Chapter 9

Church Life
Beyond "the work" (4)

Dispelling misunderstandings
About "Spiritual Authority"

The best selling Men are From Mars, Women Are From Venus confirmed what the world had suspected all along: that the communication models and concerns of the sexes are so disparate as to be from different worlds. I'm reminded of another contrary set of minds—Christians who lead and those who are led. Both are concerned about spiritual authority. Each side hopes to balance what they perceive as extremes in the other. Each makes broad assertions and small begrudging concessions.   They   listen   to   one   another,   but suspiciously at best.   Church authorities say that members should learn to fellowship before doing things. If offended, they ought not to complain or question but learn the cross. Meanwhile, those who occupy the ranks of   the   non-leader   complain   of   not   having   enough freedom and bemoan the fact that the church is no longer open to the moving of the Spirit; that there ought not   to   be   so   much   arrangement,   strategy,   or organization.

For this reason, both groups of people read books like   "Spiritual   Authority"   and   "Authority   and Submission." Of course, they are looking for different things—snippets   that   might   bolster   their   respective positions.   When the balance is lost, as it is among

groups stressing certain kinds of ultra spirituality, either side will lobby for the orthodoxy of their view. The church teeters back and forth and then topples. It was simply not meant to function at the extreme end of either "freedom" or "authority."

Sorting Through the Soup

The LC Movement's version of spiritual authority is an endless point of controversy. Not all of the teachings are wrong; on the contrary many are remarkably lucid. Still, some principles (especially those cited from the Old Testament) are badly in need of an effective counter-balance. For instance, the case of Noah's drunken self-exposure is popularly used to teach a principle that leaders' failures should be covered in order to obtain the Lord's blessing. The abundance of sex-abuse scandals plaguing the Roman Catholic Church in North America demonstrates where the unfettered application of that ideal can lead. Those who emphasize an almost mindless reverential submission to Movement authority have a hard time explaining why this principle is not practiced with such one-sidedness in other verses. We find that a young up-start like Paul could publicly rebuke Peter, God's "deputy authority," to his face, then go on to record it in Galatians chapter 2 for all successive generations to read!

If LC teachings need generous tweaking, the non-biblical extensions and inferences attached to them make Movement authority an even more formidable maze to explore. In it we first find the concepts of congregational authority, or local church government (having to do with appointed eldership) and apostolic authority (or, individuals who directly establish churches). These two areas tend toward more scriptural sentiments, although from the standpoint of application the Movement has frequently intensified, modified or dismissed them, depending on the prevailing agenda.

Further complicating matters, we find the idea of an authoritative global oracle, whose extended influence has, in whatever way, led to churches being founded or influenced. In addition, as a recent innovation, there are also individuals called "proper representatives of the Body." These members are aligned with "the ministry of the age" and are "one with the ministry." Then finally, there are coworkers who have not founded anything themselves, nor exercise a particular ministry. They act as middle managers on behalf of Movement headquarters. The crisscross of all these alleged authorities have produced an unwieldy system that Movement leaders insist is "organic."

Separating good concepts from bad is like sorting through alphabet soup. First we must establish what things are not letters at all, but foreign floating objects that have gotten into the bowl. The most obvious of these is the predominance of the Living Stream Ministry, a publishing company staffed by the same people who simultaneously hold places of influence among the Local Churches. Conflict of interest has long been the complaint of unhappy LC members. Is LSM one man's spiritual work, an extension of that man's spiritual authority over all the churches, the general work of God, a source of books and tapes for members, or merely a business entity? Several of these nomenclatures have been trumpeted publicly, others have been denied, but the company has certainly behaved as all of them at different times.

Ministry representatives have advanced a variety of explanations to clarify the confusion. For instance, when pressed for a definition of the relationship between LSM and the Local Churches, one spokesperson explained that it was similar to the association that Microsoft has with its corporate clientele. As the explanation went, companies that use Microsoft products do not report to Microsoft nor are they required to continue using Microsoft products. The

consumer can also elect to receive product training if so desired, but there is no expectation to do so.

It was a clever analogy that worked for the moment, but many LC members know that there is another, darker side of the story. For if the Microsoft analogy were taken as far as the way things really work in the LC Movement, it would not sound so benign. Imagine a company that used Microsoft products deciding not to use them anymore. Further, suppose that in turn, the software giant began calling employees of the consumer company, warning them that the action was irresponsible and then encouraging them to go on strike, even to file legal action against their employers for not using the products any more. That would be a fairer, truer version of how things have worked inside the LC Movement. While churches use ministry products all is well. But when internal disagreements have surfaced and product use threatens to be discontinued, Movement leaders abandon the Microsoft example. Instead, they turn to examples of biblical rebellions and apostasies and begin to warn member churches not to stray from the fold. If this does not work, then religious kangaroo courts (as well as secular ones) are used against the uncooperative.

Regardless of its many slick explanations, all is not well in the local church authority grid.

