

Pastoral Leadership: Authoritarian or Persuasive?¹

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Neither “authoritarian” nor “persuasive” are neutral words in our culture.

“Authoritarian” is quite pejorative in connotation while “persuasive” is conversely strongly positive. *The Oxford American Dictionary* defines “authoritarian” as “favoring complete obedience to authority as opposed to individual freedom” while defining “persuasive” as the adjectival form of persuade, identified as “to cause (a person) to believe or do something by reasoning with him.”²

By contrast “authoritative” is defined by the same dictionary as “having or using authority.” Consequently, the more neutral and accurate “authoritative,” rather than “authoritarian,” is utilized to describe the pastor-authority model of leadership in the local church. The distinction in these terms “should not be confused.”³

Authoritarianism says, “This is right because I say so.” Authority says, “I say this because it is right.” A good leader has authority on his side but he is not authoritarian.⁴

Also, it should be noted that the authoritative-persuasive dichotomy is neither mutually exclusive nor interchangeable. In fact, an authoritative ministry must be persuasive to fulfill its scriptural mandate. Conversely, a merely persuasive ministry will not suffice.

¹This essay originally appeared in *Theological Educator* 37 (Spring 1988): 75-82, 83-92.

²*The Oxford American Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) q. v.

³Joe S. Ellis, *The Church on Purpose* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1982), 131.

⁴*Ibid.*

Any serious Southern Baptist discussion of the basis, nature, and style of pastoral leadership in the local church must commence with an examination of the New Testament text. Ultimately, sound, accurate theology will be based on exegesis. The concept of authority is inextricably interwoven into the text of the New Testament.⁵ For instance, it speaks of pastoral leadership as “taking the oversight” (1 Pet. 5:2) and “them which have the rule over you” (Heb. 13:7). The rebellion of many Christians against such concepts of pastoral authority often arises out of modern secular understandings of authority and leadership.

Christ, however, made it clear to his followers that his definition of authoritative leadership departed radically from the natural world's experience.

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.⁶

Authoritative leadership in the Christian context is to be neither arrogant nor dictatorial. It is to be authoritative, but not autonomous. The pastoral leader must have learned submission in the school of Christ⁷ and he must also remember that he serves the Lord, not himself.⁸

Is the pastoral leadership in the church authoritative? In the letter to the Hebrews, the wording is clear:

Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls (Heb. 13:7, 17).

⁵Cf. 1 Tim. 5:17, “*the elders that rule well.*” Cf. also 1 Cor. 5:4-5 and Phil. 1:8-9, passages which, while admittedly dealing with apostolic authority, are clearly authoritative in leadership style.

⁶Matt. 20:25-28, *NIV*. Cf. also Luke 22:25; Mark 10:35-41.

⁷William D. Lawrence, “Distinctives of Christian Leader” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144 (July-September, 1987): 318-19.

⁸Fred Smith, *Learning to Lead* (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1986), 24-25.

The pastoral leadership “rules” and the members are to “submit themselves” (placing themselves under) their pastoral leadership.

Paul speaks of pastoral rule as a spiritual gift for ministry in Romans 12:8 where the root word *προιστεμι*, translated “rule,” means primarily “to lead and care for.”⁹ In 1 Corinthians 12:28 he adds “governments” to his list of ministry gifts.¹⁰ What does this mean? It means that the pastor, called by God, submissive to the Lordship of Christ, gifted by the Holy Spirit, and confirmed by vote of the local gathered assembly of believers is the authoritative leader. When the Bible speaks to the flock, as in Hebrews 13, the under-shepherd’s authority is underscored. When the under-shepherd is addressed, as in 1 Peter 5, the servant’s heart is emphasized. The pastor is commanded to take “oversight,” but not “as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:1-3).

The real thrust of this passage as it delineates the duties, demeanour, and dignity of the church pastor is admirably and succinctly summarized as follows:

Three descriptive terms are employed in the N . T. to depict the role of the pastor. All three are used in this passage, though here two are used in verb form: (1) Elders (*presbuterosi*, Greek) is a term generically referring to a fully mature man. The respect accorded to an elderly man is transferred to the office of the pastor. The use of the word “elder” indicates profound respect and esteem for the office. (2) “Feed” the flock of God employs the Greek verb *poimaino*, which means “to shepherd.” The nominal form of the word “elder” means “to shepherd.” The word describes the spiritual ministries of the leader of the church. As pastor or shepherd, he is to feed, protect, guide, and pray for the flock of God. (3) “Taking the oversight” is a translation of the Greek *episkopountes*, meaning “to oversee.” The noun form *episkopos* is usually translated “bishop.” The emphasis is upon the administrative responsibilities of the chief officer of the church. The terms are all synonymous in that they refer to the same office. They differ only in emphasis. These responsibilities are to be discharged willingly as an example (*tupoi*, Greek) to the flock, and they are to be rendered due to constraint, due to the desire for inordinate gain, or due to the tyranny of being lords over God’s people. The term “bishop” indicates strong leadership but not dictatorship.¹¹

⁹Cf. also 1 Thess. 5:12 where the same root word is translated as “over you in the Lord.” Cf. also Lawrence, 325.


¹⁰The root word *κυβερνεσις* signifies “helmsman” or “director.”

¹¹*The Criswell Study Bible* ed. W. A. Criswell (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979), 1456. Cf. also W. A. Criswell, *Criswell’s Guidebook for Pastors* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1980), 215-16 and W. A. Criswell, *The Doctrine of the Church* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1980), 68-72.

