

ABUSE OF AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH

(Authoritarian Shepherds and Idol-Worshipping Sheep)

I. THE PROBLEM: Troubled Times and Reactionary Leadership

Modern churches are over-reacting to sinful patterns in our culture and creating a worse problem. The late 20th century has had a severe outbreak of sins relating to rejection of authority: God's, parents, governments, etc. Since the Fall of mankind in Adam, this is not that unusual. What has become noticeable is the pendulum being swung in the opposite direction by those in leadership positions in local churches. Recent titles of Christian books such as CHURCHES THAT ABUSE point to a growing awareness that some churches are at least perceived to be abusing their members and attendees. Some church officers (pastors, elders, deacons) have sinned in their authoritarian opposition to the lawless, pleasure-loving ethos of our day. Lay Christians can find themselves confusing conformity to their church's 'status quo' and the 'traditions of the elders' with conformity to the Word of God and the image of Christ. As a result, Jesus Christ is dishonored, the doctrines of the gospel come into discredit, and many sheep are deeply hurt in the process.

How has this sad and sinful state of affairs come into being? The legacy of the Christian past in our land has almost all be spent by the heirs of the Reformation, the Puritans and the great awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries. Sin is bold in the streets of our land again. Attitudes, actions and words that were once kept hidden or secret are now flaunting themselves in broad daylight. One of the sins most evident is the rebellion against any form of authority. Sinners converted out of our culture are not sinless saints. Much of this anti-authority mindset has come into churches through true Christians who have not mortified old habits of heart. Also, sad to say, 'tares' have been welcomed into the many 'easy-believism' churches by leaders more interested with 'nickels and noses' than in faithfulness to Christ and His Word's directions for His Church. Even in 'good' churches which should model humility and the esteeming of others as better than themselves (Phil. 2:1-8), children rebel against their parents, wives rebel against their husband's headship, husbands rebel against their employers, and church members rebel against their pastors', elders' and deacons' God-given authority (Titus 2). While sins of rebellion are to be expected as common in the world of the unregenerate, they have also become the frequent reality of too many evangelical, Bible-teaching churches. Many readers of these pages know of good men who have been deeply wounded and run out of the ministry by unruly, ungodly congregations. Many pastors regularly feel like 'clay pigeons' at a skeet range moments after the shout of 'Pull' is heard! I grieve over good men who have given up the ministry under repeated assaults.

But it has also been my sad observation that a reaction has set in among some churches and leaders. 'Authoritarianism' has risen among some pastors and officeholders

such that whole churches seem to be little more than idol worshippers of 'the great man' and the 'omnicompetent elders'. Instead of wounded shepherds victimized by their flock, we now have the specter abroad of wounded sheep victimized by the very men called to feed and protect them. Who is to say which set of sins is worse or

brings more shame on the name of Christ and the gospel of grace?

Before proceeding, some definition is in order. For the purposes of this article, 'authoritarianism' is defined as an abuse of the authority delegated by Jesus Christ through the agency of the Holy Spirit and revealed in God's Word which the officeholders of the local churches are to exercise. It has been my observation that this sinful abuse of authority usually takes on or more of the following forms.

FIRST, sinful authoritarianism exists when pastors and other officeholders speak with binding authority where God Himself has not spoken in His written Word. If God has not spoken on the subject, it is a usurpation of Divine prerogative to speak for Him. It is the creature taking the place of the Creator. A pastor or other officer may rightly proclaim 'Thus saith the Lord' when speaking against idolatry, adultery, greed, marrying an unbeliever or any other violation of the express commands of God. This is a herald's duty and God help the man who 'cuts and trims' texts to speak smooth words to his flock. But the pastor has no warrant from Christ to speak with the binding authority of God's 'imprimatur' to issues upon which the written Word of God is silent. To pretend to be speaking for God without His express authority is gross sin.

