



Harvest Now

Apostles, authority and the kingdom of God

By Steve Hill, November 2008

Not so long ago and not so far away in an American city there was an area summit of an international apostolic movement. The speaker was one of their leading figures and introduced his subject as “honor” by boasting of his several cars, multimillion million dollar home and forty ministries that tithed to him. He exhorted those assembled that if they were apostolic fathers, they should receive similiar honor from their sons. He then proceeded to talk to them about their clothes--suits off the rack were fine for preaching in a normal meeting but ministering at a leader’s conference demanded tailor-made.

It is sad enough that any one representing Jesus would talk such rubbish but even more troubling that no one had enough integrity to stand up and confront him.

This example is a symptom of how we understand leadership in the kingdom of God. Do we see apostles as the top of the leadership pyramid? If so, we use phrases like “coming into apostolic alignment” and “coming into divine order” and believe that such hierarchical order is the kingdom of God. But should we?

“In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” Judges 21:25

This scripture has been read as descriptive of a problem to be solved and often the person reading it is presenting themselves as the king you need to submit to in order to solve the problem. In reality these are just two statements. It was true that there was no king in Israel. It was also true that everyone was doing whatever he pleased.

God did not want to solve the problem by appointing a king. In I Samuel 8:7, He responded to Samuel when Israel demanded a king by saying, “They have not rejected you but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them.”

How did God rule over His people? He had the priests to teach them the law and the prophets to confront them when they did not keep it. God desired obedience through free conviction rather than any form of coercion. God was willing to accept the possibility of chaos rather than accept the “order” enforced by a king. He did not want a mediator between Himself and His people. Submission to a man, even a “man of God” does not place you in a theocracy. At best, that places you in a benevolent dictatorship.

God’s desire was a theocracy for which priest and prophet were to provide the foundation. He never intended to make any man a king over his people!

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That theocracy shipwrecked upon the reality of the old heart which could not keep the ways of God. That is why Jeremiah (31:31- 34) and Ezekiel (36:25- 27) prophesied the covenant of the new heart upon which God would write His law, in which God would place His Spirit and by which God would cause us to walk in His ways.

The good news of the Kingdom of God is that you can know the direct, personal rule of the King in personal and corporate life. It is the good news of grace that your heart can be forgiven and clean to desire the ways of God, hear the intimate direction of His voice and receive the power of the Spirit to walk with Him.

“But you, do not be called Rabbi: for One is your teacher, the Christ and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father, for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant.” Matthew 23:8- 11

Those words are in the context of Jesus pronouncing “Woe!” on the religious establishment for their lust for power, position and title. But the point is not so much the destruction caused by the lust for power as the reality that when we rule over others, we are taking a place that God has reserved for Himself! Jesus never gave any man authority over another man. He gave us authority over sickness and demons and asked us to rule ourselves by dying to ourselves. Those that do so will have functional leadership through example and by invitation, but they will always know themselves as servants.

Restoration movements keep rising up where the main emphasis is the authority of the leaders over the people of God and where the mark of “spirituality” becomes submission. Some good things happen in those movements, but whether we call ourselves apostles, prophets, pastors and teachers or popes, cardinals, bishops and priests, it makes no difference. We are building a religious system based upon man and we are taking away the authority of the King. The fruit of this is always a cult of leadership privilege and materialism sprinkled with moral failure.

“Divine order”, understood as the “right” arrangement of men in hierarchy, always produces death. This is the pride of man. We think that some right order will produce the life of God. The truth is that it is the life of God which produces the church.

The example of Jesus, as narrated in John 15, is crystal clear.

“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends. You are my friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.” John 15:13-15

The One who legitimately could claim all position and title did not do so. He looked into the eyes of men who would soon betray Him and called them His friends. He absolutely and for all time destroyed any possibility of any hierarchy ever representing His kingdom. Pyramids are for dead people. Before the throne is a sea of glass. Lakes have no mountains. We are all brothers before the throne.

