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AUTHORITY & HONOUR

A SERMON PREACHED IN
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AUTHORITY & HONOUR

My text is addressed to members of a Christian congregation like ourselves. It is -

Hebrews 13:17 "Obey your leaders and submit". I couple with it a verse which is closely related. "Render to every one what is due to them, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due. Owe no man anything". Romans 13:7,8. Many modern Christians think they can treat these commands of God with impunity. They reject this obligation of respect and obedience. In this matter they will not have God's word to rule over them. And if we search our hearts, we will confess that we are all guilty.

The giving of reverence and the giving of honour is closely related to the recognition and acceptance of authority. Reverence and honour are due to those who have authority over us. But who has authority over us? We are so egalitarian nowadays that we are not willing to regard anyone as out-in-front to whom we owe a duty of giving honour. It is not a new problem. In Malachi 1:6 God complains "If I be a father where is my honour?" Men were robbing God though they would not recognize it; and when we fail to give honour where honour is due, we are in fact robbers, keeping back what is due to other people. It is a natural tendency to be reluctant to give honour, especially to people we regard as our equals, but yet it is a sin and we must be on our guard against it. The Bible constantly enjoins this duty of reverence and honour which shows that it is one which we are inclined to neglect.

Honour is closely related to authority and here of course is the nub of the modern problem. We do not willingly recognize that other people have authority over us, and this natural attitude is re-inforced by modern thinking; where everyone is anxious to do his own thing, as they say. Modern existentialism dissolves relationships and makes every person his own independent authority; but God has created us in relationships. Some of these relationships involve responsibility to care for others, and this responsibility clothes such relationships with authority on the one hand, and with the duty of submission and reverence and respect and honour on the other. The relationship in itself involves the responsibility, and therefore the relationship involves authority, with the concomitant duty of submission and honour. This is in contrast to the modern line of thought which regards authority as residing only in the exercise of the function and not in the relationship itself, so that if the function is being performed badly, it is said that there is no obligation to recognize authority. This seems to have been John Wycliff's early thought as expressed in the theory of the dominion of grace. It is very widespread nowadays and is exemplified in the philosophy of the Little Red School Book which encourages the scholars only to honour and obey such school teachers who perform well. The school teacher who, in the children's eyes, is not a good school teacher is not to be submitted to nor honoured. It is a very pervasive attitude today even invading relationships within the Church, but it is an attitude that is fundamentally mistaken. A simple illustration will show this. A Captain of a cricket team has authority because of his relationship to the players and not simply because he is a good captain. His position of captain

carries the responsibility to consider the well being of the team while the team in turn has the obligation to submit to his captaincy so that when he directs a player to any position on the field the player should go readily, not disputing the wisdom of the direction, however ill-judged he may think it to be. He is only to dispute the captain's directions if they interfere with other more important relationships, such as relationships of justice to his fellow man or his obligations to God.

Authority is a consequence of those relationships which involve responsibility to advance the welfare of others. For example, God is our creator and since His character is permeated with the morality which we ourselves share He cares for His creation so that the Scripture constantly testifies that God's tender mercies are over all His works. This relationship of caring and providing for His creation confers an obligation on us to recognize His authority, to submit to it and to honour Him as our creator and provider.

Mankind's original and basic sin is the rejection of the authority of God and the refusal to recognize what this relationship calls for from us namely, submission and honour. Like Adam, we grasp at equality, we aim to be what we think mistakenly. God is like; that is, doing our own thing, being free from any relationship which involves responsibility and obligation. 'Liberty, equality, fraternity' is the motto of the natural man. In this phrase, each person is regarded as an independent unit, with no authority one over the other from permanent relationships, but only the ephemeral authority which springs from the function of the moment, now one person, now another, exercising authority, each

mutually submitting to one another in perpetual reciprocation. 'Freedom' is the modern catch cry, but of course it is a chimera. We cannot escape from our relationships so as to be free to do our own thing. There is no possibility of experiencing the freedom that the modern existentialist society is clamouring for. Such freedom doesn't exist. We cannot escape from relationships which imply authority and involve submission, into 'liberty, equality and fraternity', where each is free, equal and merely a brother. God has put us into relationships which transcend mere brotherliness and which imply authority and submission.