SECOND, sinful authoritarianism exists when pastors and other officeholders usurp the Lordship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the lives of God's people by deciding the will of God for them where Scripture is silent. To pretend to give authoritative guidance to God's people without His Word is another gross sin of man pretending to be God. Church officers may not declare 'the will of God' for God's people on such choices as one's career, choice of Christian mate, choice of lawful employment, place of living, schooling they attend, etc. without becoming surrogate gods. Flocks of sheep with paralyzed decision-making faculties reveal exposure to shepherds who played 'God' for them. Thus the sinful tendency noted in John Milton's wry observation ('New presbyter is but old priest writ large') returns to haunt the churches. And even more sadly, some idol-worshipping sheep love it to be so.

II. CAUSES OF THE PROBLEM: Sinful Shepherds and Sinful Sheep

Sure the cause of authoritarianism and idol-worship is sin. But what sins in particular need to be recognized, repented of and mortified by the Holy Spirit's help? Five sins of the shepherds and three sins of the sheep come to mind. Taken together they produce churches with a powerfully sinful pathology which dishonors Christ, injures the sheep, inflates the shepherds and tears down the church of God.

THE SINS OF THE SHEPHERDS: Today's authoritarian shepherds seem to fall prey to one or more of the following five sins as they exercise their ministry. Examine your own heart and your church to see if these things are so.

[1] IDOLATRY: the sinful desire to always be in control, especially the control of the lives of God's sheep. Such sin is but a thinly veiled attempt to play God for His people. And make no mistake, such men become as God to their flock. It is hardly surprising that pastors with such a sinful tendency will eventually attain near papal

infallibility in their churches. Paul's command to young Titus in 2:15 ('...rebuke with all authority...do not let anyone despise you') is their 'life verse' in practice if not in precept. Usually this idolatrous sin of always needing to be in control is accompanied by a wrathful, berating, anxiety-producing spirit as the controlling leader will tolerate no loose electrons in his personal universe of control (Cf. Ezekiel 34:4 & ff.; Matt. 20:25; 1 Pet. 5:3). Such self-deified leaders produce congregations which are more afraid of displeasing the leaders than they are of displeasing their Lord and Savior. Men who must be 'God' to their people ironically lose the authority of God's Holy Spirit by their sin. Then their God-given authority is replaced by fleshly control maintained by manipulation, intimidation, verbal coercion and the ecclesiastical version of pulling rank (e.g., 'Now, I'm your elder and you had better do this, or else...!') The Apostle John's description of Diotrophes seems to fall under such a category of sin (3 John 9-10).

[2] PRAYERLESSNESS: authoritarian pastors and leaders do not rely upon prayer for their people as a primary instrument ordained by God for the edification of protection of His people. As a result, they verbally coerce and bully their people into conformity. They seek to rely only on the 'arm of flesh' of their own strong-arm tactics. Sadly, while such men console themselves that they are only giving faithful oversight to their flock, they do not labor in prayer for their people like they do in personally seeing to it that people toe the line. Such fleshly shepherds expend far more labor scolding, threatening, manipulating, confronting, 'counseling', and 'EXERCISING DISCIPLINE' to get their people to knuckle under to their will. Apparently, extrinsic motivation is all that they know. Intrinsic motivation produced by the Spirit is not sought. Laboring before the throne of grace for the Spirit's supernatural work of conforming God's people to Christ's image (2 Cor. 3:18) is hard work and the flesh will recoil. But spiritual shepherds will lay aside the weapons of flesh which feel comfortable and 'natural' to old, world-taught hands and they will make it their aim to learn anew how to labor in prayer for God's working. The Word of God makes plain that every shepherd's arsenal does include the rod and the staff. But it also emphasizes the importance of intercessory prayer for the growth of the people of God. The reader is asked to read and ponder again the recorded prayers of our Lord and His apostles on behalf to he flock of God (cf. John 17; Eph. 1 & 3, etc.). Sadly, many leaders beat their sheep because the weapons of the flesh still feel more comfortable in their hands than the weapons of the Spirit. The Apostle James rebukes those who claim to be wise but whose lives are strewn with the wreckage of their carnal leadership and he links it to, among other things, as being self-serving (self-idolatry?) and prayerlessness (James 3:13-4:3).

