

# Adventist Review

March 13, 2014

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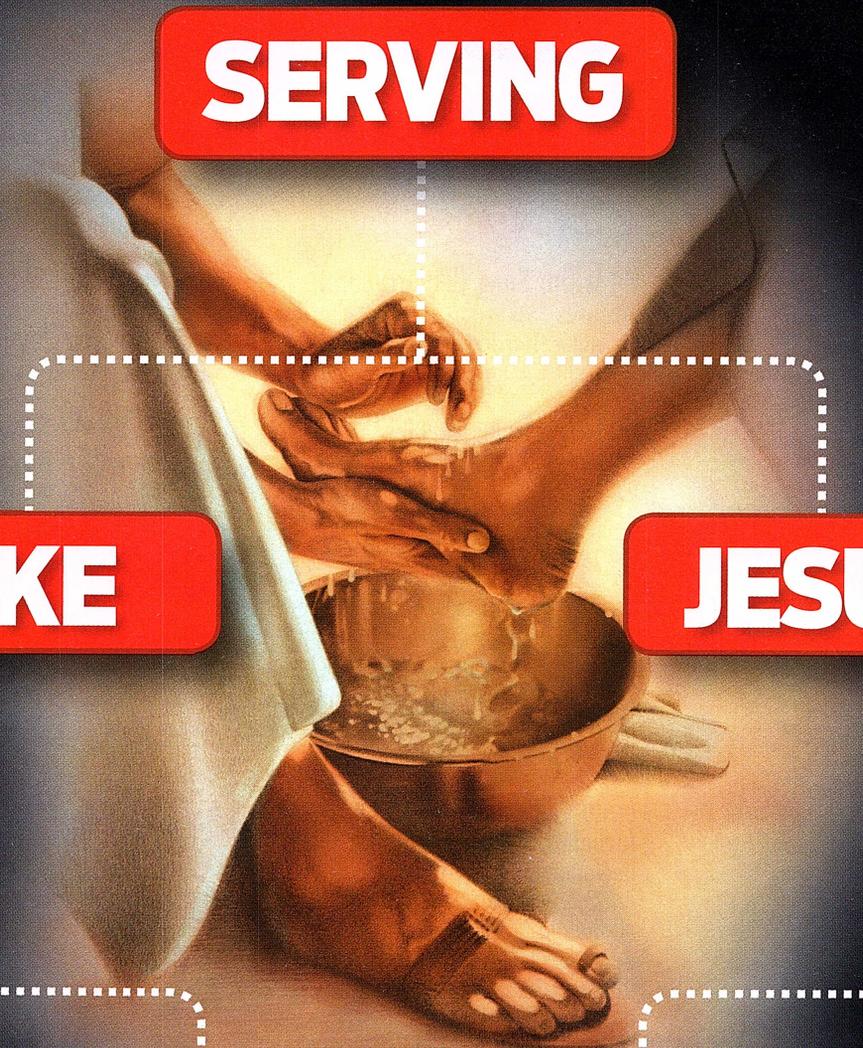
**JESUS**

**AUTHORITY**

**IN**

**GOD'S**

**CHURCH.**



# Adventist Review

**“Behold, I come quickly . . .”**

**Our mission** is to uplift Jesus Christ by presenting stories of His matchless love, news of His present workings, help for knowing Him better, and hope in His soon return.



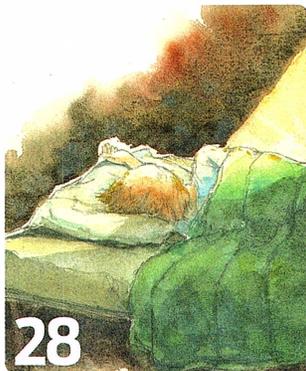
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**Serving**

**Like**

**Jesus:**

# Authority in God's Church

## BY DARIUS JANKIEWICZ

In order to thrive, every human society must establish its own organizational and authoritative structures. Eventually, if someone desires to know something about a particular nation, family, or association, they are likely to inquire about the nature and use of its authority.

While organized on entirely different premises than a nation, family, or association, the church is also a human society that must have organizational and authoritative structures in order to share its message, and thus fulfill the Great Commission given to it by Jesus.

