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The Present Leadership of the Resurrected Lord

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By Paul Anderson

While it can be said that all Christians believe in the resurrection of Christ, too few have taken seriously what it means to live under his present leadership. In fact, the implications of believing in the resurrected Lord may be among the most neglected aspects of the Christian faith! Such neglect was one of the factors that spurred the missionary zeal of George Fox and other early Friends, who sought to spread the Gospel of the living Lord to all parts of the earth, Christian and otherwise. The world still needs this message as much today as ever, and nearly all renewal movements within Christianity have been based squarely upon recovering a dynamic sense of Christ's leadership in the world. As George Fox put it in 1661,²

Dwell in the Power of Truth...every one in your Measures...feeling and knowing the Lord's Power everyone in yourselves...that you may sit down in your own possession of everlasting Life.

In that meet together, waiting upon the Lord. In it keep your meetings, where you may feel the Chief Shepherd leading you into pastures of Life. And so, the blessing of the Lord be with you!

As suggested by this statement, the power of the resurrected Lord affects us individually and corporately. As individuals we actually experience the power of the Resurrection in our lives, and this is good news indeed! The powers of sin and death are rendered toothless by the life-producing dynamics of the Resurrection. There is no habit, no weakness, no failure that cannot be healed and redeemed by the power of Christ working in our lives.³ As well as transforming the individual, however, the power of the resurrected Lord also affects the corporate fellowship of believers, and this is where modern Christians often falter. Put simply, one of the greatest needs of the church today is to experience the dynamic leadership of Christ as its Head; but knowing how this happens effectively is not easy.

¹ This essay was first published in the *Evangelical Friend*, and it was later published by Barclay Press under the title "With Christ in Decision Making; His Present Leadership Among Friends." "Friends," of course, includes any and all who seek to discern the will of Christ and obey it (Jn. 15:13-16).

² George Fox. "The Power of the Lord Is over All." *The Pastoral Letters of George Fox*, ed. Canby Jones, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1989, #203. Fox uses the word "Measure" to refer to the special way each person is reached by God.

³ Paul describes these two kinds of victories graphically in Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me"; and Romans 8:11, "But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus... dwell in you, he ... shall also quicken [make alive] your mortal bodies..."

The urgency of this need startled me several years ago when the main speaker at a Friends pastors' conference challenged us to be “good shepherds of our flocks” and lead our churches through efficient decision-making processes. “A wrong decision is better than no decision.” declared our speaker in slightly overstated terms. He then went on to expound the virtues of authoritarian styles of church leadership, borrowing heavily from “management by objective” trends in the corporate executive world.

This troubled me greatly as a young pastor. On the practical level, I had observed several churches being torn apart by pastoral leaders who, in trying to develop a working hierarchy (with themselves, of course, at the top) had either alienated others with leadership abilities or had discouraged the use of their gifts. Ironically, the very goal they sought to achieve — furthering Christ's healing ministry in the world — was being hindered by the means they pursued to achieve that end.

While I was aware that such models work well in some cases, I was also aware that authoritarian leadership often divides and discourages the flock. On the other hand, there is a lot to be said for alleviating the time-consuming frustrations of decision making within the church. Many a pastor, clerk, elder, or committee chairperson has suffered needlessly at the hands of those who freely assign responsibility without also granting the authority to carry out one's assignments. This was clearly a central problem addressed by our speaker. Sometimes groups get so involved with debating the best means to an end that accomplishing an important goal is forever frustrated by trivial discussions.

