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Shepherding the Flock of God

Trevor Morrow

The practice of the principles of "Shepherding" has caused division and distress throughout the Christian community on both sides of the Atlantic. In particular five elements in this phenomenon have been the focus of criticism.

1. Dependency All of us have real dependency needs. We admire and would seek to emulate those who appear "to have it all together". Those who are on top of problems, (financial, sexual and relational) are attractive to us. "Shepherds" can present such a successful image. "What we do - works!" If we are told in our condition of need, the only hope for spiritual maturity is in personally being shepherded by the Lord's delegated authority with whom we must enter into covenant /2 - the result is over dependence. This is illustrated in a Shepherd moving house with the dependent Sheep following and acquiring accommodation nearby; or in a student deciding where to pursue his studies on the basis of his accessibility to his Shepherd. If this had been the NT practice, the dispersion would have seen the end of the Apostolic Church.

2. Authoritarianism Shepherding or Pastoring is what Paul Tournier call a "Vocation of Power. He warns of the temptation to control, to manipulate, even exploit those who are seeking help. All of us involved in ministry are conscious of this.

"...there is in us, especially in those whose intentions are of the purest, an excessive and destructive will to power which eludes even the most sincere and honest self-examinations." /3

There are dangers here for us all. But what of a pattern of pastoring which says that the Pastor/Shepherd has been delegated his authority from the Lord himself, so that we honour and submit to the Lord by honouring and submitting to the Shepherd. Within such a framework, to argue that the sheep are free and not coerced to submit is to fail to understand that group dynamics are at work and affect both sheep and Shepherd. Consider this for example: The sheep

believes that the way to godliness is by submitting to his Shepherd. He is in a group of peers who are conforming to the same pattern. The Shepherd, in exercising his authority, may give a prophetic word (an immediate revelation from God). This Shepherd is in covenant with his sheep. What is the implication of these factors at work? The Shepherd may believe in theory that he is giving counsel on a suggested course of action but the relationship inherently involves authoritarian 'directives'. The sheep may believe that he is free to reject this counsel but the factors at play in the situation have virtually removed that option. To quote Derek Prince: "Submission is voluntary - but if you want help you better submit."⁴ This is authoritarianism. If your Shepherd phones you to say that his grass needs cutting, is he merely suggesting a course of action which will teach you servanthood? The answer is no, if by refusing you are failing to honour and submit to Christ whom you love.

3. Conflict of Authority. It is at this point that many people have become aware of this movement, that is, the conflict between the authority of parents and a Shepherd and that between the authority exercised in a local church eg by elders, and members of that church who also are being shepherded in a "fellowship". The parental problem is due, not to the failure of a Shepherd to emphasize the importance of honouring parents, but by the existence of a Shepherd per se who will be involved and responsible for the individual needs of his sheep in the same sphere as that of the parents. Shepherding as understood within this movement makes such a conflict unavoidable. The tensions between the church and the fellowship are also inevitable. To set up structures of authority for members of a fellowship who are also members of a church will of course produce a division of loyalty and act as a prime example for our Lord's observation: "you cannot serve two masters." /5

4. A new Priesthood. By this we do not mean that "the Shepherds" alone claim access to the presence of God. On the contrary, personal devotions and the development of a relational union with Christ is encouraged. Nevertheless, as God's delegate, the Shepherd will have a particular

interest in his sheep and, being mature and in tune with God he can hear most clearly from God for them. In practice what happens is this: As a sheep concerned about a particular course of action I would go to my Shepherd. I would ask him to pray for me and I will pray for him as he seeks the will of God for me. On my return the Shepherd, having acted as my "intercessor" is in a position to give directions as to the will of God for my life. Is this not a new priesthood?