Because of this, it's reasonable to ask about the nature and use of authority within the community of believers. Asking the right questions is of vital importance, for much depends on the way authority is understood and exercised in the church. Even such foundational Christian teachings as the nature of God and salvation in part depend on the way authority is defined.

Any discussion of the nature of Christian authority, however, tends to be muddled by our cultural context—the way we “see” the world. Our understanding of authority is shaped by the way authority is exercised in our society.

For many people, the word “authority” carries very few positive connotations. But we acknowledged that various authoritative structures are essential, as they provide our society with continuity, stability, safety, and boundaries. Without some form of authority, no human society would or could exist; this includes the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

It's the combination of our sinful nature and the abuse of authority, however, that causes us to develop negative attitudes toward authority. Unfortunately, all too often, abuse disguised by the label “spiritual” happens in the church, the fellowship that Jesus established to be different from any other human society on earth.

In recent years the issue of authority has received much attention in Adventist circles. As we have experienced the delay of the second coming of Christ, we've become increasingly con-

cerned with issues related to gospel order, organization, ranking, and policy—all the while striving to be faithful to Scripture. The nature of authority and its use has surfaced most recently in discussions on the possible ordination of women to the gospel ministry.

I've observed the debate for a number of years, and listened carefully to both sides. I find myself asking several questions: Are we certain that we truly understand what we mean when we use the word “authority”? Am I possibly making the false assumption that when I utter the word “authority,” you know exactly what I mean, and vice versa? What informs our understanding of “authority”? Is it our culture (both secular and religious), or is it careful attention to the words of Jesus?

IT'S TRULY UNFORTUNATE THAT IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY THE LOWLY TERM “PASTOR” HAS BECOME A SYMBOL OF STATUS.

### Jesus on the Authority of the Christian Leader

In order to exist and fulfill its mission, the church must have organization and leadership. Rather than modeling its organization upon secular structures of authority, as early post-apostolic Christianity did, the church should first of all look to Jesus to search for ways in which authority in His church should be exercised. It is Christ who founded the church, and He knows best what Christian authority is and how it should be exercised. His followers must take His teachings on authority seriously.

So what did Jesus have to say about authority?

I decided recently to re-read and think through the Gospel passages in which Jesus speaks about authority. His views are truly astounding. For most of us, immersed in hierarchically-oriented cultures, Jesus' message continues to be counterintuitive and difficult to comprehend, much less to accept. For this reason we tend to gloss over the passages dealing with authority without much thought. And yet these passages, if understood and applied, have the potential to revolutionize our personal and communal lives.

During His earthly ministry Jesus' disciples were frequently preoccupied with status and ranking in the kingdom of God. This is understandable, for their attitudes reflected the prevalent cultural and religious conceptions of authority. But the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus presented such an astonishingly different understanding of Christian authority that it took the death of Jesus for His disciples to understand His teachings.<sup>1</sup> Jesus' teachings on the authority of Christian leaders are most crisply articulated in a conversation that found its way into the three Synoptic Gospels.

### The Foundational Truth

The story is well known. Two of Jesus' disciples, John and James, approached Him with a request that they be seated on His right and left in His kingdom. It appears that these two assumed that the kingdom of Jesus would operate like other earthly institutions: their underlying desire was to have authority over others. Mark tells us that when the remaining 10 disciples heard about it, they became very angry, not because they had a different idea of “authority,” but because they themselves wanted such power as well. In response, Jesus gathered them together, and in the simplest terms explained the operational rules of the kingdom of God. His words are so striking that they must be quoted here:

“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them [*katakuriusin*], and their high officials exercise authority over them [*katexousiazousin*]. Not so with you!

Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave [*doulos*] of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45).

In this concise passage Jesus presents us with two models of authority. The first is the Roman idea of authority. In this model, the elite stand hierarchically over others. They have the power to make decisions and expect submission from those below them. Jesus clearly rejected this model of authority when He stated, “Not so with you!” Instead He presented the disciples with a breathtakingly new model of authority, a thorough rejection, or reversal, of the hierarchical model with which they were familiar.

