

Biblical leadership in the Christian church

by Jan Willem Bakker

Introduction

An important debate in the Christian church today is the biblically correct form of church government. Charismatic churches tend to emphasise a strong leadership model consisting of one or a few leaders. This leadership model may have very little checks and balances, or not existing at all. To some extent this emphasis is a reaction to the democratic model which dominates many Calvinistic or other traditional evangelical churches. However, this emphasis is based on an inadequate understanding of biblical leadership. Apart from that, such emphasis on strong leadership may easily deteriorate into an excessive use and even abuse of power in the church. In this article I will elaborate on this subject.

The Christian church: democracy, theocracy or dictatorship

In charismatic circles one can often hear the statement that the church should not be a democracy where the majority rules and decides. The church is supposed to be a theocracy which means government by God. This view may sound quite credible. After all, democracy has originated from pagan Greece. But if we only know what a theocracy is not supposed to look like – a democracy – there is a danger to regard theocracy as nothing more than merely a dictatorship of one strong leader or a few strong leaders. Such leader or leaders do not allow anybody to disagree with or to contradict them because they believe that God has given them absolute authority in a church or movement.

The model of government that consists of one or several leaders with absolute powers, however, is just as pagan as the ancient Greek democracy. Actually, there have been a lot more pagan dictatorships than pagan democracies in the history of the world. Such form of government does not reflect in any way theocracy as it functioned in the history of the Old and the New Testaments. Jesus rejects such dictatorship as form of government of His church in strong terms (see e.g. Marcus 10:42-45).

The gap between clergy and laity

The error of confusing theocracy with an absolute government by one or a few persons is of pagan origin. Many tribes and nations had religious specialists who derived their power and status from the fact that they served as intermediaries between the world of men and of the world of the gods or spirits. This situation has influenced Catholicism. Both Catholic theology and church practice is dominated by a professional clergy that functions as a religious layer between God and the laymen. The special clothes and language – Latin which originally was incomprehensible to the people --, emphasise this special status of the clergy.

This gap between clergy and laymen has subtly permeated Protestant churches as well, including charismatic churches. The strong emphasis on the importance of the leaders and of subjection of the people to the leadership is a continuation of the gap between the clergy and the laymen. In this view one presupposes that the clergy, or leaders, are in fact closer to God than the laymen or ordinary believers. In such leadership culture the laymen, or church members, are strongly dependent on the clergy or leaders for their divine blessings.

Subjection and dominance

The doctrine that the church is not a democracy but needs to be governed by a few tends to put a strong emphasis on subjection as well. Those who do not show complete and immediate obedience are quickly labelled as rebels. Now it is certainly true that the Lord does not like

rebellion against leadership that He has really appointed. But the Lord rejects leadership that dominates or exploits its members at least as emphatically.

1 Peter 5:1-6 demonstrates this fact. Peter says the younger men, those who do not lead, need to subject themselves to the elders, the leadership. Peter tells this in one single sentence. But prior to this he writes four complete verses to the elders, or leaders. In these verses he says that they should 'shepherd the flock of God' 'according to the will of God', 'not under compulsion, but voluntarily', 'not for sordid gain, but with eagerness', and not 'as lording it over the flock, but proving to be examples to the flock'. These verses also imply that the elders need to give an example of humility and subjection to other Christians. Therefore a leader who does not give such an example of humility and subjection should not expect that his members will subject themselves to him.

The book of Revelation speaks about the 'deeds and teachings of the Nicolaitans'. Christ hates the deeds of the Nicolaitans. (Revelation 2:6;14,15). The dominant interpretation of these verses applies the warnings about the Nicolaitans to the influence of a sect in the early church that was called after Nicolas of Antioch. This sect taught that it was permissible for Christians to participate in idolatrous rituals and ritual prostitution. This interpretation is credible in the light of verse 15. However, there is another, prophetic, interpretation of the Nicolaitans. In the Bible the name of a person or movement often identifies its character. The term Nicolaitans consists of two parts: 'nikos' and 'laos'. Nikos means victory in Greek, or dominance. Laos means the common people. The word laity comes from laos. In this prophetic interpretation Christ warns against a teaching that promotes a form of leadership in churches and Christian movements that lords it over the people. Instead leaders are supposed to serve the members and help them to realize their God given destiny.

