



## **The Structure of the Church, its Leadership and Development**

Our image of the future church greatly depends on how we think about the structure of the church, about leadership and about the way it functions. I have already made several observations about these issues throughout this book.

### ***Church structures***

One of the main problems in most present-day church structures is the hierarchical mindset. A way of thinking that is apparent in most churches, sometimes limited, sometimes excessively. To some extent it contributes to an often considerable gap between the “professionals” and “laymen”. It quickly becomes apparent that we have allowed a worldly and religious system of leadership in our churches by institutionalizing it the way Constantine did in the third century. This therefore also is part of the natural/carnal mindset.

*But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”*  
(Matthew 20:25-28)

Of course this also depends on a leader’s character, his/her background and vision. Yet, consider the role of what we often call the senior pastor, who has final responsibility in terms of everything that happens in the church and under whose authority everything is done. I do not believe that this role is biblical.

Please understand that this is not to undermine pastors, because we maintain good relations with each other and because we believe that the church is experiencing a certain development. However, we are discerning a fact. Ultimately, Jesus is building the church and we can have every confidence in Him doing so. He also wants to give us insight into this matter. Mine is that every church structure will end up either being completely changed or entirely disappearing before Jesus’ final appearance.

A person’s role as senior pastor often ends up being fatal to that person. Additionally, the church members often are kept functioning at an immature level. These pastors’ work is very intense, it is praiseworthy and it demands a great deal of energy. They would love to see many more in the church assuming more spiritual responsibility. A lot of them live with this frustration, yet consider it as part of their job description. Many church members are lulled to sleep and remain passive because the pastor has made it his/her job to carry the spiritual workload alone.

This happens regardless of their style of leadership, albeit controlling, dominating or even liberal. Jesus said:

*Do not be called leaders<sup>1</sup>; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ.  
(Matthew 23:10)*

### **Leaders**

Does this mean that there aren't any leaders? Of course not. The Bible is very clear about this. It's just that you're not always in charge of everything or the final person in charge of everything. You could be a leader in one area and in another be much less of a leader, or even no leader at all. This is a matter of flexibility. That is why I don't believe that a senior pastor and elders should be appointed when planting a church.

The Bible describes how elders were appointed. By the way, appointing someone just means acknowledging what is already recognized by everybody else. It was a well-known function in those days and in that society. It's about a spiritually mature person who is accepted with a great measure of obviousness. Everybody's functioning in his/her anointing, gifts and talents and all agree to be mutually submissive toward one another. For example, someone in the leadership team may receive a godly insight and put it into action. The others will then support and submit to him/her in that area. The next time it could be someone else in that team. In other words, there isn't one person who has final responsibility for everything and always needs to leave his/her mark on it. Otherwise the result often is a great amount of control and limited development for everybody else. This principle also applies to all other members of the congregation.

Acts 20:28 teaches about elders who have been made overseers among the flock, not about people ruling over one another. Hebrews 13:17 says that we are to obey our leaders and submit to them. Here, the word "leader" means: those who go before, and it actually means to say that there must be a willingness to be convinced by them, especially by the example they set. This goes hand in hand with a lot of room for one's own initiative with other believers, without having to have the church's name written all over it.

I'm not against church programs, but too many people hide behind them and hardly come into action themselves. The Kingdom of God is much larger than the church. We have a King, a Kingdom and a church. The church is the means by which the Kingdom is established (Ephesians 3:8-12). It often occurs that activities are created in order for the church to be put in the spotlight. However, one has a case of idolatry whenever the institution itself is exalted to be the goal.

### **Covering**

The concept of one's "covering" also plays an important role in many minds, churches and denominations when it comes to discussing issues such as church structure and leadership.

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1 Guide, master, or teacher (kathēgetēs, Strong's G2519).

Some questions are frequently asked, such as: Where do you come from? Who is your covering? What is your home church? Under whose authority are you? To whom are you accountable? Shouldn't there be someone above you? These questions originate from various ways of thinking. The idea is that you only have a right to live and to do what you do once you have an appropriate covering. The feeling is that only then will you be protected against demons and false doctrines. It's wrong to assume that you're only under leadership and safe once you're member of a specific, local church. Someone once wittily remarked: "My only covering is my blanket when it's cold at night."

