

Authority to Establish a Work of God

By Ronald Kirk

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When Moses attempted to stop a fight, one of the Hebrew combatants demanded, "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? (Exodus 2:14). This is an apt question and one with which Christians constantly wrestle. It is not a trivial question. Over this issue, the American Pilgrims sacrificed their livelihoods and their homeland. They nearly sacrificed their children to the vicissitudes and temptations of life in Holland. They planted America as part of their answer to the question. Many have since lost their lives to defend and live the principle of Christian liberty, that God must fundamentally direct their life and religious paths, not men. Consider the question of how godly, earthly authority arises, and in particular, where we get the authority to commence a church.

The Covenantal Basis of Authority for God's Work

The Biblical basis of human authority is simple: God decrees any work. God calls a man or men to take leadership to accomplish it. God calls particular men as constituents of that work. Then, those constituents covenantally ratify that authority and submit to it within its sphere. The leader and his constituency combine to effect their covenantal mission.

In the time before Christ, God directly anointed special individuals for His work. Anointing, such as with oil, is a symbol of commissioning and empowering. In these early days, God did not give His Holy Spirit generally to the people. Rather, the Scriptural record indicates that God granted certain appointed servants power to exercise themselves in their offices for Him.

Moses' story establishes a precedent regarding authority for leadership. The Lord calls Moses while a humble shepherd. Moses appears to possess no particular leadership quality. His greatness as the son of a pharaoh has vanished. His one initiative at leadership, when he broke up the fight between two Israelites, backfired on him. As we find later in his story, He does not even want the job. Nothing seems to recommend Moses as a leader.

Incidentally, this is an important factor in choosing leaders. We often overlook the one chosen by God. Men look upon the appearance, rather than recognizing the true character, potential and calling of an individual. We often judge by present accomplishment and do not give able candidates the opportunity to prove themselves, to learn and grow over time. We mistake human virtue for godly virtue. The better-looking one, the better spoken, the wittier, we believe will somehow make the best leader. Jesus Himself was not comely, the Scripture says. Nonetheless, as with Moses, God fulfills the calling, equipping, and matriculation to leadership.

God equally establishes the constituents of a governing authority. In other words, God chooses the *followers* as well as the leaders. In the case of Moses (and others such as David), the people voluntarily submitted to authority. Neither leader wielded military power to force ascendant authority. Any constituency or following submits to authority either by coercion and compulsion, or voluntarily. For social and civil political association, God ordinarily provides for voluntary submission among a people who are capable of some degree of self-government. This is not to say God's command of covenant is not compelling. To resist the covenant of God is to call chastening or destruction upon oneself. Yet if it is God's will, we need not worry whether He will fulfill the calling upon His chosen. If God decrees a thing, He does not need men to force its fulfillment, which is tyranny. Thus, with some notable exceptions such as children in a family or a nation in slavish rebellion requiring a dictator or another evil nation to chasten or judge it, initial voluntary submission to authority is God's rule.

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Moses had no means of compelling Israel to follow him. Rather, Moses and the people each necessarily found their respective covenants with God. God demonstrated His power among the people through Moses. God's Spirit prevailed upon those who followed. Of course, the consequences of avoiding submission to Moses would have been dire—the death of the first born. Here, God used some external means to force the issue with a slavish people. The plagues got their attention. If only out of fear, they were willing to cooperate. Finally, God seems truly to have worked a significant degree of faith among them, which He would continue to work through the wilderness experience. This is a level of government somewhere between absolute compulsion of abject slaves and the voluntary covenant-keeping of a mature and godly people. Nevertheless, God chose the leader for the people, and the people in turn chose that leader and submitted to him.

Likewise, though God's prophet Samuel anointed David king of Israel many years earlier, David's *people* must also eventually accept him and anoint him before he could rule them. In due season, the people made David king, first of Judah, then of all Israel. Though God will assemble a constituency for His work, it may be slow developing. God will often test the faithfulness of His called leaders. In a new work God's man may at first find no following whatsoever! Moreover, any new work will find adversity. Tradition is a powerful force and novelty is often met with persecution. Because innovation will appear strange, God provided us with the Berean principle. We must search the Scriptures to see if it be so. Jesus said to judge a tree by its fruit. In a word, leadership is fraught with pain and trouble. A man of God must possess a character for faithfulness in adversity. However, when God calls anyone for a particular work, with perseverance, however slowly, a constituency will grow and together they will overcome adversity.

What then constitutes God's spiritual and civil leaders' actual authority over other men? The Bible indicates that first Abraham submitted to Melchizedek as a superior (Hebrews 7:4). Moses submitted to Jethro, both as son-in-law and as a spiritual counselee (Exodus 3:1; 18:24). When godly men note God's work in other men, they submit within the proper sphere of authority. What constituted spiritual authority? A calling of God. God chooses the leader. The followers ratify their leaders by some process of choice, that is election, and then submit. God chooses the followers. One may observe the principle of submission operating over even reprobate "parishioners" of God's prophets such as King Ahab.

Succession of Authority

Succession of authority is an important question. Once God establishes authority must not men submit to the natural succession of that authority? Laying on hands commissions new works upon the authority of the old, such as with Paul and Timothy. Joshua succeeded Moses. As God's anointed representative, Eli commissioned Samuel, and Samuel commissioned David. The people of Israel generally adopted the principle of generational succession, which is apt, according to God's promise to David. Thus, God normally provides for succession of authority, once rightful authority is established. Orderly succession conserves a work already accomplished. It removes the need for revolutionary change, which ordinarily produces a net destruction.