The Leadership of the Apostle Paul

Surprisingly, church environments that champion life and vision are often greenhouses for authority abuse. Leaders are not likely to have very much accountability because their actions are considered mystical and therefore above the scrutiny of others. As these leaders rest on a bed of teachings about spiritual authority, they may rule by personal whim, act on bad information, dole out rebukes that descend to the level of personal insult, and can

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discipline with such severity as to ruin lives. They are capable of sharp critiques and can quickly assign blame for failure while skillfully dodging any for themselves. In the meantime, subordinates bear it all, intimidated into silence by warped applications of the cross.

Autocratic leadership patterns are further fueled by comparisons of the group's leader to biblical apostles like Paul. Much can be healthily emulated based on Paul's model. However, every leader needs to be aware of the marked differences between his own limited sphere of authority and Paul's particular apostolic authority. No one should quickly cast himself in Paul's shoes. Paul was a special vessel (Acts 9:15) whose writings were directly vested with universal canonical authority and subsequently became the holy scriptures (Rom. 2:16; Gal. 1:8, 11-12; 2 Pet.3:15-16). His revelations were gained through firsthand encounters with the ascended Christ and through journeys to Paradise and the third heaven. The content of his ministry clarified the ending of the previous four thousand years of God's Old Testament dispensation and then described the new. As confirming evidence "God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul" (Acts 19:11). If there were a "minister of the age" Paul would certainly qualify for it. In terms of authoritative revelation, Paul and a few others were the unique "master-builders" who laid the foundation of the faith. All that other Christian leaders and Bible-expositors can do is build upon it. Groups that believe their leader is some kind of transcendent man—"Today's Paul"—are setting themselves up for abuse and possibly massive disillusionment.

Even with legitimate spiritual authority, Paul's apostleship was manifested with principle and discretion. As the direct founder of certain churches, he had intimate knowledge of the people there and the congregational development they had gone through. Though his wish was for them to be self-governing (1

Cor. 4:8), if they slipped into a condition of license, as the Corinthians did, it was not beyond him to threaten coming and setting things straight. If the Corinthians however, had responded by telling him to "Shut up and get lost," (which in essence was what happened in Asia when "all those in Asia have turned away from me"—2 Tim. 1:15), then the hapless Apostle would have very well left them alone. Perhaps he would have appealed to God but he would certainly not have contacted Pauline supporters in the congregation, undermined the local eldership, and fomented a church split. Underhanded activities of that sort would have been an admission that his authority was not divinely backed.

Much has been said in LSM circles about "remembering our source." That is a scriptural principle as it applies to our Creator and to our earthly parents. It is also a matter of human decency when we respect and appreciate those who have brought us to salvation or substantially discipled us. Unfortunately this same principle can easily translate into a system of what has been called "remote control." When out of loyalty the leaders of a church permanently remain its founder's "yes men," then that church is not really a church. It is simply an extension of that man's ministry.

The Apostle Paul moved throughout the ancient world, announcing the gospel. In city after city, he then helped the newly saved to forge a community of fellowship. No doubt many of his Jewish converts were already devout men with extensive exposure to the scriptures. It did not take long for them to mature in the Christian faith. Paul charged some of these more advanced saints with the well-being of the church. Then, he departed into other locales. But for a period of time while he was still there, the authority to deal with local issues must have gravitated around him. This was only normal, since those born through his ministry were babes.

Once the congregation got off the ground, though, there is no biblical data to suggest that Paul interfered with its daily life or ministerial efforts. Nor did he attempt to solicit the sole alignment of any church or group of churches upon himself (He discouraged it—1 Cor. 3, although, at the same time, he dismantled idle speculations that his ministry was substandard and exposed those who were spreading a non-New Covenant message—2 Corinthians).

The only other time Paul's tone becomes corrective or disciplinary towards these little communities was when their very New Testament foundation of righteousness and grace was in danger of being compromised (i.e., 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, and to a broader extent, Hebrews). Otherwise, Pauline addresses to the believers are for general upbuilding and helpful advice (Romans, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians).

Where Paul might have had a certain amount of "founder's rights," they were not transferable to his younger and lesser coworkers. Timothy and Titus and Silas delivered Paul's charges to the saints and taught truth that should have been obeyed, but they did not consider the churches a dominion to be inherited. After the apostle's demise, no contingency plan existed for running Paul's churches because there was no such thing as a Pauline church and no such concept as a succession of heirs running it.

Neither did Paul exercise "stepfather authority" over those he had indirectly helped. His tone, therefore, to the church in Rome (which he apparently did not found) was different than to the Galatians (among whom he had directly worked from the beginning). No doubt the Roman saints felt the weight of apostolic authority in the truth of his writing but did not receive personal censures and warnings of his direct intervention should they fail to act according to the Christian faith. Additionally, although the Apostle

visited churches throughout Judea, (most notably, Jerusalem), there is no record of his writing epistles to any one of them. Paul understood the concept of measured boundaries as inferred through his commitment not to build on another man's foundation—Rom. 15:20, (although he was willing to have others build upon his—1 Cor. 3:10). He lamented the lawless activities of others who did not understand boundaries (2 Cor. 10:12-16), likely because of various Jerusalem missions that seemed to think wherever they went was their personal domain.