These concerns about one's covering are mostly based on a question that Jesus was asked. The chief priests and elders of the people asked Him by what authority He was doing what He did (Matthew 21:23). This has often led to people asking: Who is your covering and under whose authority are you? The concept of covering, however, lacks any sound Biblical basis and the fruit of this mindset have often been a false sense of security, control, passiveness and discouragement.

Throughout the world, there are very many small groups with a shepherd that function very well independently. Of course they need input and equipping from apostles and other ministries. But they don't always dare ask for help, often because of fear or disappointment. Certainly they could've received the help they needed, but only if they were willing to bear the name of the "ministry", subscribe to their idea of "covering" and/or give them their tithes. True apostles are called for the body of Christ and are not primarily focused on their own denomination and/or group.

### ***Jethro's model vs. God's model***

We read about Moses' conversation with his father-in-law, a man named Jethro, in Exodus 18. Jethro had seen how Moses had been the only one to judge over the people, day and night. He warned Moses to not continue in this way because it would completely exhaust him. He then gave him some advice:

*Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. Let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. (Exodus 18:21-22)*

Here we see how Jethro introduced a hierarchical concept of leadership and that Moses simply applied it. Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said. The Bible doesn't mention that he first consulted God about it.

Later on, we read that this structure didn't have God's heart and that in the end Moses himself hadn't gained much from it, either (Numbers 11). When the people started

complaining again, Moses called to the Lord and said:

*I alone am not able to carry all this people, because it is too burdensome for me.  
So if You are going to deal thus with me, please kill me at once, if I have found favor  
in Your sight, and do not let me see my wretchedness. (Numbers 11:14-15)*

God then commanded him to gather seventy men whom he knew to be elders and officers of Israel and to bring them to the tent of meeting (Numbers 11:16). God took some of the Spirit Who was upon Moses and put Him upon the seventy elders and officers so that Moses no longer had to bear the burden of the people alone (Numbers 11:17).

The men then started prophesying. Two of them hadn't even gone inside the tent of meeting because they had stayed behind in the camp, but they, too, were prophesying there (Numbers 11:25-26). Moses was informed about this by his servant, Joshua, and was asked to restrain these men from prophesying.

*But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!" Then Moses returned to the camp, both he and the elders of Israel. (Numbers 11:29-30)*

Here we see that the solution to Moses' problem wasn't Jethro's hierarchical concept of leadership, but that it was God's commandment to take seventy men whom Moses knew to be elders and officers of Israel. In that sense, these men had already been recognized and acknowledged.

### ***Authority, obedience and submission***

Clearly, authority comes from God and He is the one who gives it. Jesus said that all authority had been given to Him in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18) and it's a gift that He gives to His children. Therefore there isn't any delegated authority in the Kingdom of God from one person to another. There only is delegated authority from Jesus to His followers. It's organic and besides, we always see the body being directed by the head. The kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of darkness work with delegated authority. However, Jesus can speak to any believer and every believer receives his/her authority from Him. In the Gospel of John, Pilate asked Jesus about the authority He claimed to have. Jesus said:

You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given from above.  
(John 19:11)

One can respond to authority, yet there is an important difference between obedience and submission. Obedience is a deed, whereas submission is an attitude. The Bible teaches about being obedient to God, the government, your parents and lawmakers, with God of course

being the One we should obey most of all. In that sense one could be disobedient to a natural authority while still having a spirit of submission. Hence, being disobedient while maintaining an attitude of respect and awe, is very different to being disobedient with a rebellious and undermining attitude. It's because submission is about your heart's attitude. You will then be willing to listen to others, be transparent towards them, be vulnerable and consider others to be more important than yourself.

Authority isn't based on rank and position, but on godly character and Holy Spirit's work in us. Many people, whose ministries and anointing are recognized and acknowledged without question, still often work using a strict hierarchical, authority-based structure. A renewal of our thinking will continue to occur in this area. It isn't a hierarchy. It's not about one's position or about being dominating. It's functional. It's about being relational and about serving others. It's not about class or being a guru, about a system based on titles and qualifications, but it's about the priesthood of all believers.