Theocracy and separation of powers in Old testament Israel

It might sound strange to some, but the theocracy of ancient Israel had important similarities with modern states. For instance, Israel knew a strict separation of powers. This separation of powers was not identical to our present society in which there is a separation between the judiciary, the executive and the legislature. The kings of Israel and Judah were judges, rulers and legislative heads all at the same time. Nevertheless, there was a separation of powers that was quite essential for Israel's theocracy. There was a separation of powers between the kings, the priests and the prophets. These three offices had to collaborate closely. Yet each of these offices had a responsibility of its own. In this form of government the king was responsible for security, law and order and administration, amongst other things. In his judicial duties the king was assisted by judges and officers (Deut. 16:18).

The teaching of the Mosaic law and the sacrifices formed the heart of Israel's theocracy. These were the tasks of the priests. The kings were not allowed to meddle in these tasks. In 2 Chronicles we read what could happen if a king overstepped the boundaries of his jurisdiction and performed a priestly task. King Uzziah of Judah became proud, entered the temple and burned incense on the altar of incense. As a consequence Uzziah contracted leprosy. The strict separation of powers between kings and priests was underlined by the fact that the priest were from the tribe of Levi and the kings from the tribe of Judah (apart from the kingdom of the ten tribes after Solomon).

In principle a prophet could come from any tribe. In some cases the Lord called priests to the office of prophet. Isaiah, Ezechiel and Zachariah are well known examples. But many prophets were from other tribes as well. A prophet had to act independently from people, including the priests, even if he came from the tribe of Levi. A prophet was the direct mouthpiece of the Lord. The prophet had nobody else above him except the Lord Himself. Nevertheless, a prophet never took over the role of the king, but respected the king's

jurisdiction. Likewise, he did not perform priestly functions if he did not come from the tribe of Levi.

More checks and balances in theocratic Israel

Ancient Israel had no constitution like we know today. Yet it had an important written foundation that functioned like a constitution. This written foundation was the law of Moses. The king was subjected to this written foundation just like everybody else. Apart from that, the heads of the families in Israel played an important role in the administration and justice system. It is very interesting that the common people played a role in the appointment of the king. Normally speaking, a son of the king succeeded the incumbent after his death. But the people still needed to confirm this succession. The schism of Israel after Solomon's death provides a good example. The schism is a result of the fact that ten out of the twelve tribes refused to accept Rehoboam, Solomon's son as their king.

My conclusion is that theocratic Israel was not a nation ruled by one or a few leaders who could exercise absolute power. The powers of the kings of Israel were restricted by an elaborate system of checks and balances.

Government and leadership in the new-testament church

The New Testament church was birthed through the spiritual heritage of Israel. This implies that the biblical view of spiritual leadership in the church has been shaped by ideas about leadership that originated from the Old Testament times. Therefore dictatorship of one or of a few persons is not an appropriate model for leadership in the New Testament church. Moreover, the New Testament does not compare church leaders to kings, nor to priests. In the new covenant all church members are called to be kings and priests (1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10).

The New Testament compares the church mainly with an extended family Jewish style. A key verse is Matthew 23:8. Jesus warns us not to put ourselves above other Christians because we are 'all brothers'. Apart from that, the term brothers and sisters are consistently applied to believers in the New Testament which underlines the notion of an extended family as the prime model for the church. In the church the terms brothers and sisters are widely used. Nevertheless, the implications of the family model for church leadership are not properly understood. The church needs leaders. However, they are not kings but more like heads of the family. In the Old Testament the heads of the families consisted of the eldest brothers.

1 Timothy 5:17 supports this notion of church leaders being the eldest brothers. He says that the elders 'who rule well' are worthy of double honour. The idea of the double portion is taken from the Old Testament laws on inheritance. In comparison to the other brothers the eldest brothers inherited a double portion after the death of the father (Deut. 21:17). This double portion was related to the extra responsibility that the eldest son had in relation to the entire family. Paul says in fact to Timothy that the responsibility that the church leaders have toward the church is similar to the responsibility that the eldest brothers have in relation to the family as a whole. The church members should honour this role and give the elders extra influence and resources in order to enable the elders to live up to this responsibility. And the church members should not make the carrying of this responsibility difficult for the leaders but support them (see also Hebrews 13:17).