Looking at all the biblical data, we can conclude that the apostles did not brandish their authority as gods, making up the rules as they went along.   All of them, as exemplified by Paul, exercised within the realm of propriety, keeping their place as human beings and servants of God's people.

Authority between Workers

Some voices in the LC camp have theorized that the behavior of ministers in the New Testament was flawed. They say that the early church and the workers serving it should have lined up on the Apostle Paul in almost papal submission. Those who didn't, like Apollos, were loose canons, ignorantly carrying out a self-willed agenda. The same reasoning treats Barnabas as a problem also, because he didn't continue with Paul (although Barnabas preceded Paul in the Lord's work and in the faith—facts often overlooked by LSM "deputy authority" proponents). No doubt if all the first century workers had been aligned to Paul, it would have created an ancient Living Stream-like approach, but thankfully, God had other ideas. The pattern we observe in the New Testament is not one of calibration upon a singular man of revelation. The biblical record demonstrates parallel labor between groups of workers who sought their Lord's profit. Aside from twisted understandings

of authority and the agendas that they might serve, there is no need to suggest that the first century atmosphere of toleration and respect was wrong.

Authority Within Particular Works

Though the various New Testament works had no organizational authority presiding over them, we do find leadership authority at their individual cores. Often surrounding Paul or Peter, men of calling, were others who had joined them to carry out their ministry. The person in the nucleus of the work, such as Paul, would direct his coworkers to stay, come, or go. This is reasonable in that he was the leader of his particular enterprise. But these brief narrative examples cannot grant license to a worker to rule over those with him like a feudal lord.

Being involved with a worker was in the first place a matter of free will. Yes, Paul could choose someone to work with him, but the one chosen had to consent to being involved. It was a voluntary association to carry out a spiritual enterprise. There was no "oughtness," no sense of obligation communicated. It is reasonable to assume that a Timothy or a Silas would have found Paul and his mission to be inspiring. No doubt they would have realized the worthiness of his cause and would have received some inward spiritual confirmation to be involved with him. If they were so inclined, they could also leave the work, although as in the case of Mark, if they did so under questionable circumstances, the leader had the right to refuse working with him in the future. Even then, a participant who withdrew was not to be threatened with divine reprisals. Indeed, Workers who stoop to ominous threats toward those who leave them like "you will be finished" have begun to think of themselves as God.

Besides, leaving Paul was not fatal to Mark's spiritual development. Mark went on to work with

Barnabas and then Peter. Much later, even Paul had to admit that he was useful (2 Tim. 4:11). We are only "finished" with the Lord's work if we leave the Lord Jesus, the Apostle of our confession.

Local Authority

Years ago a new sister discovered the church in Columbus. After a few meetings she called relatives and told them, "This is so exciting! No one is in charge here!" Apparently her strange enthusiasm was fueled by bad past experiences of leaders who had smothered her. The informal atmosphere of our meetings meant to her that there were no dictators running around. Shortly after she came, a contrasting situation occurred. A new couple attended one of our meetings and afterward disdainfully announced that they wouldn't be coming back. When asked why, they said, "No one is in charge here!" Unlike the former lady, they did not appreciate the idea of a cluster of people who just happened to be moving in the same spiritual direction. An environment of that kind was to them like a powder keg just waiting to explode. The people in both cases had personal concepts about how authority ought to look and behave in the church—that it should either be absentee or in your face.

Some have attempted to circumvent extremes that develop around authority by adopting leaderless church models. They do so under the impression that even the appearance of someone being in charge should be avoided. Only the Holy Spirit, it is thought, has any direct legitimate charge of meetings or matters in the church. But when Paul gave instructions to the Corinthians on how to conduct a Christian meeting, he did not recommend just following the Spirit. We find instructions and a call to order that responsible parties were to keep (1 Cor. 14). Due to shortages in maturity and their spiritual understanding, many of the

Corinthian saints were not fruitfully self-governing in meetings. Therefore, Paul provided guidelines to be implemented by those who were.

In another area and under another set of circumstances, we find Paul telling Titus to "Set in order the things that are lacking" among the churches in Crete. Handling the problem was practical and administrative in nature—to "appoint elders in every city" (Titus 1:5). Without mature oversight in the churches, a definite lack had emerged. Weird strains of doctrine were spreading through the assemblies. Out from under the gaze of responsible leadership, every mouth was becoming an authority unto itself. The churches of Crete were in danger of collapsing into a religious free-for-all.

I recently spoke to a young man who had been part of a leaderless group. His first observation about it was the skewed standard of teaching found there. Key biblical doctrines were habitually demoted to the level of optional belief. Alternately, strange experiences and opinions were elevated to the rank of "truth." Since everyone, even the unclear and fleshly among them carried an equal "Aye" or "Nay," there could be no such thing as consistent healthy teaching, much less correction. As a result, the only people attracted to the group were extremely dysfunctional sorts. The man telling me the story had to resign himself to the fact that the group would never grow larger than a living room. He was correct. In fact, it finally collapsed under the weight of its own peculiarities.

