
The Discipleship and Submission Movement

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The current outpouring of the Holy Spirit has given multitudes all over the world a new appreciation of what Jesus means to believers. As a result many old barriers have been broken down. Fellowship with God and Christ in the Spirit has brought people together from various backgrounds. With this, a new hunger for the teaching of the Word of God has arisen.

Every day new groups are formed for the express purpose of prayer and Bible study. Some of these groups, however, have lacked leaders with a mature understanding of the Word. In many cases the pastors of the old-line churches to which some of these people belonged have been either too busy or too unsympathetic to the Pentecostal experience to give the counsel and help needed.

With the avowed intention of meeting this need for training and for developing leadership, well-known Bible teachers are promoting a new concept of shepherding, discipleship, and submission to authority. For a number of those cut off from old loyalties and for new converts who had no one to guide them, this teaching seems to have filled a vacuum with what appears to be good results. In other cases, however, there have been serious abuses. Much has been reported that is destructive and divisive. So much so that it has become necessary to examine the claims of this movement, especially with respect to its teachings concerning the Scriptures, the Church, and the believers.

The Scriptures

All these teachers seem to declare loyalty to the written Word of God as the inspired and infallible rule of faith and conduct. All seem to claim that any manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit must be judged by it. They recognize also that the Word must be applied to our present situation and to our daily needs and problems. Some, however, seem to attach unwarranted authority to the contemporary spoken word, the rhema, going so far as to hold that it is equal to the written Word, the logos.

It is true that the gifts of the Spirit such as the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, prophecy, and interpretation may provide specific help, encouragement, and guidance for believers. But the danger comes when instead of searching the Scriptures and judging these words by the whole intent of the Word of God, selected passages are spiritualized or allegorized in a way that will support their teachings.

One example is the way John 10 has been interpreted. In John 10:1-6, Jesus contrasted the shepherd who comes into the sheepfold by the door with the thief who enters by climbing up another way. His hearers did not understand His meaning, so Jesus changed the picture and plainly said, "I am the door of the sheep. All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers" (John 10:7, 8). As the Good Shepherd, also, He would lay down His life for the sheep.

A number today have misinterpreted the phrase, "I am the door." Jesus is the door, they say, and then they add that everyone needs an undershepherd who is a door. They teach that such an undershepherd will keep out the thieves and robbers, the false teachers who would lead believers astray and rob them of God's truth and blessings. At the same time, they hold the undershepherd is to be responsible for teaching, training, counseling, and guiding his "sheep" in a life-long commitment.

It is true many new converts look to someone to keep them from error and to guide them into truth. However, where the individual relies altogether on another person to protect him from all error, he will cease searching the Scriptures and fail to develop his own ability to withstand false teaching. Both Paul and Peter warn against false teachers, but the New Testament does not indicate that the answer is to get a human shepherd who will protect the believer. Scripture teaches that all must fight the good fight of faith (1 Timothy 6:12). All must put on the whole armor of God and learn to use the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit so they may stand (Ephesians 6:10-18).

A closer examination of John 10 furthermore rules out the idea of any man being a door in the sense Jesus is. He is the door for all the sheep. The true sheep listen to no one's voice but Christ's, for they know Him and they know that He alone laid down His life for them. He knows their need. He gives them eternal life (John 10:4, 14, 27, 28).

The sheep of His flock hear His voice for themselves and know it. Thus to take John 10 and use it as a basis for interposing human shepherds between the convert and Christ or to use it as a basis for making human teachers a door is to establish a doctrine for which this passage gives no grounds.

Paul recognized that the elders (pastors) of the congregations in Ephesus had a responsibility to feed the flock, the church (local assembly) of God. He warned that wolves would enter among them, not sparing the flock. But he also warned that from among these elders or undershepherds themselves, men would arise twisting the Scripture to draw away disciples after them (Acts 20:28-30). That is, they will seem to be good teachers but will twist the truth at some points in order to build a following for themselves.

