

Authority

Some Thoughts for the Maranatha Community

The Nature of Authority

The commonly agreed definition of authority is delegated or derived power. It invariably implies the right to command or give an ultimate decision. The Greek word *Exousia*, used frequently in the New Testament, is used to define the right to exercise power.

The purpose of authority is often deemed to be the creation and maintenance of order, which in turn, defines responsibilities and rights.

Human and Divine Authority

Worldly authority is usually based upon some form of law supported by the ultimate sanction of force and punishment. In the Gospels reference is made to the authority of the governor (Lk 20.20) and to the authority of Herod (Lk. 23.7) and Pilate specifically challenged Jesus with the words, *“Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you”* (Jn. 19.10). Thus the human authority of Pilate directly confronted the divine authority of Jesus. The response of Jesus was, *“You would have no authority except if it were given you from above”* (Jn 19.11). The divine and human authority of Jesus was readily recognised by those around Him.

The authority of Jesus was revealed in His miracles. It was seen when He stilled the storm and healed the sick. When He taught, He spoke as one *“with authority”* (Matt 7.29). His exercise of power was endorsed by His personal claim: *“All authority has been given to me”* (Matt. 28.18). He claimed the authority to forgive sins (Mk 2.10). He claimed authority to cast out demons (Lk 4.36).

The title Lord Jesus Christ carries authority. “Lord” denotes sovereign power. “Jesus Christ” denotes Messiah – God’s anointed one. There is indeed power in the name of Jesus. At His name demons fear and fly and in His name the mountain can be moved.

The teaching, knowledge and wisdom of Jesus were rooted in His authority. Underscoring this, He made constant reference to the Prophets and the Law.

The Servant King

Jesus is a King with a royal role giving Him authority over all others. The Prophets foretold the coming of the King. Isaiah in the great “suffering servant poems” heralded the serving and suffering nature of the Messiah king. Unlike earthly rulers, Jesus was a servant king. He said, *“I am among you as one who serves”* (Lk 22.27). He *“...made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant”* (Phil 2.7). Jesus came in humility and lowliness. Born in a stable, He went to town on a donkey, washed His disciples’ feet, mixed with the poor, prostitutes and sinners, and died the death of a criminal on a Cross between two thieves.

Jesus fully recognised the nature of His ministry. He said, *“I am meek and lowly”* (Matt 11.29). He said the meek would inherit the earth. He called His followers to become as little children. His followers urged the Early Christians, *“Be completely humble”* (Eph 4.2), *“Show all meekness to all men”* (Tit 7.2), and *“Gird yourself with humility”* (1 Peter 5.9).

Jesus sought no position of authority in the world. His authority is in the Kingdom of God. He came to bring the Kingdom of God into the world not by lording it over people but by making himself equal with the lowest and poorest in society. He was born to a simple young woman, raised by poor parents, worked for a living and owned very little. When asked by his disciples, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” he answered, *“...whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”* (Matt 18.1-4).

Jesus chose the most unlikely men to be His disciples and dealt fiercely with them when they debated between themselves as to who was the greatest. Paul said, *“God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world... so that no one may boast before Him”* (1 Cor 1.27-29).

Authority is exercised in the Maranatha Community solely in the context of our being a servant community which seeks no worldly status or authority.

Discipline

The Christian concept of discipline embraces the breadth of the Latin word “*disciplina*”. This signifies the complete range of nurturing, instructional and training procedures that are required for disciple-making. Jesus himself instituted Christian discipline. The exercise of discipline in the Early Church was consistently in the context of the authority given by God. They were told, “*All of you clothe yourselves with humility towards one another*” (1 Peter 5.5) and “*Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you*” (Rom. 12.3), “*Rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice...*” (Col. 3.8), and “*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*” (Eph. 4.3). Members of the Churches were warned of quarrelling over words – “*It is of no value and only harms those who listen*” (2 Tim. 2.14).

Church discipline was based upon a clear framework of human relationships (righteousness) – “*As people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you are called to peace and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly... Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him*” (Col. 3.12-17).

Leadership in the Early Church was spelt out clearly – “*Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care*” (1 Peter 5.2). Leaders were urged, “*Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction*” (2 Tim. 4.2).

In the Maranatha Community we have endeavoured to exercise authority and servant leadership with love and to “*live in harmony with one another*” (Rom. 12.16).