5. Uniformity All churches or groups receiving instruction in a certain tradition will of course reflect a certain degree of uniformity in judgment. The practice of discipling through Shepherding of this nature also tends to develop an unhealthy conformism. There are at least three reasons for this. First, the relationship between the Shepherd and the sheep is perceived as that between an apprentice and a craftsman. If the apprentice will not be instructed in the trade according to the ideals of the craftsman - he would be let go! The pressure is therefore to conform. Second, the process of discipling involves not merely the basic teaching and principles of the Christian faith but with it successful behavioural patterns necessary for character building. These reflect the origins of the movement ie Middle class, North American, evangelical, social and cultural values in eg the nature of family life, the home, finances, life style and the role of women etc. Third, since the teaching on these and other matters flows from a narrow stream within the Charismatic renewal movement, the diversity of opinion found throughout the Church "evangelical" never mind "catholic", is not normally present. The result is a Shepherded Community who are uniform in their attitude and outlook with regard to eg the position of women; the non-simple lifestyle, or support for the nation of Israel.

The question we must now consider is: are these areas of concern the result of immature and insensitive application of valid biblical insights or is there something inherently unbiblical and unbalanced in this understanding of Shepherding? There are four considerations which would lead us to make the latter judgment.

1. The nature of Authority The model of authority used

by Derek Prince is that derived from reflections of the "Roman Centurion" (Lk 7:7-8) who functions under a chain of command/obedience structure ie as the centurion is under authority to his superior and so back in the chain of command to Caesar himself, so Jesus is under authority to the Father and derives his authority from him. The implication is that Christ's delegated authority (the Shepherd) is under Christ and derives his authority from him. Now in spite of the qualifications with respect to this pattern for authority (the submission or obedience is voluntary), nevertheless, the authority exercised by it by a person in humility and as a servant is still anchored in the military model. The effect of this is that the authority practised is that of directive jurisdiction over individual lives. Juan Carlow Ortiz, a practitioner of this form of authority, speaks of the need "to control your disciples" /5

This is not the biblical pattern of authority. Robert Murray, a Jesuit, highlights the NT emphasis, namely that Jesus does not merely qualify the worldly model for authority but rather points to something radically different. After quoting from Mark 10:42-45,

You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be the slave of all. For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many

Murray explains the meaning of the term for "authority in the NT:

The normal word of 'authority' in the NT is exousia, the noun denoting the situation in which one is able, competent or permitted. While exousia can mean moral authority, the quality by which Jesus impressed people in contrast with the scribes' "cautious recital of past opinions" (cf Mk 1.22), normally the best English equivalent of it is "competence"...

The NT concept expressed in the word exousia does not have the connotation of jurisdiction over others, much less the power to impose force upon other persons... /6
Kennedy and Lewis crystallize the nature of authority in the NT by saying

It is...the authority of truth, the authority of wisdom and experience. It is something that a wise man recognizes and willingly submits to. /7

2. Delegated Authority Delegated authority is crucial to this whole understanding of the function of a Shepherd. In the writings of Derek Prince this notion is based on two assertions. First, that Christ the supreme ruler over every area of the universe including the church does not rule in every area directly, in his own person. He rules through a delegated authority. /8 Second, the delegated chain of authority is said to be seen in Mt 10.40. When Jesus sent out the twelve, he said, "He who receives you, receives me, and he who receives me, receives him who sent me."

...the Father was represented by Christ, Christ was represented by his Apostles. To receive the Apostles was to receive Christ and thus God the Father. Conversely, to reject the Apostles was to reject both Christ and the Father /9

We shall consider these in reverse order. Mt 10.40 is part of a section which reads

He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives a cup of water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward (Mt 10.40-42 NIV)

The passage is not about authority. Jesus, in sending out the twelve has warned them that they will be rejected because of their ministry in his name (Mt.10.16-39). Now he turns to show them that some of their listeners will respond positively and will be rewarded. LevertOff understands it like this.