[3] UNBELIEF: many leaders in churches do not believe the declarative statements and promises of God contained in His Word. They do not believe that Christ is presently and actively Lord of His church such that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. They do not believe that God the Holy Spirit is also presently and actively Lord of the church, conforming God's people to Christ's image. They do not believe God the Father is presently and actively exercising His Fatherly love and discipline over the lives of His adopted children. In this pattern of unbelief, following hard on the heels of their own prayerlessness, authoritarian shepherds develop the mindset, 'If I don't make them do this, they won't!' or 'If I don't make them do this, who will?' They really do not believe that Christ will shepherd His sheep and the Holy Spirit

guide and convict the saints while they are away from the human shepherd. Just as Christian parents must entrust their Christian teens unto the Lord as they drive the car down the street or leave for the university, so pastors must learn to trust God to work in the hearts and lives of His people when they are out from under the watchful gaze of the hyper-shepherd. Sadly, such pastors and elders create a 'police-state mentality' in their congregations: everyone's life is carefully monitored and scrutinized for any deviation, and any 'sins' or questionable activities are to be reported to the church leadership immediately. Lack of faith, love of love, and lack of joy are the hallmarks of flocks led by such unbelieving shepherds.

[4] LACK OF LOVE FOR THE SHEEP: shepherds in ancient Palestine walked ahead of their sheep, leading them on and calling them by name to follow them to green pastures and cool waters. The sheep followed because they had come to know and trust the shepherd's faithful care and loving concern for their well-being. It was the shepherd who slept in the doorway of the sheepfold to guard the flock by night. It was the shepherd who fought the bear, the lion and other predators. It was the shepherd who protected the flock from the thief. It was the shepherd who stayed awake that the sheep might sleep in peace. It was the shepherd who left the ninety-nine safe to search for the lost sheep. It was the shepherd who gently led the nursing ewes and their young, not cursing them for being 'weak, slow and consumed with mundane matters'. The Bible surely uses such images to depict a sacrificial and empathetic love for the sheep on the part of the shepherd. But times have changed and shepherds in the West have grown accustomed to doing things differently. 'Sheep ranchers' now employ barking dogs and herders in helicopters to drive the frightened, harassed and bewildered sheep ahead of them. In modern 'sheep ranching', sheep are motivated by fear of the snarling bite of the rancher's seemingly omnipresent dogs and incessant bellowing of the rancher's loudspeaker in the helicopter overhead. Sadly, in too many congregations today, sheep are not led; they are driven by a man more like a callous meatpacker than a loving shepherd. Many modern ranchers do not even like sheep; it's just their business. In fact, men entering the ministry today are encouraged not to get too close to the sheep, let alone emotionally involved in their lives and problems. As a result, many pastors, elders and deacons do not really like, let alone love, their people. Yes, they promote witnessing and world missions, but they just don't like to be around individual sinners. Many pastors love to study, preach, teach and manage but they just do not like the people. Even their time counseling people is only 'fix' problems that might mess up the church. Compare such attitudes with that of our loving and compassionate Lord for the sheep-like sinners of His earthly ministry (cf. Matt. 9:36 and 14:14; Mark 1:29-41 and 10:21). Do you see how far removed our Lord's shepherd ministry is from many pastoral examples today? Sacrificial and compassionate shepherd-love which lays down its life for the sheep has been replaced too often by loveless 'sheep management' by emotionally distant, bureaucratic sheep ranchers.