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You cannot be friends in a hierarchy. Those on the same level are always competitors. Relationships above or below always involve power and control.

The New Testament was written to friends. That is why it has almost sixty “one another” verses which contain thirty “one another commands” including “submit to one another in the fear of God”. That is why there are only six verses which ask for recognition of functional leadership and each of those rest in the context of the “one another” reality. I Peter 5:5 is normative.

The words and example of Jesus as narrated in John 16 are even more startling!

“Nevertheless, I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.” John 16:7

The disciples could not imagine anything worse than Jesus going away! Jesus, the best leader that ever walked on earth, is telling them it is better for them if He goes away! And we think we are important, indispensable even? Jesus knew it would be better for the disciples to have the inward leading of the Holy Spirit than even His flesh and blood leadership!

Jesus was willing to trust all upon the ability of the Holy Spirit to lead men into Truth. And we who claim to be followers of Jesus build leadership cults?

If friends are to know the practical reign of Jesus they will have to embrace some basic responsibilities and that is where the problem comes. Often people do not want the responsibilities of freedom. They would rather have a king tell them what to do and there are always those who want to be king but do not call this co-dependent arrangement the kingdom of God.

The authority of the kingdom is distributed through each member of the body as we accept the responsibilities of freedom and...

1/ Seek the King for ourselves. That means you become a self feeder. You let His grace lead your life. As Dallas Willard says in “The Divine Conspiracy”, “You either live by grace or addiction”.

2/ Fulfill the “one another commands” with a few. If you cannot be church with your spouse and speak the truth with two or three, your public worship is a show.

3/ Disciple our own children. If you cannot disciple your own kids, how can you disciple the nations? If you do not have relational integrity with your own kids, with whom will you have it?

4/ Multiply our relationship with the King through making disciples. The basic command of the King is to make disciples. This is not about events or programs. Disciples are made by a relational process based in the transparency and humility of doing the “one another” stuff together.

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5/ Speak the truth to one another so that we might grow up. Accountability in the Kingdom is not hierarchical. It is primarily to God and then horizontally to one another.

“And he gave some to be apostles...”

When Jesus is the King of His Kingdom, we need a New Testament understanding of “apostle”. The picture of spiritual CEO at the top of the religious food chain is simply wrong. We know the word means “sent one” but may not realize that Paul’s use of the term is in the Greco/Roman business context regarding slaves. There was a fixed hierarchy among slaves from business directors down to those who did manual chores. The most expendable slave and thus, least honored, was the “sent one”. Why? Travel was often dangerous so those sent on errands near or far were those whose loss would be missed the least. They were the most expendable with the least status. Putting “apostle” on your business card then would be like putting “dishwasher” on your card now. ¹

In Romans 1:1 Paul identifies himself first as ‘the slave of Jesus Christ’ and then one who has been “called to be an apostle”. 1 Corinthians 4:8-10 and 2 Corinthians 2:4-10 read properly in this light.

In John 13, Jesus models what the *lowest* household slave should do, and tells his disciples this is their paradigm. He was free to serve because he knew ‘that the father had given all things into His hands and that He had come from God and was going to God’. Our need for position and honor is a testimony to our inward poverty.

Our examples are not Saul, David and Solomon. Our examples are Jesus and Paul. Paul was not the top religious administrator going around collecting churches, holding conferences and taking offerings. He was the first into new territory to found a group of disciples, to take the persecution and, after they were established, leave them to the Holy Spirit.

He did not stay to play king and he certainly left no record of teaching his sons about the importance of tailormade suits.

(Endnotes)

1 See a full description of Paul’s self-understanding in the Greco-Roman social context by Brian J. Dodd, Ph.D.: *Paul’s Paradigmatic “I”: Personal Example as Literary Strategy* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 177; Sheffield Academic Press, 1999; or unpublished article Apostles - Slaves of Christ

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