

Authoritarianism in The Church

By Steve Martin

The Problem

A tragic and dangerous trend can be observed in some contemporary evangelical churches. While standing against the lawlessness and anti-authority mood of this generation, some conservative, Bible-believing churches have drifted into deadly authoritarian tendencies. This sad phenomenon is increasingly becoming publicized and well-documented (see suggested reading list at the end of this article).

Why is this happening? What kind of attitudes engender authoritarianism in a church? Whose fault is it? What can be done about it?

Before proceeding any farther, some definition is in order. For the purposes of this article, “authoritarianism” is defined as an abuse of the authority given by Christ through the agency of the Holy Spirit and revealed in God’s Word which the office holders of the local churches are to exercise. It has been my observation that this abuse of authority usually takes on one or both of the following forms.

First, the sin of authoritarianism exists when pastors and other office holders speak with binding authority where God Himself has not spoken in His written Word. If God has not pronounced on the subject, it is a usurpation of the Creator. A pastor may rightly proclaim “Thus saith the Lord” when preaching against idolatry, adultery, greed, marrying an unbeliever or any other violation of the express commands of God. That is his duty and God help the man who “cuts and trims” texts to speak smooth words to his flock. But the pastor has no warrant from Christ to speak with the binding authority of God’s *imprimatur* to issues upon which the written word of God is silent.

Second, the sin of authoritarianism exists when pastors and other office holders usurp the Lordship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the lives of God’s people by deciding the will of God for them where Scripture is silent. Church officers may not declare the will of God for God’s people on such choices as one’s career, choice of Christian mate, choice of lawful employment, place of living, schooling they attend, etc. without becoming surrogate deities. Flocks of sheep with paralyzed decision-making faculties reveal exposure to shepherds who played God with them. Thus the sinful tendency revealed in John Milton’s wry observation (“New presbyter is but old priest writ large”) returns to haunt churches. And even more sadly, some idol-worshipping sheep love it to be so.

Causes of the Problem

Surely the cause of authoritarianism and idol-worship is sin. But what sins in particular need to be recognized, repented of and mortified by the Holy Spirit's help? Five sins of the shepherds and three sins of the sheep come to mind. Taken together they produce churches with a powerfully sinful pathology which dishonors Christ, smothers the sheep, inflates the shepherds and hinders the work of God.

Sins of the Shepherds

Today's authoritarian shepherds seem to fall prey to one or more of the following sins as they exercise their ministry.

1. *Idolatry*: the sinful desires of some men to always be in control, especially the control of the lives of God's sheep. Such sin is but a thinly veiled attempt to play God. And make no mistake, such men become as God to their flock. It is hardly surprising that pastors with such a sinful proclivity will eventually attain near papal infallibility in their churches. Paul's command to Titus in 2:15 ("rebuke with all authority . . . do not let anyone despise you") is their key verse in practice if not by precept. Usually the idolatrous sin of control is accompanied by a wrathful, berating, anxiety-producing spirit as the authoritarian leader will tolerate no loose atoms in their personal universe of control (cf. Ezek. 34:4c; Matt. 20:25; 1 Pet. 5:3). Such self-deified pastors produce congregations which are more afraid of displeasing the pastors than they are of displeasing their Lord and Savior. Men who must be "God" to their people ironically lose the authority of God's Holy Spirit by their sin and God-given authority is replaced by fleshly control maintained by manipulation, intimidation, verbal coercion and ecclesiastical pulling of rank (e.g. "Now, I'm your elder and you had better be . . . or else . . ."). The Apostle John's description of Diotrephes seems to fall under such a category of sin (3 John 9-10).

2. *Prayerlessness*: authoritarian pastors do not rely upon prayer for their people as a primary instrument ordained by God for the edification of His people. As a result, they verbally coerce and bully their people to conform. They seek to rely only on the "arm of flesh" of their own strong-arm tactics. Such fleshly shepherds expend far more labor scolding, threatening, manipulating, confronting and "exercising discipline" to get their people to conform to their wishes than they do laboring before the throne of grace for the Spirit's supernatural work of conforming saints to Christ's image (2 Cor. 3:18). The Word of God makes plain that every shepherd's arsenal does include the rod and the staff. But it also emphasizes the importance of intercessory prayer for the growth of the people of God (cf. the recorded prayers of our Lord's and the Apostle Paul on behalf of their people). Sadly, many pastors beat their sheep because the weapons of the flesh are more comfortable in their own hands than the weapons of the Spirit. The Apostle James warns about men whose lives are strewn with the wreckage of their carnal leadership and links it to their prayerlessness (James 3:13-4:3).