Foundations of Leadership

Leadership of Christian movements including Maranatha should invariably be rooted in the following foundations:

Firstly, it should be based on the integrity and the authority of Scripture. Basic textual teaching should be affirmed with a particular emphasis upon what are agreed to be the non-negotiable truths of the Christian faith.

Secondly, it should be based on the authority of ecclesial foundations and traditional credal statements. The central and universal truths and practices of the Church across the centuries and in all the traditions should be affirmed and upheld.

Thirdly, it should be based upon and motivated by the love and truth of the Holy Spirit, who gives power and love to God’s people.

The Four-fold Ministry

The four-fold ministry is clearly laid down in the Epistles and is a model for all Christian movements, including Maranatha. It carries with it the authority of the Holy Spirit. It is recognised, accepted and affirmed by God’s people.

The one with *apostolic* calling and anointing should lead with integrity, confidence and authority. The one with a *prophetic* calling should proclaim God’s word with clarity and urgency. The one who is called to be an *evangelist* should preach the Gospel with immediacy and simplicity, calling individual men and women to the Lord. The one who is called to *teaching and pastoral oversight* should exercise the qualities of a loving and strong shepherd.

These ministries are invariably identified within the body of the church and, after appropriate recognition and training, should be encouraged and affirmed. The process made clear to Maranatha is one of identification, encouragement, anointing and appointing.

Respect for Authority

In the world where there is no authority we inevitably see disorder, disintegration and, ultimately, chaos and anarchy. In our own society we are seeing the social consequences of the erosion of respect for authority, eg the authority of parents, the elderly, teachers, the police, magistrates and judges.

If the Church itself fails to speak with authority about the absolute truths of the Gospel, there will be dire consequences. Already in our nation we are seeing signs of serious doubt and confusion about the fundamentals of the Christian faith. All too often the voice of the church is discordant or even silent – “*If the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?*” (1 Cor 14.8).

In the world, if authority is imposed dictatorially on unwilling people, there is inevitably resentment, resistance and strife. In the Church, if authority is exercised lovingly and openly, we see unity and the advancement of the Kingdom.

Our Calling

Jesus makes it clear that we are to make a choice – to follow him or the ways of the world. Christians today are called to an essentially counter-cultural position. The way of Jesus conflicts fundamentally with the way of the world. We are clearly instructed, *“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”* (Rom 12.2).

The characteristic of the Early Church was the proclamation of the Lordship of Christ. To do this inevitably brought trouble because it was a crime to claim that anyone other than Caesar was Lord. The biggest issue facing Christians today is our readiness to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and the one and only Saviour of the world. If we cannot say this we have no message for the world, and one of the key roles of Maranatha is to proclaim the Lordship of Jesus. In all the centuries men have claimed a higher authority than God. The celebrity culture, which we are currently creating, is the antithesis of the way of Jesus. It should be a warning to all Christians.

Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do you say I am?” It was following Peter’s declaration that Jesus is the Messiah that Jesus gave him authority in the Church. In order to exercise authority we must first submit to authority.

Integrity of Community

Any Christian community or movement should constantly endeavour to model itself on Jesus. We endeavour to embrace simplicity and humility, and are called to be “little brothers and sisters of Jesus”, experiencing and revealing His love. In the measure that we do this, we receive authority from God in our ministry of healing, unity and renewal.

In our Community there has always been a shared responsibility in our awareness that we are all functioning members of the one Body of Christ, and subject to His ultimate guidance, leadership and authority. We experience the gentle but firm exercise of authority as members of the one family, and sheep within the one flock. Led by the Spirit, we have walked together without any hierarchical structure and free from oppressive constitutional and institutional restraints. Our unity has been achieved primarily through praying together in love until we are of one heart and mind. It is through this unity that the authority of Christ is manifest.

Harmony, Authority and Discipline

A form of servant ministry in Maranatha has emerged over the years. This has been based upon a very high degree of sharing and openness, always undergirded with continual prayer.

The form of servant leadership which has developed has been sensitive to the dangers of emphasising personality and also the risks of power-seeking. In many respects authority in Maranatha has been exercised collegially. Because of the immense degree of faith, love and hope invested in the Community, there has been an inter-weaving of security and unity and the development of an integration between prayer and action.