The concept of authority for Jesus was to be governed by two words: servant (*diakonos*) and slave (*doulos*). From our modern perspective, these two words, often translated as “minister,” have lost much of their force.<sup>3</sup> For a person familiar with ancient society and its institutions, however, Jesus’ words must have been appalling—so much so that the disciples were unable to understand Jesus’ words. Right up to the last moments of His life, during the Last Supper, they argued about “who is the greatest” (see Luke 22:24). They did so because, in the first-century culture, servants (*diakonoi*) and slaves (*douloi*) represented the lowest class of human beings, persons who had few rights and whose job was to listen and fulfill the wishes of those they served. Among slaves “there [was] no place for one’s own will or initiative.”<sup>3</sup> “Ruling and not serving is proper to a man,” the ancient Greeks believed.<sup>4</sup> Thus, whatever the metaphors of servant and slave were meant to convey, it certainly was not exercising authority, spiritual or otherwise, over others (*katexousiazousin*) or having status in the community.

Why did Jesus use these two metaphors if He could have compared His disciples with other leadership groups in society?

I believe that Jesus was keenly aware that His kingdom would be doomed if the disciples incorporated into it the authority structures seen in their contemporary society. For His mission to succeed, all “pecking order” in the church had to be abolished. Murray Harris grasped this well: “Jesus was teaching that greatness in the community of his followers is marked by humble, self-effacing servanthood or slavery, modeled on his own selfless devotion to

**WE SEE THAT THE CONCEPT OF AUTHORITY IN NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIANITY, FOUNDED UPON THE WORDS AND ACTIONS OF JESUS, DOESN'T REPRESENT ANY FORM OF CONTROL OVER OTHERS WHERE SUBMISSION IS EXPECTED.**

the highest good of others.”<sup>5</sup>

All this shows that Jesus certainly didn’t seek to abolish all authority in the church; He just radically redefined it and distanced it from the kind of “authority” that advocated submission to a higher authority. Instead, the church was to be a place where those who desired to follow His example were willing to serve in the lowest positions. In Philippians 2:5-7 Paul thus states that “your attitude should be the same as that of “Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, . . . made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.”

In the church of Jesus, therefore, it isn’t ordination to an office, a title, or a position that makes a leader, but the quality of a person’s life and his or her

willingness to be the least of all. Following His lead, the despised terms *diakonos* and *doulos* later became the quasi-technical descriptions of apostolic and ministerial leadership in the church.

Two other Greek terms, *exousia* and *dynamis*, are commonly translated as “authority.” *Exousia* appears to be related to Jesus’ teaching ministry and His ability to forgive sins (e.g., Matt. 7:29; 9:6; Mark 1:22; Luke 4:32). The authority (*exousia*) that Jesus exercised brought words of life and healing to those who were willing to listen. *Dynamis* is usually associated with Jesus’ power to perform miracles and drive out demons (e.g., Luke 4:36; Luke 9:1).

Nowhere in the Gospels, however, do the terms *exousia* or *dynamis* appear to be associated with exercising any form of having authority over others in a spiritual sense. Such thinking simply wasn’t part of Jesus’ worldview.<sup>6</sup> It is *exousia* and *dynamis* that Jesus bestowed upon the entire community of believers—all of them—and it’s these two terms that are often confused with a secular understanding of ministerial or leadership “powers.”

There’s a remarkable and unique use of *exousia* in Matthew 28:18: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Jesus doesn’t hand over this authority to the disciples, for it can’t be done. This is the absolute authority of the almighty, omniscient, Creator God.<sup>7</sup>

And how does the almighty Creator God exercise His authority? Does He force His human subjects to be obedient? Does He take away their free will? In Ephesians 5:1, 2 Paul provides an answer to the question of how God exercises His authority: “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” The absolute authority of Christ thus represents a supreme example of love, servanthood, and self-sacrifice.

So we see that the concept of authority in New Testament Christianity, founded upon the words and actions of Jesus,

doesn't represent any form of control over others where submission is expected. Clearly Jesus always allowed the exercise of free will. Instead of the exercising of authority over others, His kind of authority can be expressed in terms of serving others. He demonstrated this most forcefully when He knelt to wash the disciples' feet and when He died on the cross, giving us a supreme example of the true understanding of Christian authority. According to Him, it's not about status or having authority over others; it's about being the least in the community of believers.