3. *Unbelief*: many office holders do not believe the declarative statements and promises of God in the Scripture. They do not believe that Christ is Lord of His true church and that the gates of hell will not prevail against it. They do not believe that God the Holy Spirit is also Lord of the church, conforming God's people into His image. They do not believe God the Father will exercise His Fatherly love and discipline over the lives of His adopted children. In their unbelief, following hard on the heels of their own prayerlessness, authoritarian shepherds develop the mind-set, "If I don't make them do this, they won't!" or "If I don't make them do this, who will?" They really do not believe that the Holy Spirit will superintend His people and convict them of sin when away from the shepherd. Even as Christian parents must entrust their Christian teens unto the Lord as they drive the car down the driveway or leave for the university, so pastors must learn to trust God the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of His people when they are out from under the watchful gaze of their local under-shepherd. Sadly, such pastors create a "police state mentality" in their congregations where everyone's life is carefully monitored and scrutinized for any deviation, and "sins" are to be reported to the church leadership immediately.

4. *Lack of love for the sheep*: shepherds in ancient Palestine walked ahead of their sheep, leading them on and calling them by name to follow them to green pastures and cool waters. The sheep followed because they had come to know the shepherd's faithful care and loving concern for their own well-being. It was the shepherd who slept in the doorway of the sheepfold to guard the flock at night. It was the shepherd who fought the bear, the lion and other predators. It was the shepherd who protected the flock from the thief. It was the shepherd who left the 99 to go looking for the lost sheep. It was the shepherd who gently led the nursing ewes and their young.

Such imagery surely depicts a sacrificial love for the sheep on the part of the shepherd. But times have changed for many shepherds in the West. "Sheep ranchers" now employ barking dogs and shepherds in helicopters to drive the frightened, harassed and bewildered sheep ahead of them. The sheep in such contemporary operations are motivated out of fear of the snarling bite of the shepherds' seemly omnipresent dogs and the incessant bellowing of the shepherd himself over the loud-speaker in his helicopter overhead.

Sadly, in too many congregations today, sheep are driven by a man more like a callous meat packer than a loving shepherd. Many modern shepherds don't even like sheep; it's just their business. In fact, men are encouraged not to get too close to the sheep or emotionally involved in their lives and problems. So many pastors don't actually like (let alone love) their people. They promote witnessing and world evangelization, they just don't like to be around individual sinners. One need only read of our Lord's loving compassion for the sheep-like sinners of His earthly ministry (Matt. 9:36, 14:14; Mark 1:40-41, 10:21) and recognize how far removed that is from many pastoral examples today. Sacrificial shepherd-love which lays down its life for the sheep has been replaced by loveless sheep management by uncaring sheep ranchers.

5. *Pride*: at root, all the above mentioned sins of office bearers stem from an inflated sense of their own importance. John Calvin once shrewdly observed that from the king on his throne to the scullery maid in the kitchen, each of us harbors a kingdom in our hearts. Such is the sinful

pride of the human heart. Creatures saved by the sovereign grace of their Creator and put into service of their fellow creatures may all too quickly forget that they are but clay pots made out of “proud dust” (to use Thomas Watson’s apt expression). We must be reminded that we hold our office by our Master’s pleasure, to do His bidding, and to further His Kingdom. Humble shepherds never forget from whence they have come nor to whom they must give an account. Humble shepherds look to God’s sheep with compassion; prideful shepherds look down upon the sheep with scornful contempt for their weaknesses and failings. Humble shepherds remember that even the Great Shepherd of the sheep patiently endured the misunderstanding, scolding and fleshly rebukes of His sheep (cf. Matt. 16:22; Mark 4:38; 1 Peter 2:21-23). Prideful shepherds however react to every real and perceived slight to their “august personage.” How unlike their Master! Shepherds must learn that they cannot be conformed to the image of Christ as longsuffering and forgiving unless they are “long bothered” and wronged. Pride, however, responds to the irritations of sinners with anger. An angry leader is a prideful leader.