Thus the believer needs more than a human shepherd to protect him. He needs to develop his own ability to search and understand the Scriptures under the guidance of the Spirit who alone can lead into all truth (John 16:13).

The Church

Another aspect of this movement is its attitude toward the Church. Its leaders claim they are not starting a new denomination and suggest that respect be given to existing churches and pastors. But in practice they are saying that existing churches and pastors have failed. By the very fact that leaders in this movement are establishing a new set of shepherds, they are setting up new structures and forming a new denomination, regardless of how they may try to interpret their actions.

In line with this, some of these teachers claim their mission and the church's mission is no longer evangelism, but the setting up of a new order on earth in prospect of bringing in the Kingdom. But the New Testament does not indicate we can set up a purified external order in this age. The Church grows and develops, but the tares will be among the wheat until the harvest. Judgment that destroys the present world order is necessary before the kingdom rule can be established on earth, as Daniel 2; 2 Thessalonians 1, and Revelation 19 clearly indicate. It is necessary to avoid this postmillennial viewpoint which ignores the evangelistic purpose of the Church in the present age.

Some find the pattern for their new order of discipleship in the relationship of Jesus and His disciples, forgetting that this was done within Judaism before Jesus began to build His Church. Instead they should seek guidance for church patterns in the Acts and Epistles. There variety is evident to meet the need for every situation.

Along with this there is a current tendency to downgrade democracy in the church in favor of submission to authority. It is supposed that apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church exercised authority over the church in Jerusalem and other churches as well. A closer examination of the Scripture shows that when the seven were chosen to administer aid to the widows, the apostles merely stated the qualifications and asked the people to choose or elect seven men (Acts 6:3, 5). In Acts 14:23 where Paul and Barnabas "ordained" elders in every church, the Greek word for ordain means to choose or elect by the raising of hands. Though it is correctly translated "chosen" in 2 Corinthians 8:19, some say it cannot mean elect in Acts 14:23 because the apostles are the subject. There is no reason, however, why the verb may not indicate that Paul

and Barnabas laid down the qualifications for elders (as in 1 Timothy 3:1-7) and then conducted an election. We see variety in the New Testament rather than one rigid type of organization. The purpose of organization was always to meet the need and accomplish the task, never just to organize for organization's sake.

There is no indication that the Jerusalem church exercised authority over other churches. When they sent Peter and John to Samaria, it was to express interest and give help. The same thing was true when Barnabas was sent to Antioch. It is helpful to notice that Barnabas did not turn to Jerusalem for advice when he needed help. He went directly to Tarsus and brought Saul to work with him. But Saul did not stay under the authority of Barnabas, for both were under the authority of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Barnabas willingly allowed Paul to take the place of leadership later on.

Not only so, Paul withstood Barnabas on one occasion (Acts 15:36-41), and Peter and the delegates from James and the Jerusalem church on another (Galatians 2:11-14). His authority was the Word, his guidance by the Spirit and the Word. Paul's response to the request of James at Jerusalem to participate in an act of purification was concern for the truth, not mere arbitrary submission to authority (Acts 21:17-26).

The Bible does teach a submission to our leaders and to one another in love. But this is a matter of mutual concern and consideration for one another. The Bible also recognizes the need for leadership, but Jesus warned that he who will be first should be the servant of all. There is no room in the church for anyone to lord it over another or over God's heritage (1 Peter 5:3).

Paul and his company did not claim dominion over the faith of their converts. Rather, they were helpers of their joy, but by their own faith these converts must stand (2 Corinthians 1:23, 24). Peter (1 Peter 5:4) urged the younger to submit to the elder, but immediately added that all are to be subject one to another and clothed with humility.

No one is to take arbitrary authority over others even to protect them. For each is to be on guard, to be vigilant, in order to have victory over Satan (1 Peter 5:8).