Only when we grasp the clear teaching of Jesus on this point will His church fulfill His vision for leadership.

### **The New Testament Church: A Unique Community**

As a result of Jesus' teachings, the New Testament church became a community like no other. It was a community whose leaders refused any form of hierarchy that would place some above others. In fact, following Jesus' example, the New Testament leaders proclaimed what we can only describe as a "reverse hierarchy." "Following the lead of Jesus, its leaders routinely referred to themselves as *doulos* and *diakonos* of both God and the church.

Accordingly, in 1 Corinthians 3:5 Paul writes: "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants (*diakonoi*), through whom you came to believe." In 2 Corinthians 4:5 he emphatically declares: "For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants (*doulos*)." We constantly find Paul lifting Christ and others up, while speaking of himself in such unflattering terms as "chief of sinners" (see 1 Tim. 1:15, KJV). Elsewhere he writes: "And last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle" (1 Cor. 15:8, 9).

While Paul was commissioned to proclaim the gospel, to teach, exhort, and rebuke, it appears that he purposefully sought to avoid positioning himself in a role above his fellow believers. Instead, and

despite his special position as an apostle of Christ, we see him wooing people to follow Christ, not through the authority of his "office" (an unbiblical term) but through the witness of his life. "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1; see also 1 Cor. 4:16; Phil. 3:17; 4:9; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:7).

With a clear conscience Paul was able to write to the Corinthians that when

**THE CHURCH WAS TO BE A PLACE WHERE THOSE WHO DESIRED TO FOLLOW HIS EXAMPLE WERE WILLING TO SERVE IN THE LOWEST POSITIONS.**

his young disciple Timothy visits them, he would "remind [them] of [Paul's] way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what [he taught] everywhere in every church" (1 Cor. 4:17). It was the way he lived his life, rather than his position, that resulted in Paul's having genuine authority in the church.

In the context of being "slaves" in the church, the New Testament writers were remarkably egalitarian. Everyone could be a slave of the Lord! In Romans 12:11 Paul encouraged all believers to serve the Lord as His slaves (*tō kyriō douleuontes*). In Galatians 5:13 he urged believers to "serve one another" as slaves (*doulelete*) through love. Every believer was to serve as a *doulos* of Christ and of each other.

While all believers were called to be slaves of God and one another, this especially applied to leaders in the Christian community who, according to the teaching of Christ, were to consider themselves "the least of all," and examples to those under their care. Peter echoed Jesus when he wrote to the leaders in the church: "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care . . . ; not lording it over [*katakurieontes*] those

entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2, 3). This was the primary reason Paul, James, and Peter often introduced themselves to their congregations as slaves (*douloi*) of Christ (Rom. 1:1; James 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1).

All this reminds us that New Testament leadership was not about having "authority" over others, about having the "last word," or having an "office." Instead, it was all about having the attitude of Paul, Peter, and other leaders of the New Testament church, who led by the example of their devotion to their Lord and to each other. This was the bedrock of genuine Christian authority.<sup>8</sup>

When we see the church of God described in the pages of the New Testament, we understand that it was decidedly "non-elitist." In His sayings Jesus focused on the non-elite of the day and proclaimed them to be the children of God (Matt. 5:3-8). He said to His followers: "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. . . . The greatest among you will be your servant" (Matt. 23:8-11). In modern terms we could paraphrase this saying as follows: "But you are not to be called 'pastor,' 'elder,' 'professor,' or 'doctor,' for you have only one Master, and you are all brothers." It's truly unfortunate that in Christian history the lowly term "pastor" has become a symbol of status.

Paul's favorite imagery for portraying the Christian community, i.e., the "body of Christ," represented a remarkably non-elitist view of the church (1 Cor. 12:12-31; Rom. 12:1-8; Eph. 1:22). Central to this imagery were unity of the church and the church's vital relationship with its Head, Jesus Christ. Paul's insistence that the church functioned like a human body reminded believers that they were completely dependent upon Christ for their growth and life.

