

Service To Others NOT Authority Over Others

“Speaking the truth in love we are to grow in every respect into the mature body of Him who is the Head, that is, Christ” (Ephesians 4:15).

THEME: *If a Christian were to assume authority over others because of a position granted by the church, then Christ's authority of His people is being usurped and otherwise gifted ministry will be ignored.*

A believer should concern himself with loving others and serving others, and never be concerned with “authority over others.” That’s Christ’s job. If a church or convention were to ever believe that a person automatically possesses spiritual authority because of a position that the church has bestowed, then there is the danger of missing out on thrills and joys of seeing God’s kingdom expanded on earth because we begin to exclude or discount the ministries of God-called and Spirit-gifted people who are not “office holders” of that church or denomination.

Christians infatuated with institutional church authority often miss the blessings that come from everyday Christians serving and ministering to others as the Kingdom of Christ is being built. When the church sees those with spiritual authority as only those “ordained” to an office, then we’ve overlooked the New Covenant truth that the only one with authority over anyone is Jesus, the Head over us all.

The New Testament never put an emphasis on any mystical “office” in the church with inherent authority. The people of Christ are to recognize the gifts God has given his people, examine their lives for love and humility, and allow the Spirit to work through those gifted and called people as Christ adds to His church and builds His Kingdom.

The New Covenant people of God are particularly bound to the New Covenant (Testament) writings since the Old Covenant has been fulfilled by Christ and done away with (**Hebrews 1:2, Acts 18:28**).

For those who struggle with the phrase ‘done away with,’ the New Testament uses even sharper language like ‘abolished.’ This is why we do not offer sacrifices, celebrate the seven Jewish festivals, follow the Jewish dietary laws, etc.

Whereas in the Old Covenant you had it made if you were an old, Jewish male holding the office of priest or king (which was a legitimate office), in the New Covenant, all believers in Christ - both male and female, young and old, rich and poor, Greek and Jew - are priests and kings (co-heirs with Christ).

Christ is our Head; we are His Body. He is the King of kings; we are His servants.

New Covenant believers are responsible to the Head individually, but we also have a responsibility to fulfill in terms of each other (Rom. 14:4, Eph. 5:21). All believers, not just men, are priests and servants of God. All believers, not just men, are gifted by God. All believers, not just men, are under the authority of the Head of the Body, Jesus Christ. Therefore, we must all take our place among the Body to minister according to the gifts He has given us for the good of us all (1 Corinthians 12-14). It is God who gives us believers spiritual gifts to minister, and it is Christ the Head to whom we answer in the use of those gifts.

There are certain members of the body, both men and women, who become a gift to the body of Christ in unique ways. God has gifted and given these people to the body for the purpose of equipping all the members of the church for ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12).

When the New Testament describes these individuals, no emphasis is placed on any "authority" they possess that is derived from any "office" they hold. Rather, the people of God in the church have observed the Kingdom advanced through the servant leadership of those gifted individuals.

It is not the "office" of pastor that bestows any power, but Christ who empowers the servant leadership. Part of the confusion in the minds of some Southern Baptists over this issue may arise from the King James Version translating the word "diakonia" in Romans 11:13 with the word "office."

Unfortunately, the KJV translation is a poor one, simply because "diakonia" means "service or ministry."

This is important. So, let me show you again the difference between a service and an office, and why authority arises from service and not an office. When Paul, a Jew, desired for the Gentiles to listen to his teaching, *he reminds them of his ministry or service to them* - not any imagined office of authority. Some evangelicals think there is something mystical about a pastor and his inherent authority. Because of the "office" the pastor holds, people ought to listen to Him.

That's not the way it was, however, even in Paul's day. The Bereans, Christians of "noble character," heard Paul and didn't accept what he said as true because Paul said it. Rather, they "examined the Scriptures with great eagerness to see whether what Paul was saying was true" (Acts 17:11).

Any pastor who puts the emphasis on the "office" of pastor and tells the congregation that they must listen to them because of his authority over them, is conducting his ministry in a manner contrary to the teachings of the New Testament, the practice of the Apostle Paul, and completely opposite of the way Christ told His people to serve others.

Nobody has authority over anyone but Christ (See Lesson 5: "No Office of Authority" and Lesson 9: "Who Is the Boss of Your Church?")

My father, Paul Burleson, clearly articulates that this is the key to understanding the authority of anyone who ministers in the local church or is sent by the church to minister to others. He writes:

"No one has authority BECAUSE they have a stronger personality, knows more Bible, or they hold an office. That is foreign to the New Testament. Paul the Apostle had to defend his Apostleship by virtue of it being the work of the Spirit setting him aside for it. 1 Timothy 5:17 speaks of those elders that "give oversight well" and "are worthy of double honor."

The anointing of the Spirit makes clear the authority that rests on a ministry done well, not the office holder.

Until the church of Jesus Christ understands that ministry and service to others is the New Testament manner of Kingdom living, otherwise gifted men and women (especially women) will be excluded from leadership based upon their gender.

(See Appendix 1: Three Illustrations of Gifted Servants of the Church Excluded from Leadership).