Everyone has authority to perform certain actions. God is the sole source of that authority. The Greek word for authority is *exousia* and refers to a lawful act that may be performed (Strong's G1849). God has given authority to all believers. Authority to become children of God, to own property, to marry or to remain celibate, to choose what they want to eat and drink, to heal the sick and to cast out demons, to build the church, to receive blessings from certain ministries, to rule the nations, to eat of the tree of life, etc.

However, the Bible nowhere teaches that God has given believers authority over other believers. Such a form of authority is never related to church leadership in the New Testament. There is no such form of *exousia* from one believer towards another. The authority within the church evidently differs from the natural order that has been established in the world. That's because the church isn't a manmade organization, but a spiritual one. Hence it's an organic authority. It uses language to convince, to exhort and to challenge. It never circumvents other people's responsibilities. Everyone stays responsible for his/her own actions and decisions. Organic authority implies spiritual maturity and develops spiritual maturity. In contrast, leaders in the natural world may very well be less mature than those over whom they have authority. The more you grow in your spiritual life, the larger your organic authority becomes. It has to do with the respect you receive that results from trustworthiness and serving others, not from a position. It's a kind of authority that only works when it comes out of the heart of God. So if the church is encouraged to do something that isn't according to the Lord's will, it won't be supported by His authority, even if it isn't unbiblical.

In Acts 15 we read about a problem. The solution was sought for in Jerusalem. Then we read:

*For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ...(Acts 15:28)*

It isn't authority that fits into a hierarchy that runs top-down, but it runs from the inside out. Holy Spirit, who lives inside us, is the source.

### ***Accountability towards others***

What about being accountable to others? We must always be accountable to the Lord (Matthew 12:36; Romans 14:12; Hebrews 4:13; 1 Peter 4:5). There isn't a single passage in the scriptures that teaches that we should be accountable to people. However, the Bible does teach us to submit to one another. Ephesians 5:21 says that we are to be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. As already discussed, submission is an attitude of the heart. In that sense it's important to be willing to be convinced by one's leaders, especially by the example they give. 1 Peter 5:5 even says that young people must submit to their elders and that we must be subject to one another in humility.

Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers are ministries that have been given to the church (Ephesians 4:11). This leadership cannot be appointed, but it can be recognized and acknowledged. Hence, these are not positions, but functions. The order by which these functions are listed is also functional and does not refer to their respective position. It is rather striking to discover that Paul always exhorted the church based on this relationship, and never on the basis of some position in a hierarchy (Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 1:10; 2 Corinthians 2:8; Galatians 4:12).

Whenever he called for obedience to God's commandments, he always called for obedience to God (1 Corinthians 14:37)! He always tried to convince people based on God's thoughts and not by means of ordering people around. Whenever he desired a specific action or attitude, we see him exhorting, challenging, asking, warning, requesting and persuading. We never see him giving orders by means of an authoritative declaration.

In those days there was considerable debate about whether or not one could eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. There also was some disharmony about the day on which they were to gather together. Paul discussed these matters in Romans 14-15. We don't see him making or enforcing any rules, except that they had to love and accept one another and strive for peace:

*For the Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. (Romans 14:17)*

It is also remarkable that Paul always addressed his letters to the entire congregation of believers, and never tried to change things through one single leader. Doesn't this seem more appropriate with a priesthood of all believers?

### *A new movement*

I see a new movement developing. How will it develop? Who knows? One's personal relationship with Jesus will be the most important of all. Of course it's always been the most important of all, but it will become even clearer than ever before. What does He want, anyway?

*Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, "Sacrifice and offering you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for Me." (Hebrews 10:5)*

He is looking for a spiritual house to live in (1 Peter 2:5). Jesus put it as follows:

*The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head. (Matthew 8:20)*

Again Jesus taught in parables. Jesus, the Head of the church, is looking for a place where He can reveal His authority in all its fullness. You could also read: He doesn't have a place to rest His head, or He doesn't have a place upon which He can put His head (Strong's G2827). He was already referring to the church that would be born on Pentecost. Many desire to be this place for Jesus. Besides, Jesus is the only Person who can really promise that He'll never let you down.