The passage seems to imply that as of old kindness shown to the prophet because he represented God (eg Elisha and the widow) and to the righteous, was rewarded by God according to the measure of the merit of the prophet or the righteous man; so now even the simplest kindness shown to the most insignificant disciple of Christ, because he is a disciple of his, will be rewarded according to the merit of Christ himself." / 10

The disciples may not be prophets or righteous men as they go out in weakness like little children but kindness shown to them will be rewarded by the one who sends them (Christ) and the one who has sent him (the Father). This applies to all the disciples of Jesus - not just a select few with delegated authority, for the same word is given to the

seventy, except it is in negative terms: "Jesus said to his disciples; and the one who listens to you, listens to me and the one who rejects you rejects me; and he who rejects me rejects the one who sent me" (Lk 10.16). It is also used to refer to a child (who could not have the qualifications of a shepherd) - "whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me" (Mt 18.15)

The authority of those who minister the name of Christ is not because they are part of a chain of authority but because of the authority of their message. It is for this reason Jesus prayed, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone (the twelve) but also for those who believe in me through their word" (Jn 17.20). The Authority of the Messenger is therefore in the message. Derek Prince's assertion that Christ does not rule every area of his church directly, in his own person, is not supported by any scripture. It is assumed. On the basis of this assumption the idea of delegated authority is introduced to explain how Christ rules the church and from that we are encouraged to submit to his delegates as we would to Christ himself. It would be our contention that Jesus Christ is the sole head of his church and that his purpose is to govern it in his person and presence at all times.

In the coming of the Holy Spirit Jesus came to his church (Jn 14.16-18) To become a Christian is to be baptized into his body (the church) (1 Cor.12.13) If we do not have the Spirit we are not Christian (Rom 8.9). Through the Holy Spirit Jesus is present among his people. To exhibit his government and kingdom he distributes gifts to his church (1 Cor 12.3-11). When through the operation of the Holy Spirit in say the assembling of the people of God, as these gifts are being used, Christ's presence and authority is being exercised. The standard by which such ministry is to be judged is "the word of Christ" (1Cor. 14.29-33). Paul, eg in exercising his gifts encourages his hearers to judge his ministry by the "word of God" (Gal 1.8 & 9; Acts 17.11) Jesus Christ is therefore personally governing his Church with, to use Calvin's phrase - his word and his Spirit. The Elders/Shepherds therefore do not govern for him as his Vicars or delegates. Rather as co-workers with Christ (1 Cor 3.9-11) they are to encourage "the body" to allow "the head" to govern according to his pleasure.

3. The Role of an Elder or Shepherd Most commentators today recognize that it is virtually impossible to discover in the NT any particular form of church government. Nevertheless it is difficult to see justification for the distinction which Prince makes between charismatic, governmental and discipling authority. In this short paper we shall not consider Charismatic authority. The separation into two authority patterns, one for governing and one for discipling lacks biblical credence.

Jesus Christ has given, by his Holy Spirit, Shepherd/Elders to watch over the flock (Acts 20 28-31). They have the responsibility to equip the Church for the work of the ministry so that through the exercise of the various gifts in the body it will be brought to maturity (Eph 4) The Shepherds, while involved in the governing of the Church will therefore be engaged in discipline, teaching and ruling but discipling is not only for Shepherds, it is an activity of the whole body of Christ when all the organs are being properly utilized. The commission to make disciples was only realizable when the Holy Spirit had come upon the followers of Jesus at Pentecost and the Church was constituted the body of Christ. Those who believed were therefore added to the Church in order that through the body they might grow up in every way into the head. Discipling by individuals with discipling authority apart from the Church is unknown in the NT. Now, of course, there will be those with whom one will specifically relate as friends, helpers and guides. They may or may not be Elders/Shepherds. They will be involved in the activity of one being disciplined but they are but one of many upon whom we are interdependent as members of the one body.

There are many things about the functions of an Elder /Shepherd/Presbyter/Bishop in the NT about which the scriptures may be ambiguous but two points may be made which have a bearing on our discussion. /11

(i) The congregation selected by a show of hands (Acts 14.23) those Shepherds/Elders whom they believed the Holy Spirit had given them and they were set apart to that role by other presbyters/elders (1 Thess 1.5) The Elders/Shepherds were therefore a function within the local church. To be part of a church and to be shepherd-

ed by a member of a group outside that Church is in NT terms inconceivable.