The Sins of the Sheep

Sad to say, but the sheep themselves contribute their own sins to the creation of authoritarian ministries. Having talked with several wounded sheep, it has struck me how seldom they have seen their own culpability. They are quick to foist all blame upon their harsh taskmasters. But petty dictators cannot reign without the consent of their craven lackeys and servile subjects. There are at least three sins which they contribute to the sinful pathology of authoritarian churches.

1. *Idol-worship*: sinful flesh is not content with the reality of the one true God. It wants to fashion an idol in place of the invisible God who is spirit. There is always the temptation to act like the Jews of Saul’s time who wanted a human leader they could see, rather than the unseen God (cf. 1 Kings 8:1-18). But God shares His glory with no man, not even “called men” who are promoted to demi-god status by their adoring flock. Such flocks too often find for themselves a man who likes to lord it over the flock. Thus a sinfully symbiotic relationship is complete with an abusive authority figure coupled to his idol-worshipping minions (Jeremiah 5:30-31).

2. *Fear of man*: too many sheep are more gripped by the desire to please a man or more fearful of displeasing a man than they are of pleasing or displeasing Almighty God (cf. Prov. 29:25; John 5:41-44). They spend their time dancing around their idol, expending their energies catering to his every whim and seeking to avoid his wrath. Men pleasers have little stomach for potential conflict. They would never dare ask their exalted leader a question, no matter how respectfully. They would never ask for the biblical basis for a decision made by the leadership, even when that decision seems to fly in the face of clear Scriptural teaching. Such men-pleasers crave the smile of a man’s countenance more than the smile of God and they will not speak the truth in love (Eph. 5:15).

3. *Unbelief*: too many sheep do not believe that God still guides His people today through the means of prayerful meditation upon the Word of God and the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is easier for the flesh to suspend the use of spiritual faculties and scriptural means of guidance for the short-cut of asking the leader to determine God's will and make the decisions all the time. It is not surprising that sheep who put men on pedestals, who cravenly serve men and who do not believe that God still guides will fall prey to abusive shepherds. It is only by the grace of God that it doesn't happen more than it does (Even good men know the temptation to become surrogate "gods" for their people and must stoutly resist the temptation to always answer questions of guidance and decision making.). Perhaps, some of the time, authoritarian shepherds are God's chastening rods on the backs of idol-worshipping, men-pleasing, unbelieving sheep who will not have God to be their God but who substitute a mere creature in His place (cf. Is. 2:22; Ps. 33:13-19).

The Cure for Authoritarian Shepherds and Idol-Worshipping Sheep

The call of the Word of God to sinners is always "repent and believe." So it is to the office holder who has exercised his office in sinful ways. So it is to the member of a local church who has sinfully preferred looking to puny men rather than Almighty God.

Shepherds convicted of the sins of authoritarianism should humbly come to the Word of God and prayerfully meditate upon those great passages which delineate the work of the man of God and warn against abuse (Gen. 18, Ex. 32-33; Lev. 10, Ez. 34; Matt. 23; the Pastoral Epistles, 1 Pet. 5, *et al*). Repentance involves confession. Public sins must be publicly confessed; private sins must be privately confessed.

Pastors guilty of authoritarianism would do well to preach to themselves and their flocks an extended series on 1 Corinthians 13, Philippians 2, the Sermon on the Mount, or John 10. They should not be afraid to humble themselves to the dust before God and their people, for our God does not despise a broken and contrite heart (Ps. 51:17). He comes close to the lowly and meek and raises them up. The true people of God will not despise "a good man who is good enough to recognize that he is not good enough." Pastors must seek to cultivate the habit of intercessory prayer on behalf of their people. They must pray for great grace to resist the persistent temptation to play God for people. They must learn to redirect potential idol-worshippers to the living God who delights in His Bride but who will not share her with another. They must also pray for the sheep that they would not become embittered but would be forgiving of the pastor's sins. Shepherds who have been guilty of not loving their flocks sacrificially must pray for God the Holy Spirit to produce the loving fruit of the Spirit in their hearts, and with a compassion bred of selflessness, they must cultivate works of loving concern even when the initial "feeling" of love is not present. God will not long withhold His Spirit from that man who pleads for grace to love the flock as Christ does and who begins regularly giving himself to them in sacrificial acts of

service. Men who humble themselves before the Lord will be shown what they need to see and shown afresh how the blood of Christ cleanses even the stains of pastoral sins.