Firstly we are related to God in an unequal relationship. God has the authority of our creator and sustainer, in the context of his love for us; we respond with reverence, honour, submission in the context of our love for him.

Similarly in the human family, here too the members are in mutual relationships and are not simply autonomous units, as the moderns would have us believe. Husbands and wives have a relationship. The family is a microcosm of God's relationship to the world, so that the husband has the responsibility to provide for and protect his wife just as God provides for His creation. This responsibility to ensure welfare confers authority, and calls for submission and honour. Similarly Father and Mother together have responsibility to care for, take thought for and provide for their children, while their children on the other hand have the obligation to recognize the authority that this relationship brings with it and should submit to that authority by obeying and honouring their parents. As the children grow older the relationship changes; the

parents no longer have the same necessity to care for and provide for their children who are now adults, so in that sense their authority over their children ceases, for authority is concomitant with the relationship of responsibility to undertake for those over whom authority is given. The same is true of the Government. It has the responsibility to take measures for the welfare of the people while we in turn have the obligation to submit to the Government, and to honour those who are in a position of authority. For example, we should honour the Prime Minister, and members of the cabinet and Parliament, and we should remember them before God in prayer, for they have duties towards us and therefore authority over us and we must fulfil our part towards them in honouring those to whom honour is due. So too in the structure of the christian congregation, pastors have the responsibility of oversight and care for those whom God has put within their flock. Christians for their part are to recognize the authority that goes with this responsibility and submit to their godly admonition and should honour them in their position of pastor. "Obey them that have the rule over you and submit to them; for they which on behalf of yourselves, as they that give account" Heb. 13:17.

But all authority over our fellow man must be exercised in a human way, that is, with rationality and consideration for the human natures over whom the authority is exercised. By ignoring this principle, authority becomes authoritarianism, which is the exercising of rightful authority in a way which contradicts human relationships. The absence of authoritarianism does not mean the absence of authority nor does it require the sharing of authority with those who do not have it; it merely means the exercise of authority in a human way, in a way, that

is, which is in conformity with human relationships, and which does not destroy those relationships, as authoritarianism tends to do. Paul is a good example of a man who exercised authority but who avoided authoritarianism. Paul was conscious of his authority. He expected submission to it from the Corinthians. He told the Corinthians that if he came again he would not spare them (11 Corinthians 13:2) and he asked them "Do you want me to come with a rod or with gentleness". (1 Corinthians 4:21). It was a question of whether they were willing to submit or not. The rod is the symbol of coercive authority, but it was not authoritarianism, as coercion is only the ultimate sanction. Paul exercised his authority firstly by explanation, by exhortation, by appeal to the Corinthians' true conscience. This was in accordance with human nature and personal relations. But he did not abandon his authority which he was conscious that the Lord had given to him (11 Corinthians 3:10). He did not wish to be severe in the use of that authority, but he made clear that he would be severe if that were necessary. He announced that he would expell from the fellowship and deliver to Satan the recalcitrant, associating with himself in this ultimate exercise of authority the whole congregation obedient to the mind of the Spirit expressed through his decision. Though Paul did not confuse the giving of advice (1 Corinthians 7:25ff) with the exercise of apostolic authority, he was, when the occasion called for it fully authoritative, but he was not authoritarian. Authoritarianism is the exercise of true authority in a way which disregards human nature and personal relations.

Paternalism is the exercise of true authority in a way which disregards the stage of development

of the personality and in this respect disregards human nature and soputs personal relationships in jeopardy.

Both authoritarianism and paternalism are the exercise of true authority and although we could wish it should be exercised in a better way, we are not at liberty to reject the authority just because it is authoritarian or paternalistic.