(ii) Elders in the NT (and thus as recognized by D. Prince) were appointed and acted in plurality. By acting in a collegiate manner they are evidently a check and balance in the exercise of governmental authority in the Church. Their responsibility was to oversee collectively the discipline, teaching and overall guidance of the congregation. There is no evidence from the NT that individual elders had the right to give personal authoritative direction to the lives of people under them

4. The Nature of Submission or Obedience The nature of submission or obedience will be determined by the nature of authority and the role of those exercising it.

(i) The focus of our obedience in the scriptures is "The Lord" and his truth, the gospel. This is seen in the ministry of the apostle Paul, who, though commissioned and sent by Christ, does not major on his own authority and the obligation of his hearers to listen, but concentrates on the authority of the truth which is the power of God for salvation. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, describes his ministry.

We have renounced disgraceful, underhand ways; we refuse to practise cunning or tamper with God's word, commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God (2 Cor 4.2)

Robert Murray comments:

This passage is fundamental for a right understanding of authority in the NT. Its exercise is a witness to the truth, rendered in the Spirit and met by the working of the Spirit in the hearers. It does not so much impose as commend its message to the free human conscience /12

It is for this reason Paul writes to the Galatians to curse him if he preaches not "the truth". Our primary obedience is to "the gospel"

(ii) The model of Authority in the Church is relational rather than imperial, ie, based on servanthood rather than lordship. What is involved in submission or obedience will reflect this pattern of authority. Paul eg affirming the freedom of Christians, "urges" the saints in Corinth to subject themselves to those who have devoted themselves to ministry (1 Cor. 15.16) The submission or obedience called

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for in the relationship between sheep and Shepherd is, therefore, to quote Ray Stedman, the willingness "to allow oneself to be persuaded by" /13 those who minister the word of God. There are no hidden or concealed pressures to obey

(iii) When obedience is called for with regard to those who are over us "in the Lord" (Heb 13.17) always we are challenged, without exception, to obey those who are over us. We are never asked to obey him who is over us. The pattern of obedience is collegial. An elder or a Shepherd does not have as an individual any special authority. Authority in the NT wisely follows the lesson of Proverbs 11.4: "in the multitude of counsellors there is safety." Decisions were made either collectively by the elders or corporately by the church. Our obedience or submission which is voluntary is therefore directed, not to a Shepherd but to the Shepherds who are discipling the people of God.

Our conclusion must be this:

There is no biblical justification for the idea that you must be "covered" and "discipled" by an individual Shepherd who has been delegated by Christ to exercise authority over and to whom you must submit as you would to the Lord himself.

Notes

1. The attempts to achieve reconciliation within the Charismatic movement are recounted in Michael Harper's This is the Day (appendix C), Hodder & Stoughton, London 1979
2. Kelly, John: "If you not under some sort of leadership, you are not under Christ" quoted from a tape on "Christ's Authority in the Church"
3. Quoted by Ronald Enroth in The Power Abusers' Eternity, Philadelphia 1979
4. Prince, Derek: Tape on "Shepherding" (D. Prince publications)
5. Mt 5.24
6. Quoted in Enroth, op.cit
7. Murray, Robert: Authority in a Changing Church, Sheed & Ward 1966 as quoted by Kennedy & Lewis in "Shepherding and Submission" to whom I am indebted for so many of these insights.
8. Prince, Discipling, in New Wine, 1976, p13
9. ibid
10. Quoted in Matthew, Tyndale by R.V.G. Tasker, p109
11. No attempt has been made to distinguish between elder/presbyter/bishop/teacher. While recognizing the difference in emphasis with regard to responsibility, I (an unprejudiced Presbyterian) am assuming they refer to the same office!
12. Murray, op.cit. p35
13. Stedman, Ray, Body Life, Regal, California 1979

The Rev Dr Trevor Morrow is presently minister of Lucan Presbyterian Church in the Irish Republic. He completed his Doctoral Thesis at the University of Edinburgh and has closely studied the Renewal Movement.