Leaderless models sound attractive to those who have been victimized by untrained leaders or squelched by inflexible programs. It may seem that the answer to bad leadership is to abolish leadership altogether. But it only seems so. Actually, the way to remedy bad leadership is to establish good leadership. And good leadership is never missing from any cohesive, healthy, growing group of Christians.

In saying this, I am fully aware that the LC Movement has had its fair share of folks who tried to grab places of prominence in member congregations. These negative experiences have led to endlessly recycled warnings from Movement headquarters about the evils of ambition. Without context or qualification though, ambition-bashing tends to sound like a mindless recommendation to bury one's talent. Followed absolutely, it is the perfect recipe for becoming a Christian couch potato. None of the current LSM leadership, nor its founder, Witness Lee are (or were) men bereft of ambition or opinion. For them to claim otherwise is absurd. If a ministry spreads and gains a following of churches, yet its founder claims not to have opinions or ambitions, then that simply means he doesn't know the definition of the words "opinion" or "ambition." It is like asking a person why he has a gun, when he has taught everyone else not to have one. Then he says, "Oh, that isn't a gun, it's an assemblage of metal parts with a rotating cylinder, a trigger, and a firing pin that discharges a projectile." Naïve listeners buy the fancy talk. The rest of us say, "Yeah. It's a gun."

Ambition is not necessarily evil. The Apostle Paul commended the aspiration to oversight (1 Tim 3:1). He did not consider the desire to care for the welfare of the saints as being synonymous with the sinful craving for prominence (c.f. Matt. 20:25-27). Yes, there have been individuals who used Local Churches as their personal kingdom. Leadership for them meant the spotlight they had lusted after for so long or the place of affirmation that they couldn't find anywhere else in life. Some of these people rose to local prominence simply through their allegiance to Ministry Headquarters. I do not count these men as real leaders. They are hirelings. The early church would have found such characters intolerable. Even yes-men for the Apostle Paul were

scorned...by no less than the Apostle himself! (1 Cor. 1:13).

Authentic elders are servants and shepherds who care for the flock of God with their own personal ministries of feeding and truth. They would certainly never place the interests of a global activity ahead of the saints' well being. In fact, the loyalty of a local leader to the local church ought to be such that he would die for them if need be, as the Lord said, "The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep" (John 10:11).

When a local administration is composed of cheerleaders, salesmen, and public relations personnel for some ministerial activity, issues are certain to arise. For instance, who is really leading the church? I'm reminded of a woman in our meeting who stood up and gave a testimony applauding the idea of "deputy authority." A month later church leaders here disciplined her Living Stream Ministry cell group and she responded by helping the group to sue those same leaders.

At first I found the entire matter puzzling. How could someone say one thing so strongly and then turn 180 degrees away from her supposed belief the next? Gradually I realized that when she was talking about deputy authority it meant Living Stream Ministry executives or those endorsed by them. It was personality and organization based, having nothing to do with real spiritual authority or true local administration. In other Local churches she had seen a model of elders and responsible brothers who had acted as middlemen for LSM; she assumed that it would be the same in Columbus. However, we were trying to learn and practice real local eldership in this city. It wasn't long before expectations and reality collided.

In spite of the LC Movement's failures in implementing good leadership, strong local leaders are still a requisite for strong congregations. This should certainly not mean that the congregation ought to be

treated like a dumb flock that must be told every move to make. It is very common throughout the New Testament for the Apostles to address the entire church, not just the few men who comprise its leadership. Only in a distinct minority of church letters were the elders specified as a group. This truth ought to affect the way leaders approach their duties. Since they themselves are part of the flock, they would be extremely unwise not to listen and learn from the rest of the community before they decide upon courses of action. Neither, however, should this be confused with mere democratic processes. The weight of spiritually mature leaders cannot be ignored, or else the church will end up being substantially led by those whose primary loyalties and interests do not lie with Christ. Under those circumstances, the leading of the flock could degrade into the will of a mixed majority.

The Necessity of Appointment

The Bible tells us that every child of God has some level of authority, however miniscule it may be (John 1:12). Those who have grown more have a greater measure (as in a family). Ideally, believers ought to pay attention to those possessing advanced maturity in the congregation and respect them. But the church will find it difficult to determine who has the most maturity if its only tool of measurement is subjective.

Everyone has a preferential concept about what real spirituality and maturity looks like. Some, clouded with bias, habitually overlook red flags. I once heard a sister promoting another woman as being "the most spiritual person" she had ever known. Yet the woman that was supposedly so spiritual had interfered with marriages in several churches and caused a number of divorces. Far from repenting, she had continued her path of destruction in other places. Admirers were willing to overlook the signs of obvious sinful behavior

in favor of her attractive charisma. In another case, several young men came forward and accused an esteemed "spiritual man" of molesting them. Through what appears to have been an in-house cover up, the allegations remain unsettled until this day. The man continues as an influential figure in the church because his personal swagger and an ability to "talk the talk" have a charming effect on the other members. Unfortunately, religious flair seems to hypnotize common folk and draw their attention away from serious warning signs.