On the other hand tyranny is the exercise of authority where there is no right to exercise that authority. It is based on power, not on relationships. It may avoid both authoritarianism and paternalism and be very sweet and moderate in its exercise, but if it has no right to be exercised, in the area where it is exercised it is a tyranny. There is spiritual tyranny as well as secular tyranny. It is important that authority recognizes its limits. Paul was conscious of the limits of apostolic authority (1st Corinthians 1:24).

True authority arises from responsibility towards those over whom the authority is exercised. But since tyranny does not arise from relationship, it is essentially selfcentred, the tyrant, whether despotic or benign advancing his own interests rather than those over whom he reigns.

True authority serves. Jesus is the example here. He had full authority over all flesh. He was rightly called Lord and Master, yet he washed the disciples feet, that is, he stooped to the most menial service that was needed. Yet because authority serves, it does not follow that it can be rejected. It expects submission.

Let us list those whom the New Testament affirms to have authority and consequently to whom

honour and respect is due.

1. We are to honour and submit to God.
2. We are to honour and submit to the Government. (Romans 13:1ff). This is because the government exercises a ministry towards us to further our good. The New Testament command to honour the government was given at a time when the government was inefficient, corrupt and venial. Its failure to function well was not taken into account by the New Testament writers when they enjoined on all the obligation to honour the government and to submit to every ordinance for conscience sake.
3. Wives are to honour and submit to their husbands, calling them lord. (1 Peter 3:1,6). For husbands have the responsibility to take thought for, provide for and protect their wives, as Christ gave Himself for his bride. (Eph. 5).
4. Children are to honour and submit to their parents (Prov. 1:8; Ephes. 6:1).
5. Slaves are to honour and submit to their masters. The Scripture is clear that this submission and honour is due to bad masters as well as to good. "Servants be submissive to your masters with all respect (i.e. honour), not only to the kind and gentle, but also to the overbearing", (1 Peter 3:18). The authority and honour is due to the relationship, even when it is functionally bad.
6. Members of the congregation are to honour and submit to those who are over them in the Lord. Once again, this honour is due to the position

held and not merely to those who function well. It is true that those who work well are worthy of double honour (1Tim. 5:17), but from this it follows that even those who do not function so well are worthy of honour.

It is important to recognize that the authority and the consequent duty of submission and honour reside in the relationship which involves responsibility to provide for. This responsibility requires an ongoing relationship and not merely a momentary one, coincident with the discharge of the function. For provision involves forethought and preparation beforehand at a stage quite unbeknown to the recipient. It is this ongoing relationship involving responsibility to take thought for, that invests those having this responsibility with authority towards those who are the recipients of the benefit.

I come back to my text. Obey your leaders and submit, for they have the responsibility of taking care for your souls. (Hebrews 13:17).

If you do not learn to accept the godly administration of those who are over you in the Lord, how you will yourself be a leader? The Scripture is clear. We are to obey those in authority. Jesus asked "Why do you call me Lord and do not the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46).

God has created us in relationship; enjoy your relationships. Pray for one another, pray for those in authority over you, and for those under your care. If God puts you in a position of authority, remember this, that authority is only for the purpose of advancing the well being of those under your authority. Imitate Christ. Be among them as one who serves; relate yourself to them as their

servant, with no pomposity, no triumph, no self interest.

Exhort one another where any falls short of being Christ-like. If we are encouraged to exhort God (and the Scripture is full of prayers calling on God to act), then those in authority need to be exhorted to exercise their authority diligently and in a humane and Christ-like way.

If God puts you under authority relate yourself in a true way to those whom God has put over you, whether government, parents, spouse or pastor by accepting their authority, by honouring and respecting them and esteeming them highly for their works sake. Jesus was obedient to his parents (Luke 2:51) and to his Heavenly Father (Phil. 2:5; Heb. 5:8).

In a word, imitate Christ, and not Adam.

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Principal