The Bible teaches that Jesus always wanted to proclaim the heart of God. He made that testimony "tangible" to the people and always created an atmosphere of life. The testimony of Jesus also always creates an atmosphere of life. It's the spirit of pro-phesy. That's what He's asking us to do as well. A prophetic people are a people that echo the heart of God. The church is busy and making the Kingdom of God visible wherever and whenever that lifestyle is revealed from out of the heart of God.

It is wonderful to gather together with many believers and to take part in it. This is regardless of whether it's on a Sunday or any other day of the week. I also love sitting at the table with friends while eating, laughing, talking about Jesus and sharing our hearts. Those meetings very often are better than the usual Sunday morning service. That is because it, too, is a manifestation of church.

Some leaders respond, saying that they are "congregation people" – as if I am not. To be perfectly clear, it is impossible not to love what Jesus loves very much. Jesus loves the church, but the church does consist of people and God loves those people. Of course, the point in question is how one defines "church", which results in different perspectives on this issue. Fortunately, Jesus is the one building the church and consequently, much that doesn't have His heart is being broken down.

I don't consider the fact that church buildings are running empty in the Western world to be such a problem. I prefer to consider it to be a sign of something new. A network of relationships is being formed while circumventing the religious system. God is building His

own network. This is an organic movement where people find one another and are relationally bonded together. It is a movement in which we recognize and acknowledge one another's ministries, gifts and talents.

### ***The church is awakening***

There's a new awakening in the church. A people are being formed out of every denomination and out of the religious system. Sometimes they stay where they are, sometimes they leave. It's all about what God wants them to do. I sometimes call it the church in the wilderness, the jackals and ostriches (Isaiah 43:18-21). Those caves of Abdullam are being formed everywhere (1 Samuel 22:1-2). Whether or not they're already gathering together, they're already there. It still is hidden for the most part, but something's happening, and that gives much hope.

A Christian isn't someone primarily assigned to finding a community that provides for his, her or somebody else's needs. It's every Christian's task to create a place for someone around him/her who doesn't have such a place. We are responsible. If I'm the church, I'm also responsible. If Jesus is my head, then I'm accountable to Him and He gives me the authority to do what I have to do. True Christianity is the complete, personal responsibility to do what Jesus says.

The message of the cross is very comforting. Jesus died for my sins. He took upon Himself the responsibility for all my wrong choices, but that also means that I no longer have any excuses. We can no longer hide behind our personal history or what others have done to us. It's impossible to continue hiding behind wrong leadership, control and manipulation. Of course there's a time and place for healing, restoration and comfort. However, many people keep on licking their wounds open and continue to be allergic to everything that has to do with authority for fear of control and manipulation. And then there are also leaders who are too afraid to say anything about it and who hardly dare to correct people when they need it. That's no use. Paul didn't lay yokes on anybody, but he had no trouble rebuking people when it came to matters such as hypocrisy, impurity and disobedience towards God.

God is calling a prophetic people that move on the wind of the Spirit in His Kingdom. However, a real change in the institutionalized church will not come about by activating spiritual gifts, by singing new songs, by clapping and raising hands or by giving much more room for praise and worship.

Of course, these are very important issues and they do help the church get ahead. Breaking the church into smaller groups with various goals and/or making more disciples isn't the solution, either, even though it does contribute to relational developments within the church.

God has used the institutionalized church in the past, and still does. God is gracious and wants to work through every structure as long as He finds hearts that are opened to Him, and there are many of them. So it's not really about whether God wants to use the mega churches, the cell churches, the house churches and all sorts of other initiatives. It's about God holding us accountable for doing what His Word says, to the extent that we know and understand it.

We mustn't compare ourselves to others. Besides, you normally don't get that very far with other people's approval. It's about God's approval. God is taking the church on a road where He wants to dismantle the system of spiritual hierarchy and laity. He wants to restore a community of equals and release each and every believer's ministry to the fullest. How will all of this happen? Jesus is building the church, and that is something we can absolutely trust.

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