Sheep convicted of worshipping idols, pleasing men and disbelieving God must also face their sins and repent. Such repentance would include study and meditation upon God's Word on idolatry, men-pleasing, and the sin of unbelief. Sheep must learn to look to the Great Shepherd of the sheep. Weak faith grows best upon a diet of regular study and a believing hearing of the Word of God (Romans 10:17). Sheep must also learn from God's Word that enduring real or imagined conflict is not the worse thing in the world and that the worst that a man can do to you is nothing compared with what Almighty God can do. Sheep must be encouraged to learn in more depth that they are believer-priests with equal access to God and the same merit of Christ as their title deed for prayer. Sheep who walk with God, who know His Word and believe it and obey it are not likely to fall prey to tin gods, clay idols and fleshly shepherds.

May God give His people grace to see their sins and repent of them. We dare not glory in our current condition and slothfully ignore the deplorable state of much of Christ's Church. We must first judge ourselves that we may not be judged. And we must plead the purposes and promises of our Father in begging Him for the renewal of the Holy Spirit.

Additional Resources to Help You See the Problem and Turn From It

Portions of the Word of God speaking directly to shepherds should be memorized and regularly meditated upon. A pastor or elder would do well to commit to memory Ezekiel 34:1-16; John 10:1-18; 1 Corinthians 13; Philippians 2:1-11; 1 Thessalonians 2 (whole chapter); 1 Peter 5:1-11.

1. Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian" in *Three Treatises*, Concordia; a clarion call of the Reformation against the abuses of the authoritarian Church of Rome.
2. Jerram Barrs, *Shepherds and Sheep*, Intervarsity Press; evaluation of the Pentecostal shepherding groups of the late 70's but sadly still applicable to abuses of authority today.
3. Roger O. Beardmore, ed. *Shepherding God's Flock*, Sprinkle Publications; a treasury of good counsel and teaching on biblical oversight, Should be read and reread by every office holder. Roger Beardmore's chapter is especially pertinent to the question at hand.
4. Harold L. Bussell, *Unholy Devotion*, Zondervan; sub-titled "Why Cults Lure Christians", it examines the problem of manipulative leadership in church groups and gets at some of the thorny issues faced not only by heretical cults but also orthodox but authoritarian churches.

5. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Authority*, Banner of Truth; an invaluable and unique contribution on the authority which the Holy Spirit gives to the churches and to His servants. Cites the attempts of evangelicals the past 200 years to recapture their lost authority without recourse to the Holy Spirit. The Puritans would take note of their loss of church and pastoral power: “The Holy Spirit has a controversy with us. We must stop and see what we have done to grieve or quench Him.” Today we prefer to look to conferences, special speakers and events, jazzed-up entertainment, and the exercise of raw ecclesiastical power. Readers who know their church history will wince in recognition.
6. Clifford Pond, *Only Servants*, Grace Publications Trust; shows the leader as servant of Christ and His people. Refreshing reminders.
7. Ron Enroth, *Churches That Abuse*, Intervarsity Press; sadly chronicles the abuses of power that are wielded in the name of our Lord Jesus.
8. Erroll Hulse, ed. *Our Baptist Heritage*, Reformation Today Trust; wise and biblical counsel on facing and dealing with problems affecting Reformed Baptist and indeed the whole body of Christ. Should be pondered and discussed among church leadership groups.
9. Donald A. Carson, *A Call To Spiritual Reformation*, Baker; moving and enlightening examination of Paul’s priorities through the lens of his prayers for the churches. By a master exegete and teacher who has a heart for His Lord and His Church. Would make an excellent focus for a church leadership and a sermon series.
10. Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, Banner of Truth; masterful exposition of I Corinthians 13 with powerful application to us today. Pastors who need to learn more about love should long dwell here.
11. A. W. Tozer, *The Waning Authority of Christ in the Churches Today*, Christian Publications; just what it says! Tozer believed that Christ’s servants often try to wield more authority in local churches than Christ Himself did through His Word. Hits painfully close to home for too many churches.