On a theological level, however, I was also disturbed by the implication that Christ's leadership is limited to a human structure. It seemed to me that the goal of pastoral leadership as portrayed in the New Testament was less preoccupied with pastors being “the” shepherd, or even the “undershepherd,” and more concerned with leaders pointing people to the True Shepherd, *Christ himself*. Nearly all of the exhortations to pastors and other leaders in the New Testament emphasize humble servanthood and exemplary faithfulness, following the lead of Christ.⁴ Some leaders were even corrected because they had abused their positions of service.⁵

Just as it is not the goal of the vocal minister simply to be heard — but for the living Word of Christ to be heard through his or her words — so the primary calling of the pastoral minister is not to *do* shepherding, but to lead the flock to the nurturing/healing power of Christ, who *is* the true Shepherd of the sheep. Paradoxically, this is what makes the shepherding work of a pastor most effective. When one truly becomes the servant of the church, the most fruitful service he or she can provide is to continually build the connections between believers and their living Lord.⁶ Because

⁴ Such passages as John 10:10-12; 21:15-17, and 1 Peter 5:2-4 emphasize the importance of pastors (and elders) being good “shepherds” to the “flock” of Christ, imitating his sacrificial example. These admonitions probably did not arise out of a vacuum, but were intended to correct the misuse of positional service and authority within the early church.

⁵ The above passages (#3) clearly have Ezekiel 34 in mind, where the “shepherds of Israel” are scolded for feeding themselves and not the flock. In 3 John 9 “Diotrephes, who loves to be first...” is challenged for using his authority in a heavy-handed way, and in 1 Peter 5:3 the selfish interests of pastoral leaders are confronted. See Paul N. Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel; Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6*, Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International (1997) 221-51.

⁶ Being “servant of the church or meeting” describes a Quaker view of leadership well, but the same should be the case for all Christian leaders seeking to emulate the example of Jesus. Important to establish within

Christ himself bridges the gap between us and God as our High Priest, there is no need for another.

“Yes, but how does this work?” one might ask. The quick answer is that it is an uncharted sojourn; a walk of faith. There are no guarantees, no pat answers. On the other hand, neither do we operate in the dark. The same Spirit who inspired the Scriptures speaks to us as we read them. And, these Scriptures promise us that Christ's Spirit will be with us, will guide us, and will lead us into all truth.⁷ This is the most striking implication of one's belief in the resurrected Lord. If Christ *is* alive he *seeks* to lead us, and if he *seeks* to lead us, his will *can be discerned and obeyed*.

Believing this is one thing. Doing it effectively is another. Great dangers abound, of course, any time a person or group seeks to discern a divine leading. Our subjective views and our personal interests too easily get mistaken for the Holy Spirit's voice. Then again, every approach to guidance has its own difficulties. The key is addressing the vulnerabilities critically, under prayerful submission to the Lordship of Christ every step of the way. Fortunately, throughout the history of the church, learnings from the past inform our approaches today, and several principles have been found to be trustworthy. On a personal level one can test one's personal “leadings” by asking the following questions:

Questions for Testing One's Leadings

1. “Is this leading in keeping with the teachings of the Scriptures?” The Spirit who inspired the Scriptures will not contradict the truths contained in the Bible. The Bible serves as an authoritative and objective referent by which to check subjective leadings.
2. “Are there examples from the past that may provide direction for the present?” Because the church is the body of Christ, hHis leadership can often be evaluated more clearly by hindsight, and such observations may provide parallels that inform present issues.
3. “Is a leading self-serving, or is it motivated by one's love for God and others?” Most false leadings are revealed to be selfishly motivated, or at least tainted with self-interest, even if the goal sounds noble. The will of Christ is always perceived more clearly from the foot of the cross; as we release our needs to God we find that God is also freed to meet them in ways pleasing to him.

an organization, however, is: who makes which decisions, and by what process? Just as a leader must be given clarity regarding his or her assignments, he or she must also be released and empowered with the authority and means to carry them out. Authority does not need to be structurally hierarchical, though, to be effective. The most important factor is responsibility-clarification: is a person empowered to carry out the specific tasks assigned? Authority is always a function of entrusted responsibility.

⁷ The five *Parakletos* passages of John 14-16 state clearly that the risen Christ is with us, guides us into all truth, reminds us of Jesus' teachings and convicts the world of sin and righteousness. See also Matthew 18:18-20. Where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, he is *present* in their midst. From the high Catholic Mass to the fiery Pentecostal revival meeting, Christians hold to the sacramental reality of the Real Presence of the resurrected Lord within the gathered meeting for worship.