While unity and the headship of Christ were Paul's main concern, his discussion of the church as the body of Christ was framed in an understanding of spiritual gifts. The recipients of spiritual gifts were all who were part of the body of Christ, and the unity of the body of Christ depended on the pres-

ence, recognition, and use of these spiritual gifts (Eph. 4:1-13). Any exclusive claim to these gifts was precluded, because their distribution was dependent upon the Holy Spirit, and not on the church (1 Cor. 12:11). Any form of elitism was settled by Paul's masterful discussion on the mutual interdependence of believers who exhibited various spiritual gifts (verses 12-31).

Furthermore, in none of the four listings of spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:8-10, 28-30; Eph. 4:11) was Paul exclusive in any way. In Romans 12:8, for instance, the gifts of teaching and leadership were tucked in among other (seemingly insignificant) gifts. It would be impossible to claim, on the basis of this passage, that the gift of encouragement was lower on the scale of giftedness, while the gift of leadership was higher and thus could be endowed only upon a certain class of believers in the church. Certainly this couldn't have been Paul's intention.

Paul's use of the body of Christ imagery helps us to understand the reality of the church and the way it should function. In this kind of community all solidarities of race, class, culture, and gender are replaced by an allegiance to Christ alone. The old way of relating is replaced by a new relatedness in Christ (Gal. 3:28, 29). In this community all people are equal members of the body of Christ, because all have experienced the risen Christ and all are gifted with a variety of spiritual gifts of equal value (1 Cor. 12), which are to be used for the benefit of believers and the world (Rom. 12:1-8).

In the church described in the New Testament, we don't find a hierarchy in which some people rank above others according to status; neither do we find a division between ordained clergy and laity. What we see is a new community, the body of Christ, a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), where all relationships should hail back to the Garden of Eden.

The reality is that if anything other than commitment to Christ and His church, spiritual gifting, and maturity determines fitness for various functions in the church, then, whether we intend it or not, we create an elitist

community. No pious designations attached to the "office" of the church—such as "servant," "spiritual authority," "spiritual leadership," or "spiritual headship"—can change this reality.

### Answering the Questions

Our God, who is a God of order, created a world in which human beings, the crown of His creation, were to live according to the authoritative patterns that governed the universe prior to the creation of the earth. Then sin entered the world. The way God exercised His authority was challenged, and a counterfeit notion of authority was introduced. The precise reason Christ, God incarnate, came to this earth and founded a community like no other was to counteract the counterfeit notion of God's authority. He accomplished it by

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His life of divine slavery (*douleia*), which ultimately led Him to the cross.

Unfortunately, human beings, weakened by millennia of sin's existence on this earth, returned to the old patterns of thinking soon after the death of His first disciples. Notwithstanding our devotion to Scripture, even we Seventh-day Adventists have inherited from Christian tradition these patterns of thinking that are so tenaciously (and tragically) ingrained in the Christian faith.

It's a common human experience to be attracted to those who exhibit genuine Christian authority, and to be repelled by the attitudes of those who

rely solely on the authority of their office. Ideally, genuine Christian authority and the authority of a representative function should be integrated. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with persons holding an office. Neither is there anything inherently wrong with the way our church is currently organized. However, while Jesus left us with no specific model of running the church, He was adamant that His church wouldn't resemble secular structures, where authority was organized according to a "pecking order."

I'm convinced that when we embrace His understanding of authority and ministry, Christ's vision for His church will be fulfilled, and revival and reformation will follow.

The questions are insistent and unavoidable: Are we going to follow culture, both secular and religious, which has taught us a hierarchical and elitist understanding of authority? Or are we going to follow Christ, who said, "Not so with you!"? ■

<sup>1</sup>Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), pp. 432-439, 550, 551.

<sup>2</sup>James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 325, 326; M. Eugene Boring, Fred B. Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 151; John L. McKenzie, *Authority in the Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), pp. 23, 24.

<sup>3</sup>Karl Heinrich Rengstorff, "δοῦλος," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), vol. 2, pp. 270, 261.

<sup>4</sup>Hermann W. Beyer, "διακονεω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, p. 82.

<sup>5</sup>Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 102.

<sup>6</sup>Clayton Sullivan, *Rethinking Realized Eschatology* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1988), pp. 72, 73; Alan Richardson, *The Miracle-Stories of the Gospels* (London: SCM Press LTD., 1956), pp. 5, 6; McKenzie, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup>John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 1263-1265.

<sup>8</sup>See Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1923), pp. 361-364, 366.



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