Because of the human propensity to overlook gross spiritual immaturity, a formal identification of leaders is needed from a more advanced source. These ought to come from the church founder, planter (or, if you wish, apostle), and other leaders within the congregation, if some already exist. But where spiritual authority should not be confirmed according to the subjective preferences of church members, neither is it by the individual preferences of those making the appointment. No apostle or worker should appoint an elder based on the strength of personal loyalties ("this guy always does what I say") or some organizational loyalty ("this guy attends all the conferences and trainings").

According to the Bible, appointments to eldership ought to be determined by a particular collection of character traits. Between the passages in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus chapter 1, most of these are soundly human, as they deal with family life, reputations in the community, addictions, attitudes toward money, personal bearing, and methods of communicating with other people. Among these we find no requirements to see "high peaks of divine truth," the uniqueness of the Lord's Recovery, church forms and practices or any other specialized doctrines. However, it is a necessary quality that an elder has the highest commitment to the Christian faith, that they can teach it and if necessary,

to correct others. In addition, these men must willingly serve and shepherd the flock (1 Pet. 5:2). A congregation will find it difficult to thrive if its leaders are constantly fantasizing about how to escape and go somewhere else. Neither will any flock be blessed if the leaders see it as something to be fleeced. Hence the warning against a desire to lead "for dishonest gain" (1 Pet. 5:2b).

Without leadership shaped by the above biblically described qualities, what does a person have with which to lead others? He could appeal to the fact that someone else put him in charge ("So-and-so said"), or to seniority ("I've been in the church life longer than you"). Worse still, are personality factors, where someone is louder and stronger-willed than others or material factors, such as someone having more money than everyone else. If such criterion comes to define who the leaders are, it will only be so long before such men are exposed as being inadequate for the job. For a depth of personal spirituality and character is always required in the crucible of Christian leadership. There are no substitutes.

Once candidates for the eldership have been recognized, specific appointments can be made among them and thus a formal recognition before the entire congregation. Naturally, neither appointment letters nor the laying on of hands can bestow spiritual authority. Men can identify, confirm, and point out authority but they themselves can never give it.   That remains the inviolable business of the Holy Spirit.

Dealing With the Tough Stuff

A long time ago I promised myself that if I ever had the opportunity to lead, I would be different. I was determined to be one of those enlightened men who would never acknowledge being a leader ("I'm just a brother"), never tell people things they didn't want to

hear ("We are under grace, not law"), and would never allow others to look to me for help ("Only Jesus"). Additionally, I would avoid being disliked by never holding anyone accountable for anything. In other words, I was planning to be a leader who wouldn't lead! Therefore, my approach to difficult situations in the church was to either ignore them or tell the Lord to deal with them.

I was under the influence that the whole idea of authority was something suspicious, if not dirty. Leadership reeked of a neurotic obsession with controlling others, replacing Christ, and quenching those who were truly led by the Spirit. Operating under that concept tended to make my leadership style apologetic and a bit nervous. I always worried that someone might think I was trying to be some kind of Pope.

While the church cruised in maintenance mode for a few years, a hands-off, do-whatever-you-want leadership style seemed to work fine. However, a pro-LSM undercurrent slowly began to gain momentum in Columbus, generating partisan tactics and attitudes. It became clear that without strong local leadership the church would be in serious trouble. Regardless of warning signals from the elders, another congregation was beginning to form within the assembly—"a church within a church"—having a separate direction, different values, another administration, and an intention to recruit. One thing we had learned repeatedly was that LSM diehards do not respond to tenderness. They treat brotherly warmth and other virtues as weaknesses to exploit. It had come time for us to administer tough love. No elder really wanted a confrontation but through it, the church was substantially preserved.

The leadership experience for me finally became complete when I was not only loved for being a leader but hated for being one as well. This triggered a cycle of wrestling that included self-blame, second-guessing,

sadness and at long last personal vindication in the Lord's presence. The entire experience made one thing crystal clear: if the church were ever to go anywhere in terms of growth and health, the leadership of godly men would be absolutely necessary. And some of that would unavoidably involve issues of discipline.

Positive, godly people in the church are usually not aware of "the elders." They just see helpful, friendly guys named Bill or John or Mike, men who are just like everyone else. But let certain things start to happen and all of a sudden "the elders" begin to appear. In the same way, while you're a law-abiding citizen, authorities like the police are a welcome sight—the more the better. But if you break the speed limit, put a piece of chewing gum in your pocket without paying for it, or just double park, those same authorities will now, according to Romans 13, become something of a terror to you. Authority will suddenly emerge with flashing lights.