[5] PRIDE: at root, all the above mentioned sins of office bearers stem from an inflated sense of their own importance. John Calvin once observed that from the king on his throne to the scullery maid in her kitchen, each of us harbors a kingdom in our hearts. Such is the sinful pride of the human heart. Creatures that have been saved by the sovereign grace of the Creator, put into the service of their fellow creatures and commanded to herald the good news of Divine pardon and deliverance may all

too quickly forget that they are but clay pots made out of 'proud dust' (to note Thomas Watson's apt description). We must be reminded that we hold our office by our Master's pleasure, to do His bidding, to further His Kingdom, and to build up His children. Humble shepherds look upon god's sheep with compassion born of self-knowledge of their own wicked and slow hearts. Proud shepherds look down upon the sheep with scornful contempt for their weakness, slowness, dullness, and failings. Humble shepherds remember that even the Great Shepherd of the sheep patiently endured the misunderstanding, scolding and fleshly second-guessing of His slow-to-learn sheep (cf. Matt. 16:22; Mark 4:38; 1 Pet. 2:21-23). Proud shepherds, however, react to every real or perceived slight to their 'august personage'. How unlike their Master! Shepherds must learn that they cannot be conformed to the image of Christ as long-suffering and forgiving unless they are first 'long-bothered' and wronged. Think about that before reading on! Pride, however, responds to the irritations of fellow sinners with anger. Bottom line, an angry leader is a proud leader.

THE SINS OF THE SHEEP: Sad to say, but the sheep themselves contribute their own sins to the creation of authoritarian ministries. Having talked with and ministered to several wounded sheep, it has struck me how seldom they have seen their own culpability. They are quick to foist all blame upon their harsh leader-taskmasters. But petty dictators cannot reign without the consent of their bowing and scraping subjects who, when they are not fawning all over their leaders, are assuming the role of doormats for the leader to wipe his feet on. There are at least three sins which laymen contribute to the sinful pathology of authoritarian churches.

[1] IDOL-WORSHIP: sinful flesh is not content with the unseen reality of the one true God. It wants to fashion an idol in place of the invisible God who is spirit. There is always the temptation to act like the Jews of Saul's time who wanted a human leader that they could see, rather than the unseen God Himself (1 Kings 8:1-18). But God shares His glory with no man, not even 'called men' who are promoted to demi-god status by their adoring flock. Such flocks too often find for themselves a man who likes to lord it over the flock. Thus a sinfully symbiotic relationship is complete with an abusive authority figure coupled to idol-worshipping minions (e.g., Jer. 5:30-31). Such people populate churches that boast of their preacher but speak little of Jesus Christ!

[2] FEAR OF MAN: too many sheep are more gripped by the desire to please a man or more fearful of displeasing a man than they are of pleasing or displeasing Almighty God (cf. Prov. 29:25; John 5:41-44). They spend their time dancing around their idol, expending all their energy catering to his every whim and seeking to avoid his wrath. Men-pleasers have little stomach for potential conflict or simple disagreement. They would never dare question their exalted leader, no matter how respectfully. They would never ask for the biblical basis for a decision made by the leadership, even when that decision seems to fly in the face of clear biblical teaching. Such men-pleasers crave the smile of a man's countenance more than the smile of God and they will not speak the truth in love (Eph. 5:15).

[3] UNBELIEF: too many believers do not believe that God still guides His people today through the means of prayerful meditation upon the Word of God and the

illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is easier for the flesh to suspend the use of spiritual faculties and biblical means of guidance for the short-cut of asking the leader to determine God's will and make the decisions all the time. It is not surprising that Christians who put men of clay on pedestals, who then cravenly serve these idol-leaders, and who do not believe that God still guides should fall prey to abusive leaders. It is only the grace of God that it does not happen more than it does. (Even good leaders know the temptation to become surrogate 'gods' or infallible 'oracles' for their people. They learn to stoutly resist the frequent temptation placed before them by individuals to always answers their questions of guidance and decision-making.) Perhaps authoritarian shepherds are God's chastening rods upon the backs of idol-worshipping, men-pleasing, unbelieving sheep who will not have God to be their God and who substitute a mere creature in His place (cf. Isaiah 2:22 and Psalm 33:13-19).