4. “Does it matter who gets the credit?” The Kingdom God is never limited to the petty “empires” that humans try to build. These will crumble, but what is done for Christ and his Truth will last. A lot of good can be done when it doesn't matter who gets the credit.

5. “Is the ministry of Jesus being continued in what we do?” If the world sees Christ in our time it will be through the men, women, and children who are his hands and feet in the world. To pray in Christ's name and according to his will implies taking the time to seek out and know his desires, and this is what makes any authentic follower of Jesus his “friends.” (John 15:12-16)

Along with these individual questions there are corporate guidelines for discerning Christ's leadership among us, based on the teachings of Scripture and refined by experience. While voting may bring a discussion to a speedy conclusion, this does not necessarily mean that the group has sought — let alone found — the will of Christ. On the other hand, unwieldy and endless discussions may be brought to a more effective resolution when the group understands the nature of the corporate task at hand. The goal of decision making within the church is less a matter of deciding what to do and more a matter of listening for the still, clear voice of the risen Christ, who speaks in Spirit and in Truth. Quakers have learned a great deal about how this happens and have much to share with others regarding practical suggestions for corporate decision making in the church. Some of these include the following:

Guidelines for Effective Corporate Decision Making⁸

1. Matters of community maintenance deserve to be relegated to working groups. Only matters that concern the direction of the entire community deserve the searching of all, although clearness for the concerns of individuals is also appropriately sought in the gathered meeting for worship.

2. The meeting for business is first and foremost a meeting for worship. In such a meeting the central question is neither “What is expedient?” nor “What is the group consensus?” but “What is the leading of Christ in our midst?” Prepare accordingly and allow times of prayer and quiet searching within the meeting itself.

3. All members who have something to say have the responsibility to do so clearly, but having done so, to release their contributions to the larger sense of the meeting and leading of the Spirit. No individual possesses all of God's truth, and

⁸ These themes are probably less familiar, and this makes them all the more important. They may be helpful for clerks, pastors, and committee chairpersons to use corporately, as those present are asked to focus on the goal and character of the “gathered meeting for worship in which business is conducted.” Many of these insights may be attributed to Dealous Cox, former clerk of Reedwood Friends Church in Portland, Oregon. These guidelines were also published recently in the *Indiana Friend* and *Quaker Life* as well as the *Evangelical Friend*.

the contribution of each who has something to say is essential. To withhold one's truth is a "high crime" against the meeting and an affront to the Lord. It may have been the very piece needed to complete the puzzle. The clerk should invite insight from all perspectives possible in order for the issue and its implications to be understood clearly.

4. Where there is a conflict of perspective the issue must be sorted until the genuine issue(s) of disagreement is (are) clarified. Then, those who hold opposing views are called to distinguish between preference and conscience. If it is a matter of preference, release it to the meeting and do not stand in its way. If it is a matter of conscience, hold to your conviction as long as it holds you. The prophetic voice *often sings a solo*, at least for a while.

5. Friends must agree to wait until there is clarity of leading and then support the decisions made in unity. When this happens, meetings begin to experience the exciting reality of Christ's present leadership, and the meeting is energized to move forward in the strength of unity. Speaking with a united voice depends on waiting long enough to receive a common sense of leading. Not only do we seek Christ's leading, but the Spirit of Christ also seeks to lead us into truth.

What a difference our belief in the resurrected Lord makes in our daily lives! It is important to believe that God has a plan for the direction of the local church as well as for the church universal. If Jesus is alive, he seeks to lead. If he seeks to lead, his leadings can be known and obeyed individually and corporately through the direction of the Holy Spirit. And, if his leadings can be known and obeyed, they indeed should be sought!

Christian leadership involves much more — and less — than trying to get people to bend to the will of a human leader or group. Effective Christian leadership ever facilitates helping others discern and mind the dynamic leadership of Christ, the living Lord of the church. While the Bible teaches this conviction clearly, amazingly few Christians, including Quakers, have put it authentically into practice effectively. The world needs this message, especially in the form of the changed and changing lives of men, women, and children who, as George Fox has said, "feel the Chief Shepherd leading [them] into the pastures of life."