The question is what behavior in the church justifiably provokes such unpleasant emergency responses. One Local Church reported that the saints were not purchasing enough of LSM's Holy Word for Morning Revival. One of the elders pounded on a table and lambasted those who dared to read other materials. When the intimidated saints once again purchased the appropriate quota of Ministry books, local leaders triumphantly reported that the "storm" in that church had subsided. This and many other ridiculous misuses of authority have occurred in LC settings, exposing the fact that "company men" have wormed their way into local leadership.

The Bible does present legitimate situations that call for authoritative measures. Even in these however, the elders are not to be Gestapo agents, lurking around the church and sniffing out those who might have made mistakes. Should any leader get into such a mode, he may find himself challenged by the Lord. "He who is

without sin, let him throw a stone first" and "What measure you measure shall be measured to you" and "He who judges without mercy shall be judged without mercy" are just a few reminders for any would-be crusader of righteousness.   Besides, it must be remembered that discipline is for the purpose of "gaining your brother."   Where wrongdoing has occurred, we all should hope for a positive repentance-based ending.

One of the areas of necessary dealing in church situations has to do with licentious living, especially sexual immorality. It is preferable, if possible to cover and restore implicated persons, as exemplified by 1 Peter 4:8 and Galatians 6:1 (I am not extending this to include criminal acts like rape or child molestation). The problem is that in the interim, if the immoral behavior becomes generally known and tolerated among the believers, their resistance level to it may go down. Let a string of these events occur that receive no correction and the moral standard of the church could very well disintegrate. This is especially so in the case of leaders who sin. People tend to emulate what they see their leaders doing. Because of their influence on the congregation then, the tolerance corridor should narrow considerably (1 Tim. 5:19-20).

Consider the case of the man who fell into fornication with his stepmother in Corinth. Paul rebuked the believers there, saying, "It is actually reported that there is fornication among you, and such fornication that does not even occur among the gentiles, that someone has his stepmother. And you are puffed up? And have you not rather mourned that the one who has done this deed might be removed from your midst?" (1 Cor. 5:1-2). The implications in these verses are that the sinful behavior had already become something of a norm to the congregation. The believers were puffed up, proud of it, over it rather than sorrowful.

We also know from Paul's word that the immoral liaison had become a report reaching beyond the confines of the church—"It is actually reported that there is fornication among you." If the congregation is too soft on sins such as these, then news of it will eventually land outside church circles. Perhaps it will even become known in the non-Christian community. Once that happens, our testimony could be severely damaged. If the church can no longer offer light or salt to a lost world, there is no further need for it to exist.

Another issue that must invite negative attention from the church and its leaders is heresy. If someone tries to introduce a teaching that contradicts the core Christian faith or even attempts to tweak it, the elders will naturally be a problem to that person. After all, one of their chief qualifications is the fact that they, like deacons, should hold the faith with a pure conscience (1 Tim. 3:9) and should "by sound doctrine, both…exhort and convict those who contradict" (Titus 1:9). Since the elders of the church guard its foundational truth, they provide a critical line of defense. Recall the psalmist's question: "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Psalms 11:3). Indeed, if "another Jesus, another Spirit, and another gospel" (2 Cor. 11:4) make inroads into the church the reason for its existence disappears. We cease to be "the pillar and base of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). When that happens, any substantial difference between the church and the Elks Club is effectively erased.

Division is a further matter that requires authoritative dealing. The Apostles charged the local elders with oversight of the flock of God (Acts 20:28, 1 Pet. 5:2), but sometimes counter directions within it threaten to tear the flock to pieces. This is especially confusing to the saints, since the people who are causing the problem are usually armed with very strong convictions and their words are "smooth and flattering"

(Rom. 16:17). Divisive folks are typically energized with a zeal that befuddles the onlooker. Even if these trouble-makers had been somewhat dormant for years, once they find a point of religious contention they suddenly seem to experience five times the Christian life that they used to have. This includes visiting other members (in order to gain them for their side), sharing their beliefs (not the gospel, just disagreements), and "caring" for those on the periphery of the church (these are usually the weakest and easiest to influence).

During such times, the immature on all sides will do things to destroy the basic coherence of the church. Some will add to an emotionally charged atmosphere with negative actions and words. Others will feign a neutral position, even though the situation demands a clear commitment. Others will disdain the entire affair, walking away from the church because "the whole mess isn't spiritual." Still others will play politics, being a friend to all since they are not able to bear the disapproval of folks on any side.

None of those reacting in such ways are capable of anchoring a congregation as it is tossed in a storm. Neither can they provide navigation into safer waters. It takes real spirituality and maturity of character to stabilize congregational upsets. In the face of division those who are immature will fully prove their lack of growth and sometimes even basic human decency. However, it works the opposite way for others. As Paul said, "There must also be factions among you that those who are approved may be recognized among you" (1 Cor. 11:19). The only real thing that division will expose in true authority is a certain depth of approval. The harder the tests, the brighter it shines.

