

Our Problem is Authoritarianism and Not Legalism



I used to think the problem in modern Christianity was legalism. I was wrong. I now see that some Christians flaunt their freedom and taunt their foes while other Christians consult their legal formulas and insult their libertine friends. One man's freedom is another man's sin, but both groups suffer from a much larger problem. The church of Jesus Christ in the 21st century is losing its power because of an infatuation with authority. It is authoritarianism, not legalism that has become the biggest challenge Christians face. William Bausch, church historian par excellence, has correctly written, "*No cultic priesthood is to be found in the New Testament. Yet we are importing Old Testament Levitical forms and imposing them on Christian ministry.*"

The world has established systems of governance with imperial forms of authority, governance similar to that of the Hebrews in the Old Covenant. The Hebrews looked--and the world looks--to positions of authority for their leadership. Webster's defines authority as "*the power to influence thought, opinion, or behavior by convincing force or control.*" Governments have authority. Kings have authority. Presidents have authority. The Hebrew priests *had* authority. The control or force these systems of governance exert vary, but the authority is similar. Leadership comes from people in higher *positions* of authority.

The church of Jesus Christ was never designed to operate in this manner. Jesus explicitly taught in Matthew 23:8-11 (read it for yourself to see) that the only person who rules Christian communities is the Lord Himself. Under Him, we are all equals. He emphatically rejected the world's system of top-down governance by declaring, "*It shall not be so among you*" (Mark 10:43). "*The greatest among you shall be your **servant***" (Matthew 23:11). There is no emphasis in the New Testament on authority that is derived from any "office" or position. Let me repeat that again: *Nowhere in the New Testament does it say that a Christian, because of title or position, has moral authority over another Christian.* The idea of an 'office' of authority in the church, like that of the office of 'President of the United States,' simply does not exist. Christ alone has the position of authority in the church and He has no vicar on earth but His Spirit, who resides in the life of every believer.

The King James Version unfortunately translates the Greek word *diakonia* as "office" in Romans 11:13, but *diakonia* is always elsewhere properly translated as "service" or "servant." Christians serve others and any leadership in the church *flows from* this selfless service and oversight of others; pagans *seek offices* that grant authority so that their leadership (lordship) over other people is inherent to their positions or titles. Christians morally *persuade* others by our love and grace; pagans morally *coerce* others by their positions of authority. When Christians act like pagans, they turn their homes, churches, and organizations into structures of authority where everybody is coerced to submit to the authority and control of another person in a higher 'position' of authority. The equality of New Covenant believers in

Christ is lost because Old Covenant Levitical forms of authority are imposed on Christian ministry.

How does one know if the Christian community or church to which he or she belongs is following Christ's teachings on leadership or is a reflection of the pagan's understanding of authority? What are the signs imperial authoritarianism in the church? The following are ten indicators:

1. There is never any freedom to question the leader.
2. The leader often makes claims of having special insights from God, insights that the laity are unable to possess.
3. Disagreement with the leader is deemed a sign of the devil's influence in one's life.
4. Events are designed to bring attention and praise to the leader rather than equipping others to do the work of the ministry.
5. Any concept of equality is immediately labeled rebellion or the end result of a "liberal" denial of the Bible.
6. Authoritarian leaders are only comfortable around like-minded leaders; thus, there is an unofficial 'speaking tour' where only imperial, authoritarian leaders share the platform with each other.
7. The measure of success becomes the number of people who follow the leader ("*It must be of God! Look at how many come to hear me speak!*")
8. If a person leaves the community or church, the problem is always in the person who leaves, not the leadership.
9. Leaders who wrongly perceive themselves as those "with authority" insulate their lives by demanding absolute loyalty through giving large financial benefits to their closest 'advisors.'
10. The ultimate end of this kind of Christian leadership is always more; more money, more power, more followers, more publicity, more, more, more...

The people of Christ are beginning to awaken to the abuses in the modern church. Whereas I thought it important in years past to challenge the legalism prevalent in the Southern Baptist Convention, I have become utterly convinced that the major problem in modern Christendom is authoritarianism, not legalism. Ask yourself if you are in a place of worship where there is always a fresh, radical presentation of the freedom and equality of individual followers of Christ. If not, consider leaving, because in the end you will find your Christian community was never really about Christ or His people at all.

From [Wade Burleson](#)