However, God does not always use a succession of authority. In the absence of a present authority receptive or available to God's latest work among men, He may call special new ones. God called Melchizedek and Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, as priests without previous lineage. Indeed, by all

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appearances, these two set up shop as ministers of God apart from any other human ordination or ratification yet with no divine contradiction. Moses certainly received authority from no other man. Interestingly, God may not always desire a continuing succession. With Jethro, and certainly with Melchizedek, no following succession of authority appears. Indeed, due to the individuality of His work among many men in many different times and locations, such special works may well be God's norm. God can handle diversity and change. God can bring the Many into His One without help from men and without destroying liberty.

The New Testament Legacy

Jesus clearly chose the disciples and not the other way around (Luke 6:13 and John 15:16). Torching the notion of absolute succession, God sovereignly called Paul, though he appeared to be perhaps the worst candidate for Apostle. (Humanly speaking, Paul's latter resume appears not much better.)

So then how did New Testament churches begin? The Jerusalem church first gathered around the Apostles of Christ. Jerusalem Christians then took the Gospel to Judea and beyond. Here, then, churches developed under a successional authority, though it is far from clear that the Apostles founded established central authority over the churches. The succession we speak of here is *founding* authority. One church member or several took the Gospel from where it was to a new place and people.

A question arises here: Were the New Testament evangelists always Apostles or church officials directly commissioned for such work? That is, did God require a succession under formal church authority? Or were the evangelists merely identified as anointed, thus going about God's business on *His* terms, with the corresponding blessing of their fellows? I do not pretend to answer the question authoritatively. This is an honest difference between Presbyterians and historic Reformed Congregationalists, such as the American Pilgrims and later their neighbors the Puritans. Acts 6:8 declares, "And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people." Did he receive this power from the church, or did the church merely recognize Stephen's gifts when they called him to the diaconate? We know that Stephen's great power to witness of Christ became manifest after his ordination as deacon. Then there is Philip. After Philip evangelized Samaria, the church sent Peter and John to them (Acts 8:14). Nothing in the text indicates the church specifically sent Philip, but rather, "Then Philip *went down* to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them" (Acts 8:5). The language seems to indicate personal volition.

Paul certainly was an Apostle and God clearly sent him to plant churches. How do we know that God called him? We know because men witnessed and responded to his ministry. Paul had a special ministry that no one else had—the conversion of the Gentiles. Others, such as the inspired physician Luke, recognized it. Christians in general have recognized it. Through the direction of the Holy Spirit, men canonized Paul's writing as the Word of God! Paul founded churches through his apostolic authority. Paul clearly possessed authority from God to perform his ministry. Paul founded churches, but he did so apart from the formal authority of any other church. By mutual agreement, but not fiat, the Council of Jerusalem decided the question of gentile Christianity with respect to the ritual law of Moses. This seems to be the only formal central authority exerted in the New Testament. All other human spiritual authority is exercised individually, by way of reason and influence, or specific church discipline when needed. The point is Paul held true authority, and yet *not* successional derived from men.

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Even as God's anointed apostle, Paul's authority is limited. His is not formal authority, but rather an authority granted by God and earned as it were, upon the truth of God's calling and His work in the hearers. Chapter 10 of 2 Corinthians gives us an inkling of Paul's view of his own authority. Indeed, the great theme of 2 Corinthians finds Paul defending his real authority for the sake of the Corinthian church who needed to hear his voice. However, Paul knew a restriction of his formal authority over churches he founded. He *appeals* to and *pleads* upon his history with the church to heed his rightful authority. He wielded real authority because he represented God as the infallible interpreter of His Gospel. He spoke God's truth for God. Moreover, Paul argued his authority over the Corinthians because they had submitted to his doctrine. He fathered their belief. Yet as we find in verse one, Paul appeals to the Corinthians to submit voluntarily to his real authority. Paul's dignity is not at stake, but rather his real ability to assist the church in their apparently grave need. Thus, even as Paul is an apostle, he claims no formal and absolute power over the church, but rather urges them for their own good, according to his godly office.

Similarly, Paul taught Timothy to lead by example. Jesus said that the world's leaders lord it over their constituents, but it ought not to be so with the church. Thus, the great evangelical church planting and maintenance principle corresponds to the Old Testament's pattern: God calls the man or men to leadership. God calls the constituting body. The constituting body chooses its leader ("Choose this day!"). Then the church body, in this case, submits to its ruler (bishop or overseer) within his sphere as defined by the Scriptures.

Suffrage

On what Biblical ground do individuals possess the electoral authority in any given community? Under our great High Priest, Jesus Christ, God assembled the priesthood of all believers (as 1 Peter 2:9). Here again, this understanding speaks of the reciprocal nature of all Biblical authority among men: the power to choose, and the obligation to submit to limited and rightful authority so chosen. So then, where a body of believers gathers, Jesus is in our midst. If the election principle ruled in Old Testament times, how much more in an age where the Holy Spirit is shed abroad?

What then? Clearly, God uses governmental system to order His people and encourage liberty. That external forms of government are necessary is due to the vagaries of human sin in Christians. If we were perfectly self-governed, the Holy Spirit might maintain perfect order and liberty among us without external constraints. To provide godly government, God calls and ordains His own leaders. He calls and ordains those who will submit to those leaders. For stability, God uses a succession of authority from generation to generation. Nevertheless, there are limits of authority inherent in the Biblical constitution of the church. Moreover, where God institutes a new work, He often creates a new authority without previous succession, and sometimes with no further succession. The New Testament, upon the priesthood and royalty of all believers, further establishes the principle of suffrage in choosing leaders. Whether upon succession or no, election clearly stands as a fundamental principle for the establishment of authority. Mature Christian authority is thus reciprocal—the principle of America's Christian federal republican forms of government.