Offenses between the saints may require still another point of entry from the elders. Though believers ought to reconcile their own differences, occasionally a case escalates beyond reconciliation. These must be taken to the church for a final arbitration in the matter

(Matt. 18:17). The elders are not specified here as the judicial entity to deal with the problem (as they were not in the case of the Corinthian brother, either). It is, however, reasonable to expect that as mature members, they would play a considerable part in dealing with the unrepentant sinning brother. When that was not the case, the Apostle Paul saw it as a reason for lament. Concerning offenses that had spiraled out of control among the saints, he said to the Corinthians, "I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren?" (1 Cor. 6:5). This could easily have been a rebuke to idle, retreating leaders. Then Paul says to the individuals locked in the personal struggle, "Why do you not rather accept wrong?" (1 Cor. 6:7). This very well could have addressed those who rejected the refereeing of elders in the church.

Either way, let enough relationships in the church get spoiled due to unresolved offenses and the pleasant atmosphere of fellowship will unravel. The elders, representing the whole congregation, should, if necessary, weigh in on offenses between the members. Holding believers accountable for their sinful conduct toward each other will preserve the overall harmony of the church.

So when Paul charges the saints to "obey those leading you" (Heb. 13:17) it isn't to gratify their ego. All too often it's a matter of life or death, with the existence of the very church itself hanging in the balance. Granted, due to our checkered past, in many cases discipline was not meted out for legitimate reasons and even when called for, it wasn't done in a godly, restorative manner. However, where it really was properly executed, I still witnessed among those being dealt with, the human tendency toward anger, denial, and refusal. Too often this has triggered a crusade to overturn congregational authority by using biblical data of some sort.

Offended parties start conducting extravagant word studies to reinterpret terms like "elder" and "overseer," "lead," "rule," and "shepherd." They correctly note that there are no church elders mentioned in Revelation chapters two and three without of course considering the many passages that explicitly describe them. The related topics of obedience and submission receive such fine splicing that the person conducting the study neither learns to submit or obey. I am definitely in favor of researching the Word, but when the guiding bent is to somehow prove that "I don't have to listen to anyone except Jesus" then the outcome will probably be a person who listens to no one, including Jesus. Novel experiments that empower the autonomous individual in such a way might work in a group of ten, but not in a church of hundreds.

The efforts of godly leaders will always be needed. This is especially true as long as there is a potential for friction between members and where new people trickle in all the time who harbor serious problems or strange teachings.

The elders cannot legally enforce obedience. Instead it is hoped that their maturity, godly example and commitment would provide a compelling reason for the saints to offer them some degree of voluntary deference. At the very least church members should respect the Holy Spirit's placement of elders, especially where others have confirmed it. Beyond that, if a saint just can't be at peace with church leadership, then remaining in the congregation will almost certainly become a destructive force.

There are a few possible courses of action for those who find themselves at odds with their leaders (Assuming that the troubled individual does not have a legitimate accusation against a specific leader, which would require resolution). One possibility for a dissatisfied saint is to simply stay and learn before the Lord. Perhaps leaving is unnecessary. Resolution can

be found in smaller measures. Besides, there might be elements in his personality that need illumination and must be worked through. But where all else fails, it may be necessary for the ill-affected believer to find a Christian community where he can be at peace. This needn't involve excommunication. At a certain point, joining another congregation might be mutually agreed upon as the best thing to do. A time or two over the years I have been part of such an arrangement and have even offered to help stricken saints find a more fitting place to meet. If done in a proper spirit, believers can be preserved without the false stigma of having "left the church life" (for comments on my view of "local church ground," please review chapter 5).

Occasionally, some troubled soul refuses any type of exhortation or repentance and adopts the notion that he must stay in a church no matter what. Where the former cases of folks leaving were a bit disappointing, these predicaments are usually nightmarish. Now negative people decide to entrench themselves in the assembly with agendas to "save" the church or to prove something to everyone else. For trouble, multiply by a factor of ten if it is a group. Thankfully, these situations are rare. When they do occur, expect that bizarre things may end up happening that involve public confrontations and possibly even the police (Did I say already that elders need a depth of spiritual maturity and developed character?).

Elders, Not Dinosaurs

In the aftermath of our separation from LC Movement headquarters, the church in Columbus found itself in a new world. Having sailed over the horizon, we discovered challenges outside our previous bubble. These could not be answered by blindly piggybacking anyone's ministry. Real life recognized no "Brother Lee said" trump card. Answers of finality

would have to come from the Bible, prayer, and careful consideration, with the elders spearheading the effort to arrive at clarity. This made the leadership's role something much more than keeping the church from falling apart. The elders had to begin acting as an advance scout force whose eyes and ears were attuned to upcoming opportunities for the saints.

Today our hurdles are not those of the peculiar sect of which we were a part. Now we find ourselves in a complex global village that is largely ignorant of the Christian faith. For many years we had existed merely to preserve a bundle of specialized teachings and a particular church form. Needless to say, these had absolutely nothing to do with the concerns and issues of the perishing community around us. The universal church of the Lord Jesus had (and has) much larger fish to fry than whether Titus Chu had his own ministry or identifying who was not attending the "seven feasts." The pervasive influences of Post Modernist thinking, religious pluralism, and the current wandering generation of millennial youth are just some of the cultural products developed while we were behind closed doors trying to be the Lord's Recovery.

