shepherds (the apostles) indoctrinating Saul through cell group activity. There is no evidence that they sat down with Saul (Paul) and told him how to submit to them. There is no evidence of any "super submission" program.

X. Words of Caution and Guidelines

Any discipleship program must keep its eyes on Christ and not on the human leader.

A. In true discipleship, one is to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

1. Galatians 4:19 My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.

2.) Hebrews 12:2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

3.) Colossians 3:10 And have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

4.) Ephesians 4:15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

5.) Luke 6:40 A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher.

B. Paul says: Do not be anxious about anything but go to God. HE DOESN'T SAY ELDERS!!!

1.) Philippians 4:6-7 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

C James writes: If anyone lacks wisdom, let him go to God. HE DOESN'T SAY ELDERS OR SHEPHERDS.

1.) James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

D. Paul asks them to pray for him, not make decisions for him.

1.) Ephesians 6:18-20 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

2.) Colossians 4:3, 4 And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.

3.) 1 Thessalonians 5:25 Brothers, pray for us.

E. Paul says: Carry each other's burdens. He also says each person is responsible to carry their own.

1.) Galatians 6:2-5 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load.

F. Elders are responsible to counsel, encourage, and rebuke on the personal level. So are believers.

1.) 1 Timothy 4:2 Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction.

2.) Titus 2:15 These, then are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you.

3.) Galatians 6:1-5 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load.

4.) Colossians 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

G. We are to honor those in leadership over us. However, they are to be overseers by example, not force.

1.) Hebrews 13:7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

XI. Jesus Only is the Head of the Church

Each hand moves independently of the other hand. Each finger and each foot move independently of the other finger or foot. The head gives the instructions. One finger does not have to ask the other finger for permission to move. The nerves and the muscles in the arm move the finger but never the will of the arm. It is always from the head – who is Christ.

A. Paul and Barnabas refused to follow a legalistic rule of submission when it violated their convictions.

1.) Acts 15:36-39 Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it was wise to take him because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. Many authoritarian discipleship groups claim that the sheep are too dumb to receive direction from God and therefore need shepherds. The letters in the New Testament are written to all. Not just leaders.

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT THE WORD SHEEP IS USED TWENTY-TWO TIMES, AND PERTAINING TO GOD'S CHILDREN, THE WORD SON FIFTY-SIX TIMES, HEIRS THIRTEEN TIMES, SAINTS SIXTY TIMES. THIS IS NOT TO MENTION THE MANY TIMES WE ARE REFERRED TO AS KINGS, PRIESTS, CONQUERORS, OVERCOMERS, BRETHREN, ETC. TO OVEREMPHASIZE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A SHEEP IS TO DESTROY THE GREATER TRUTH OF THE WORD OF GOD.