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The Present Leadership of the Resurrected Lord

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While 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 today, at Easter time and always. As George Fox put it in 1661, 1

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. 2 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.

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 leadership in the church, 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 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 were using to reach 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 an ideological 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. 3 Some leaders were even corrected because they had abused their positions of service. 4

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

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"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. 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. 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 "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 objective referent 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, His 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, and as we release our needs to God we find that God is also freed to meet them in ways pleasing to Him.

4. "Does it matter who gets the credit?" The Kingdom of 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 us 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—and 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 Making

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

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No individual possesses all of God's truth...

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Quakers... have much to share with others regarding practical suggestions for corporate decision making.

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2. 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... dwelleth in you, he... shall also quicken [make alive] your mortal bodies... ."

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. Being "servant of the church or meeting" describes a Quaker view of leadership well. 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 hierarchical to be effective. The most important factor is specificity: Is a person empowered to carry out the specific tasks assigned?

6. The five Paráklitos passages of John 14:16-18 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.

7. These themes are probably less familiar, and this makes them all the more important. They may be useful for clerks 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 Desales Cox, former clerk of Reedwood Friends Church. These guidelines were also published recently in the Indiana Friend and Quaker Life.
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individuals is also appropriately sought in the gathered meeting for worship.

2. The meeting for business is also a meeting for worship. In such a meeting the central question is not “What is expedient?” nor “What is the group consensus?” but “What is the leading of Christ in our midst?” Prepare accordingly and allow times for prayer and quiet searching in 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 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 and 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, one is called to release it to the meeting and not stand in its way. If it is a matter of conscience, one must hold to one’s conviction as long as it holds them. 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 to 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 unanimity. Speaking with a united voice depends upon waiting long enough to receive a common sense of leading. Not only is it we who seek Christ’s leading, but it is also the Spirit of Christ who seeks to lead us into truth.

As we celebrate Easter this year let us consider what difference our belief in the resurrected Lord makes in our daily lives. If Jesus is alive, He seeks to lead. If He seeks to lead, His leadings can be known and obeyed, and this happens for us individually and corporately. While the Bible teaches this clearly, amazingly few Christians [including Quakers] have put it into practice. The world needs this message, especially in the form of the changed and changing lives of men, women, and children who “…feel the Chief Shepherd leading [them] into pastures of Life.”

Paul N. Anderson is assistant professor of Biblical and Quaker Studies at George Fox College, Newberg, Oregon, and has been appointed to be the editor of Evangelical Friend effective July 1.