

regular columns

THE RE-EMERGENCE OF HEAVY SHEPHERDS

What would you think if you received a letter from your church leaders that read like this?



Comment

John Benton



‘Are church members called to submit to / obey their elders unless they support something that clearly contradicts Scripture? The answer is yes – Hebrews 13.17 couldn’t be clearer... That means when elders eventually put forward a proposal the Christian’s conscience is bound by God himself, not because of any intrinsic authority in men but because they have been appointed (ultimately by God himself) to an office instituted by God...’

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How worrying is that! Especially as

evangelicalism has to come to see that spiritual abuse in churches is a fact and appears to be on the rise. Sadly, though I will not reveal its source, this letter is not a figment of my imagination. It is real. We thought heavy shepherding had died the death – but not so. Such a view of church government as expressed in the letter, of course, immediately makes the church meeting an irrelevance. Any idea of a church meeting providing ‘checks and balances’ on the use of power by the eldership is gone, because to question anything the elders promote is to oppose God.

But contrary to this, the Lord Jesus taught that the ultimate court of appeal in a church is not its leadership, but the church meeting (Matt. 18.17,18). It is the church which has the power to bind and loose. So it is that church leaders are appointed by the church, (Acts 6.3-6) and are answerable to the church (1 Tim. 5.20). The authority of church leaders is never in themselves, or even in their office, but in the word of God. Wasn’t that what the Reformation was all about?

Further it should be noted that while Hebrews 13.17 reads 'Obey your leaders', the word translated 'obey' is not the word most often used for obeying (*hupakouo*) but has a background much more in the idea of 'being persuaded', 'being convinced' and so following (*peitho*). This again chimes in with the Biblical view of servant leadership rather than that of dominant leadership.

The church and the cult

Moving the balance of power away from the church meeting towards the leadership puts the church in danger of becoming a cult.

In Scripture the head of the church is Christ and the church is His body. But the head of a cult is a dominant person or group of people. Church leaders are accountable to the church meeting, but a cult leader is not accountable to anyone. He might say he is accountable to Scripture, but if he is the only one who can give a valid interpretation of Scripture it means he is a law unto himself. The ethos of a cult is to control its members, while the ethos of a true church is to grow its members to maturity. A cult tends to be secretive, while a gospel church will try to be as open as possible. Paul writes of his ministry: 'We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God' (2 Cor. 4.2). A cult will receive members gladly, but often leaving is extremely difficult and involves much belligerence and bruising. A church is sad when people leave, but will handle it with love.

Beware heavy shepherding. 'The truth in love' is essential (Eph. 4.15).

Next month: John writes about the other side of the coin – difficult church members.

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