Double and single anointing in the Christian family

I believe that leaders of churches or movements often receive a double portion of anointing from the Lord as well. We have the example of Elisha receiving a double anointing after Elijah was taken to heaven (2 Kings 9) as an illustration. This double portion is particularly

important for apostles and prophets because these are foundational ministries (though evangelists often have such double portion as well, because of their special mandate to expand the kingdom). However, they do not receive such double anointing for their own sakes, but for the sake of building and equipping God's church. It was given to them to release it to others. We do not read in Ephesians 4:11-15 that it is the primary duty of believers to serve those who have a special office or ministry. On the contrary, we read that apostles, prophets, etc. have been raised up in order to serve and equip the saints so that they can minister. And those who serve in these fivefold ministries do not receive their extra portion of anointing for the sake of gaining personal power and prestige. They receive this extra anointing in order to build up the church and its members effectively.

This means that biblical leadership can only function well if the church really functions like a family. A spiritual leader is a member of the family first, and a family leader only second. His leadership exists in order to serve and strengthen the family. The family does not exist for the sake of affirming the identity or self-esteem of the leaders. Like in any functional family, the leaders of the church, (in this case the eldest brothers in the family) communicate with their family members properly and openly. Furthermore, they also have to be willing to receive feedback from their family members, even if these members do not have a double portion of anointing. It is important to bear in mind that in the New Testament church all believers are 'the Lord's anointed'. This implies that in the church not only the anointing and authority of the leaders are worthy of respect. The leaders also need to respect and accept the anointing and spiritual authority of the other members as well.

1 Peter 5:5, 6 speaks about these principles also. Peter calls the leadership the elders, and labels the other members as the younger ones. So Peter compares the leadership also with the eldest brothers, and the other members with the younger brothers of the family. After Peter tells how the elders and the younger ones need to deal with one another, he emphasises that everybody have to 'clothe themselves with humility toward one another'. The younger brothers need to be humble toward the elders, but the older brothers need to be humble toward the younger ones as well. Peter continues by saying that whoever is not humble to others does not humble himself to God either. This principle applies to both the older brothers, the elders, and to the younger brothers in the church.

Characteristics of dominance in churches or Christian movements

After the Fall, a longing for power and wealth began to reside deeply in the heart of each man. The devil put this longing in the hearts of man as a substitute for the loss of dominion man had suffered because of the Fall. Therefore each believer needs to be vigilant lest he fall in a trap of abuse of power or financial exploitation. This is especially important if he fulfils a function of leadership. As we have observed, the Bible warns us repeatedly not to use our leadership position in the church to build and finance our own kingdom or power base. We have an opening in our lives or ministry to such abuse if one or more of the following characteristics are present:

- 1) When we claim the time, energy and money of the member to such degree that they do not have room to give from these matters to causes that the Lord has put on their own hearts.
- 2) When we require or expect members of the church to have a greater commitment to the church and to the leaders than to their own families.
- 3) When we consider the member mainly as arms bearers and water carriers who have to support the leaders instead, and fail to encourage and equip the members to serve the Lord in His strength. (see Ephesians 4:11-15)

- 4) If the members are discouraged to develop a spiritual vision for their own lives and ministries, and are merely expected to adopt and support the vision of the leadership.
- 5) When leaders feel threatened by talented and anointed members and therefore oppress, belittle or marginalize them rather than affirm and bless them.
- 6) When members do not become mature and fail to learn to develop spiritual authority in their own lives, but remain dependent on prophecies and blessing from leaders or anointed men or women of God. Leaders are by no means the only people to blame for this predicament. Many believers refuse to grow up but rather choose to remain dependent on anointed persons.
- 7) When leaders emphasise so strongly that nobody should touch him because he is the Lord's anointed that they are no longer open to warnings or corrections from ordinary believers, even when these corrections originate from a pure heart and a spirit of discernment. Leaders can be influenced by Jezebel just as easily as non-leaders.
- 8) When leaders believe that they do not need to be accountable to other people because they are only accountable to God; or when they do not accept that their spiritual authority has boundaries.
- 9) If leaders do not respect the personal boundaries of their members, but meddle extensively in their private spheres of life.
- 10) A strong emphasis on symbols of status and importance, such as special titles, places of honour in meetings, special VIP rooms etc. (see Matthew 23:6-12).

Conclusion

The church is not a petty state, nor a business enterprise. It is a family with relationships of mutual trust and respect. The hierarchy within the church is not between kings and subordinates, nor between general directors and assistants, but between oldest sons and the rest of the brothers and sisters. The role, privileges and responsibilities of the eldest sons in the Old Testament provide the true biblical model for spiritual leadership.

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