First Peter 5 reflects Christ's teaching "that worldly conceptions of greatness and leadership cannot be carried over into His spiritual kingdom."¹² This revolutionary "authoritative" leadership is illustrated graphically by the following comparison of "natural" versus "spiritual" leadership:

<u>NATURAL</u>	<u>SPIRITUAL</u>
Self-confident	Confident in God
Knows Men	Also knows God
Makes own decisions	Seeks to find God's will
Ambitious	Self-effacing
Originates own methods	Finds and follows God's methods
Enjoys commanding others	Delights to obey God
Motivated by personal considerations	Motivated by love for God and man
Independent	God-dependent ¹³

To put it somewhat differently, "the difference between secular leadership and Christian leadership does not lie in the absence of authority but in the attitude that motivates authority, the sanctified nature of ambition and motivation."¹⁴

Does the pastor dictate and command the people to submit, moving forward without the counsel and advice of his people? By no means. The pastor, Peter reveals, must have a teachable spirit. The word "exhort" in 1 Peter 5:1 is the verb form of παράκλητος, meaning "the one called alongside," and meaning in its verb form "urging someone and reasoning with someone to follow a course of action." Peter is calling the pastors he addresses to heed and follow his teaching. The very same word is used in Romans 12:1 where Paul pleads (here the word is translated 'beseech') with the Roman Christians to follow his command to "present your bodies a living sacrifice." 

Paul's pleading with Christians "brothers" to obey what it was legitimate for him as an apostle merely to command, illustrates graphically the extent to which all relationships—

¹²J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago: Press, 1967), 13.

¹³Ibid., 21.

¹⁴Lawrence, 328.

including pastor-church member—are transformed by Jesus Christ. The New Testament pastor will assume his authoritative leadership role by feeding the flock and serving Christ through serving the people. He will be sensitive to their needs and will strive to be an inspiring and encouraging example to his flock, inspiring in them loyalty and trust.¹⁵ The pastor who aspires to the divine standard for the pastoral office will, when invited to take up another task, decline with the words of George W. Truett in similar circumstances. His reply was, “No, I cannot come, for I have sought and found the shepherd’s heart.”¹⁶

It is clear that the mode and style of “authoritative” leadership follows is transformed by the teaching of Scripture and the reality of the Holy Spirit. The question remains, Who is in charge? The answer is that Christ is in charge and that He has left us a pattern of authority in every area of our lives, be it the state, the home, or the church.

Why is this so? The answer is that there will come a day when a pastor and his flock will disagree. They will have prayed together diligently and discussed it exhaustively, and still disagreement remains while a decision is urgently awaited. Who makes the decision? Some would say, “the one to whom it is most: in the absence of important.” Who makes *that* decision? Some would say, “No decision should be made until agreement is reached.” Some decisions cannot be postponed without paralysis in the Lord’s work. Who makes the decision? The pastor does and that is one of many reasons why James said, “Don’t aim at adding to the number of teachers, my brothers, I beg you! Remember that we the verb form of who are teachers will be judged by a much higher standard.”¹⁷

¹⁵The willingness of pastors to follow the lead of Paul when he urged the Corinthians to “Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1, NIV) is needed desperately in the churches of our day. The pastor must be an example before his people, encouraging and inspiring them, persuading them with his actions as well as his words.

¹⁶*Criswell’s Guidebook*, 276.

¹⁷James 3:1, *Phillips*.

The Epistle to Hebrews exhorts the church members to “obey” their “leaders and submit to their authority.”¹⁸ Why? “They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”¹⁹ There is no such thing as a great, God-honoring church that is pastor-led and not deacon and people supported. There is also no such thing as a great God-honoring church that is deacon-led or congregation-led.

One of the best-known and most successful practitioners of the pastoral office has described the various parts of the New Testament church and their successful relationship, or lack thereof, beautifully.

They are the preacher and the layman, the pulpit and the pew, the vocational and the avocational, the salaried and the unsalaried, the prophet and the people. Separated they are like two hemispheres that bleed themselves white. Together they are the strength and the power of the Lord. When they are one in Christ they make an unbeatable team. Like a pair of scissors—one blade will not work. Two are needed. They sharpen each other.

Happy is the church that has a wonderful pastor. Blessed is the pastor who has a group of concentrated deacons whose hearts the Lord has touched. Marvelous is the life of the congregation when they can behold love and harmony in the two.²⁰

It was my privilege for thirteen years (1977-1988) to be a member of a church pastored by perhaps the premier model of “authoritative” pastoral leadership in Southern Baptist life, W. A. Criswell. It is not the model I was reared with growing up in Southern Baptist churches. The contrast with what I had known as a member of the pew was vivid. Having experienced a variety of models, I am able to say enthusiastically that the “authoritative” pastoral model “looks right, feels right, and plays right.” It breeds long pastorates, evangelistic growth, and large numbers of young people surrendered to special service.

¹⁸Heb. 13:17, *NIV*.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Criswell's Guidebook*, 215.

In conclusion, one final point must be addressed. The pastor is called by vote of the people of the local congregation.²¹ The people need to be taught the authoritative model and come to a clear understanding that the pastor-flock relationship is a far more intimate and demanding relationship on both than is often supposed. Such understanding would help tremendously in clarifying a “call” to a pastor as something far more important and comprehensive than a vote on his pulpit-style, personality, and resume. The extension of a “call” to pastor a church is a congregational affirmation and agreement that this is God’s man to be your shepherd and leader and as such you are ready to love him, support him, advise him, and follow him in serving the Lord Jesus Christ.

²¹Cf. Acts 1:15-26, Acts 6:1-6, and 1 Cor. 16:3.