The Believer

With regard to the position of the believer, the tendency of this shepherding movement seems to be to over-allegorize the Scripture, pressing its analogies too far.

The believer is said to be a "dumb" sheep. This takes the external circumstances of the analogy to an extreme not warranted by the context or by the rest of the Bible.

In the Bible the believer is compared to a sheep in the sense that through Christ he goes in and out and finds pasture. Christ leads and feeds him. But Jesus also called His disciples friends. He explained His plans and purposes. He called for them to share in His work as fellow laborers. He promised another Comforter to be with each one to do the same work He had done of helping, teaching, and building. Christ is the one Mediator between God and man, yet through the Spirit a variety of gifts and ministries is available to build the believer. (See Ephesians 4:11-13; Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12.)

The emphasis of this shepherding movement, that the believer find himself a shepherd and submit to him in order to be rightly related to Christ, is usually based on Ephesians 4:16. Proponents of this view interpret this to mean we must be connected to the Body through joints or ligaments. This also is pressing the human side of the analogy too far.

The context shows that all are to come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God. None are to be as children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine. All are to speak the truth in love so they may grow up into Him in all things. Unlike the human body, when every part of the body of Christ is in its proper place, every part receives from Christ directly, so that the Body increases and edifies itself in love.

Similarly in John 15 Jesus is the whole vine. Every branch (every believer) is related to Him directly and receives the flow of His life directly, not through some other branch.

God has set pastor-teachers in the Church (Ephesians 4:11) as a part of the variety of ministry to the whole Body. To reject these ministries is to deliberately reject the wise provision of the Head of the Church who is the giver of these gifts. On the other hand, however, to suggest that a Christian does not have access to God or guidance from Him apart from a human shepherd is going to the opposite extreme and denies what the Bible teaches about the believers' direct access to God (Hebrews 4:14-16).

In this connection some have even suggested that the "shepherd" must be told all one's plans and decisions so he can "cover" him. This terminology is misleading. The Bible used cover in the sense of blood atonement--something Jesus did once and for all--something that is available only through Him.

Others have tried to justify a shepherd-sheep relationship by comparing it to Paul's relationship to Timothy. But this was the relationship of an older to a younger minister and does not establish a pattern for the relationship between a pastor and people.

Still others use the analogy of a wife's obedience to her husband. But this is used of submission of the Church to Christ, not of the believer to a man. To use it in that way is misinterpreting the analogy.

Conclusion

Perhaps we should recognize that the current shepherding-discipleship-submission movement did indeed grow out of real needs. In the midst of a permissive society, people do need authority. But we must point them to the basic authority of the Word. Then we also point them to Paul's admonition that they learn to know those who labor among us, who are over us in the Lord, and esteem them in love for their work's sake (1 Thessalonians 5:12).

In our impersonal society, people do need the closer fellowship of smaller groups. These can be provided through leadership training within the local church under the direction of the pastor. Ways of meeting this need can vary to suit the circumstances. But the kind of division seen in the Corinthian church, based on getting a following for a human leader, must be avoided.

In our complex society, people do need teaching and training. But more is needed than one person or even a local church can supply. The Bible calls for a plurality of ministry and gifts within the local church (1 Corinthians 12). It also suggests that others can be brought in as was Apollos (Acts 18:27, 28). Others can be sent to Bible colleges for training.

Above all, we need to recognize that the sin of causing division in the church is a most serious breach (Romans 16:17, 18; Titus 3:9-11). In the urgency of this age the unity of the larger body is also very important if we are to accomplish the mission of the Church. The united effort of Assemblies of God missions is witness to the effectiveness of cooperation among many local assemblies. Much is being done that small groups working independently of each other are not doing and have never been able to do.

Finally, Jesus Christ must be kept central. He is the great Shepherd of the sheep. The only covenant we need is the one sealed in His blood. We can do God's will in a way that is well pleasing in the sight of God only through Him (Hebrews 13:20, 21).