Spiritual Warfare

In past years we have been protected from extreme spiritual attack. Because of the nature of Maranatha and its high calling, we are inevitably confronted with demonic powers, which in the Epistles are often referred to as *“authorities”, “thrones”, “dominions”* and *“principalities”*. Evil and destructive forces are undoubtedly at work. The devil hates the Church, including Maranatha. As Christians we believe Christ has the authority over the *“rulers of this age”*. Christ, who is at God’s right hand, is *“far above every ruler and authority and power and lordship”* (Eph 1.21). No matter how fierce the battle, Christ has the victory. This is our hope and confidence.

There is, however, a real danger that we may underestimate the nature of spiritual warfare. One of the most familiar methods of the adversary is to challenge authority and undermine leadership, casting doubts upon its integrity. This is not to say Christian leadership is above criticism, but it is to emphasise the reality and seriousness of spiritual attack, which aims to discourage, divide, weaken and destroy. Conversely, Satan also tempts individuals to lay claim to wrongful authority and power.

The chief tool of Satan is to cause division within the Body of Christ by attacking relationships. We must constantly affirm that, *“...our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”* (Eph 6.12). We must continue to pray constantly for protection under the blood of Christ and wear the full armour of God at all times.

At this crucial time in the life of the Maranatha Community we face enormous and unparalleled opportunities, but at the same time we are extremely vulnerable to spiritual attack.

By its very nature Maranatha is involved in spiritual warfare. Paul gives us clear guidance: *“For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ”* (2 Cor 10.3-5).

Leadership and Direction

Leadership of any Christian movement, including Maranatha, carries a very high degree of responsibility.

Individual and corporate authority has to be exercised with great discretion, great patience, confidence, and above all, with loving care. There must be a continuing awareness that authority is given by God and not by man. The responsibility of leadership is to give direction – to point the way forward. It must affirm absolute truths with strength and without compromise. Maranatha was told many years ago that we were called to walk a tightrope. To maintain balance in our walk we would have to fix our gaze directly upon Jesus.

To be obedient to God there must be ongoing humility, consistency and the practice of the reconciling love of Christ. There can be no drifting, indecision, compromise or prevarication. Leadership and authority should be responsive, respectful and understanding and must never be ruthlessly imposed. The sole concern of the exercise of authority and leadership should be our desire for God's will to be done at all times and in all places. Our model for leadership must be Christ Himself.

The Leader

Leadership can be very lonely. Therefore it should be upheld in prayer by those who share the vision. Jesus Himself experienced the loneliness of the desert. Every Christian leader experiences loneliness. Jesus was tempted and offered false authority. Christian leaders are also subject to this kind of attack.

The challenge to the authority of Jesus was seen when the Jewish authorities condemned Him to death for blasphemy and handed him over to Pilate, attempting to have Him put to death for political sedition. To understand the nature of the authority of Christ we need to see Him as Prophet, Priest and King. Each of these roles carries a specific authority. Significantly, it is the authority of Jesus which is increasingly denied today.

Maranatha is a pilgrimage in which there is a need for continuity of leadership, and there is a heavy responsibility on the Community to ensure that this happens. There is also a need for continuous and prayerful consideration of the balance of responsibility and accountability in the Community. The current leader refers to the appropriate group or individual in the Community to which he has direct access. He also refers to external leaders who carry authority outside the Community.

In Maranatha we recognise that all spiritual authority is given by God. It is given for a period and it is given for a specific purpose or task. Christ gave His followers specific authority, eg to cure the sick, cast out demons and announce the Kingdom. He said, *“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”* (Matt 18.18).

Leadership of the Maranatha Community calls for a range of skills and spiritual giftings. God calls upon Christian leaders to inspire and encourage and also to disciple. Currently He appears to be calling for the leadership in our Community to stand on the walls and look externally and warn of the coming assault. He is also calling for the leadership to look inside to ensure that all is well. Increasingly, the leader is called to represent the Community externally, but also, to represent what is happening internally to the Community. There is clearly an ambassadorial role, which has grown in recent years. This calls for considerable gifts of discernment.

Currently there appears to be a strong prompting from God to confirm the vision given to the Maranatha Community and to mobilise an army. God is raising leaders and these individuals need to be identified, trained, anointed and appointed. We are being prompted to make a battle cry for Christians and a wake-up call to the nation. We are being prompted to offer fervent prayer for the ignition of the fire of the Holy Spirit, to transform and heal lives, to revitalise churches and to renew the nation. This is our co-mission.