III. THE CURE FOR AUTHORITARIAN SHEPHERDS & IDOL-WORSHIPPING SHEEP

The call of the Word of God to sinners is always to 'repent and believe'. Even after conversion, believers must remember to continually preach the gospel to themselves. The message is ever fresh and relevant. So it is for the office holder who has exercised his office in sinful ways which have dishonored the Master and hurt the sheep. So it is to the idolatrous member of a local church who has sinfully preferred looking to puny men rather than to Almighty God. What form should repentance and faith take for Spirit-convicted shepherds and sheep?

SHEPHERDS convicted of the sins of authoritarianism should [1] Humbly come to the Word of God and prayerfully meditate upon those great passages which mark the work of the man of God who is the good shepherd and which warn against abuse of the office of leader in God's Kingdom. Such a prayerful and meditative study would begin with Abraham in Genesis 18, Moses in Exodus 32-33, Aaron and his sons in Leviticus 10, the abusive leaders of Ezekiel 34, the woes of our Lord upon the Pharisees of Matthew 23, our Lord's comparison and contrasts of John 10, Paul's instructions to Timothy and Titus, and Peter's admonition to the elders in 1 Peter 5. [2] Repent and confess their sins. Public sins must be publicly confessed; private sins must be privately confessed. Leaders should not fear humbling themselves before men, knowing that God's favor is all important. [3] Pastors guilty of authoritarianism should preach to themselves and their flocks an extended series on 1 Corinthians 13 or Philippians 2 or the Sermon on the Mount or John 10. [4] Leaders should not be afraid to humble themselves into the dust before God and the people for our God does not despise a broken and contrite heart, but rather draws close to the repentant sinner (cf. Psalm 51:17 and James 3:13 - 4:10). God comes close to the meek and lowly and raises them up. The true people of God will also not despise God's truly anointed leader once the self-appointed, man-anointed flesh is mortified. [5] Pastors must seek to cultivate the habit of intercessory prayer on behalf of their people. They must also pray for great grace to resist the persistent temptation to play God for people. They must learn to redirect potential idol-worshippers to the living God who delights in His Bride but who will not share her with another. They must also pray that the sheep who have been hurt will not become embittered but would be forgiving of the pastor's sins. Unloving shepherds must pray

for God the Holy Spirit to produce the loving fruit of the Spirit in their hearts, and with a compassion bred of humility and selflessness, they must cultivate works of loving concern even when the initial 'feeling' of love is not always present. God will not long withhold His Spirit from that man who pleads for grace to love the flock entrusted to him as Christ loves it and who begins to regularly give himself to them in sacrificial prayer and service. [6] Men who humble themselves before the Lord will be shown what they need to see of their sins and Christ's Cross and they will learn with new insight how the blood of Christ cleanses even the stains of pastoral sins!

SHEEP convicted of worshipping idols, pleasing men and disbelieving God must also repent and believe. [1] Repentance includes study and meditation upon God's Word regarding idolatry, men-pleasing, and the sin of unbelief. [2] Repentance also includes turning from the sins to Christ and here the convicted sheep must look to the Great Shepherd of the sheep for cleansing, the restoration of intimacy and strength to persevere. Weak faith grows best upon a diet of regular study, meditation and a believing hearing of the Word of God (cf. Rom. 10:17; John 17:17). [3] Sheep must also learn from God's Word that enduring real or imagined conflict is not the worst thing in the world and that the worst that man can do to you is nothing compared with what Almighty God can do (cf. Prov. 29:25 and Luke 12:4-7). [4] Sheep must meditate upon the reality that they are believer-priests with equal access to God as their leaders. Both leaders and laymen have the merit of Christ as their title deed for bold access to God and confidence of God's hearing and answering their prayers (Heb. 10:1-23). Sheep who walk with God, who know His Word, believe it and obey it are not likely to fall prey to tin gods, clay idols and fleshly shepherds.

May God give His people grace to see their sins and repent of them. We dare not glory in our current condition and slothfully ignore the deplorable state of much of Christ's church. We must first judge ourselves that we may not be judged. And we must plead the purposes and promises of our God and Savior in begging Him for the renewal of the Holy Spirit, both individually and corporately.