As Local Churches emigrate from Movement circles into the light of day, they will need to face issues of relevance. How should the church sensitively minister within our current culture yet maintain biblical fidelity? Church leaders will need to set the pace in learning how to do it. Against today's modern canvas the old image of the LC elder with a book bag in one hand and a Holy Word for Morning Revival in the other will look like a dinosaur. If he is not careful, his only response to today's issues will be to widen the moat, raise the drawbridge, and thicken the walls around his church.

The nature of real leadership is flexible, ongoing and adaptive, always hunting for fresh insight and applications. That is why leadership books and

seminars continually flood the market. It seems that mastering human transactions within systems is a pursuit that can never be exhausted. Church leadership is no different. Forward thinking elders will realize that the biblical requirements for eldership affect numerous related sub-qualities and approaches like tact, honesty, fair treatment, encouragement and respect; delegating responsibility, empowering others and developing protegees; vision development and execution. I realize that the semantics I've employed may sound a bit too corporate-America for your taste. But remember that some leadership principles (however you word them) universally apply wherever human beings assemble to carry out a mission. Common sense, teamwork ethic, foresight, excellence, and initiative are words that might not appear in a Bible lexicon, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't appear in the church.

Some leadership principles are unspoken necessities both inside and outside Christian congregations. Although they might be accumulated by default through long years of experience, the vast majority of them need to be sought out and perfected. We can never get too much help in these areas. Those who oversee the church need to understand that the saints are God's most valued possession. Aspiring to become more effective in serving them is a worthwhile enterprise. For those with a Solomonic heart to wisely deal with the Lord's people, books, seminars and local fellowship groups can offer extra help. After all, other leaders have obtained wisdom from God and are willing to share it.

As to spiritual discernment in leadership, today's elders will no longer look to remote locations for direction. They will pay a premium of attention to what is happening in their spirit and in that of the local saints. The combination of those two, like interwoven strands in a rope, will produce direction in the congregation.

The elders are not the "lords" of the church. Instead, they watch over what belongs to the Lord. This specifically refers not only to the believers themselves, but also to the portions He has delivered to them, their development, and how they might work together for service. This requires a keen eye and an ability to visualize possibilities, something to which LC church leaders in the past paid very little attention. For in an insatiable quest to gather members around Witness Lee's ministry, there was no heart to see new ministries emerge from within the average saints. This attitude has stymied the growth of the Local Churches and fueled suspicions that the Movement as a whole is a cult. If there is any hope of salvage for the group at large, it is not in the appearance of a new global oracle, or a Brother "We" composed of a few close followers of that oracle. No, the hope of the church lies within the church itself—local believers who are helped to powerfully grow into particular functions. And the elders who are there ought to take steps to ensure that the saints become all the Lord intended for them to be. They should not passively allow believers under their care to be kidnapped from a practical church setting into ivory tower ministry echelons, where real growth will be stunted. At times in the past, I observed brothers who had been growing here in Columbus transplanted into the foreign soil of "serving the ministry." All of them returned to our church ruined by superior attitudes, disdain for the local situation, and an almost idolatrous loyalty to the book publishing company that professed to train them. I have two words to say about this: Never again. As a real New Testament elder, either I will train those with me, or at the very least will carefully research and provide honest critique about those who would.

Properly understood and applied, spiritual authority is a blessing. In fact, a consensus of onlookers would agree that without its manifest presence in a

group there will probably not be direction, discipline, protection, healthy limitation, legitimacy to outsiders, group commitment, spiritual food, or foresight. In other words, the communal setting will not be supportive for a prospering Christian life.

Yes, I have certainly seen church government go awry. Some leaders became tyrants. Some members become man-followers. How can the elder system of church management (or any other) be made abuse-proof? There is no way. A system of church government only works inasmuch as those in it are spiritual, virtuous, and committed to the local congregation. Church governments of every kind have failed, not because the structural arrangement was wrong, but because the men were wrong. That's why scripture pays more attention to what a leader is, rather than to the system in which he operates. Some pastoral forms of administration, which the LC Movement soundly condemns, have done remarkably well at discipling people and causing congregational growth. Again, this is not because the system itself is right, but because the men involved in it are right.

A flawless church government is perhaps something of an illusion. The danger in pursuing it is that we might get stuck on a treadmill of idealism and never enter the business of the present—the church's mission to the world. So, until "that which is perfect comes," we must limp along, doing our best for those with us. This means avoiding extremes like developing abusive fiefdoms or on the other hand, backing off our duties until the eldership becomes a feeble rubberstamping entity. It means as much as possible, equally embracing all the scriptural mandates for those who lead or for those who are led. I admit that perfect balance will probably not come, but perhaps at least a wobbly forward momentum and the gracious blessings that attend it.