

Relocating Authority: A Perennial Family Issue

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At this end of the 20th century in the society of the western world the overall crisis in authority is a truism. It's not so much that people evade taking authority--although that is also not unknown. Most often the diagnosticians of our authority-crisis have in focus the refusal on the part of those under authority to acknowledge, accept and obey the authorities in place over them. Even the bishop of Rome today no longer receives automatic acquiescence from his own faithful to his authority.

Some analysts trace this wide-ranging crisis in authority to the time immediately preceding the Enlightenment. At least in western European society the crisis was generated by the authority-holders themselves. When the authorities in church, government, and academia as well, began to turn their authority positions into positions of privilege, the underlings began to object, and then eventually to reject, the authority of these formerly automatically recognized authority-bearers.

Thus the Age of Enlightenment in our western culture was first of all a crisis in authority, and that in the literal (Greek) meaning of the word crisis: judgment. Traditional authorities were weighed and found wanting. Instead of seeing their calling as one of service, the traditional [Christian] view for positions of authority--servants finally of God for the welfare of those whom God put under their jurisdiction--they regarded their position as one of privilege for those in power. When the underlings no longer trust the overlings, authority can only be maintained by the whip. But that can scarcely be called civil society--and even so it lasts only till the time that the underlings procure their own whip to strike back.

Normally we think of authority as enforceable, if necessary by coercion: the police officer with a weapon, the fiscal officer with the purse-strings, parents with their superior size and strength, or nowadays, the keys to the family vehicle. But authority so enforced is hardly authority acknowledged in its own right and for its own sake. It can be enforced, but the toll in human conflict increases. The crisis worldwide is that in so few contexts, it seems, is authority acknowledged in its own right, for its own sake, and then obeyed.

Growing segments of today's families are seen to be afflicted with the same crisis in authority. Perhaps growing children have always reached a moment in their growing-up when they responded "why?" to a parental order--to see if there were additional grounds for consent other than the parent's "I said so." In older times (we think) obedience

would come even if there were no other grounds to commend it--solely because the one ordering was parent to the child. Nowadays we hear that in many families (both two- and one-parent families) just being the parent is insufficient grounds for an obedient response. Most often the "why?" is seeking additional grounds, additional reasons, to show that the proposed action is in the best interest of the child--which means that it must commend itself within the rubrics of rationality of the child. "Just do it, because I told you" is less and less sufficient to settle the case.

Society as we envision it, even in the most democratic of models, is inconceivable without authority. In any social network, someone has to be in charge (=responsible) for this and that tissue of the body politic. People under authority in such tissues of the body politic must acknowledge and give their consent to those exercising authority on them. But just saying so doesn't make it happen. Just as children need to learn how to speak, and then read and count, so also living with authority must be learnt. That includes learning both how to live under someone else's authority and how to exercise authority when it is in your own hands. If such bilateral living with authority--how to exercise it when you have it and how to live under it--is not learnt in the family along with all the other elements in the network of socialization and maturation, where can it be learnt?

Authority inevitably entails some form of super- and sub-ordination. If the over-under posture is the primary (or only) fact of the relationship between any two persons, it is but a short step away from the master-slave relationship, from oppression and servitude. One reason why authority is best learnt in the family is the manifold additional contexts that optimally go along with parent-child relationships. Long before conscious authority situations arise in children's family-life, they will have experienced nurture, care, smiles, protection, discipline, forgiveness, appreciation, emergency aid, and love from these persons called parents. The trustworthiness of these particular parents arises from these routinely repeated interactions of affirmation.

If authority figures are to be acknowledged as such, they must be seen as trustworthy. Trustworthiness is established by experience, the experience that some person indeed has my welfare at heart. Once that has been learnt in the long haul of growing up in a family, the child can value other authority figures on commendation from the trusted parents and/or on the basis of a much shorter telescoped table of experience. So other family members, school teachers, public officials, etc. can be acknowledged as authorities from this primal foundation of positive parental experience.

The key to such a scenario, of course, is in the behavior of the parents, the functional authority figures. In both secular society and in the Biblical view, the mere fact of parenting a child grounds parental authority for this child. Biblical theology adds the God-factor, ascribing this authorization to God's specific assignment of this child to these parents. Thereby the parents assume a stewardship role for their children. The infants--like all humans--are God's image. They belong to God, not to their parents. Parenting is a "calling." God calls the parents to carry out God's kind of parenting for these children. And children are similarly "called" by God to be God's kind of children to these designated caretakers. For the children there is a specific commandment in the Ten

Commandments (“Honor your father and your mother”), and the New Testament writings augment that with comparable admonitions to parents.

So the issue of authority for all of society has a primary taproot in how authority is practiced and thus learnt from parents--none of whom is perfect--in the family. But what model might even such non-perfect parents use for their own practice thereof? A Biblical proposal for exercising authority comes from the words of Jesus. The rendering from Matthew’s Gospel (20:24-28) reads as follows:

(24) When the ten [disciples] heard it [sc. James and John’s request for left and right hand positions next to Jesus as he entered Jerusalem], they were angry with the two brothers. (25) But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. (26) It will not be so among you: but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, (27) and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; (28) just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Here Jesus begins by contrasting the practice of authority in the Gentile world and that appropriate to his own practice, which he here commends to his disciples. It is the difference between “authority over” and “authority under.” The key is the relational location of the authority figure with reference to those for whom he is authority. It is the question of who serves whom.

In the Gentile world, the world of secular daily life as we too know it, authorities are at the top of the organizational chart and the underlings are below. In elaborate systems of such authority, we have the standard organization chart with many boxes at the bottom and a shrinking number of them as we move to the top with finally only one at the very top. Put into three-dimensional terms it is the organizational pyramid. The many on the bottom serve the ones above them. The middle ranks have authority over the lower ones, and are themselves under the authority of the higher-ups. Finally way at the top is some “box” with no authority over it, and all the other boxes are beneath its authority.

Jesus speaks a stern “It will not be so among you,” and then describes his own “authority under” organizational pattern. The greater the authority figure, the more persons there are “under” whom he or she is rendering service. And the ones who would be in a single “box” would be subordinate to everybody, “slave of all.”

Early on in Matthew’s Gospel, already in chapter 2, the theme is introduced in the overture-episode of Herod and the infant Jesus. Both are named with the title “King of the Jews.” We know we are headed for conflict. The Magi are the catalysts for forcing Herod’s hand and teasing him into exercising his authority in a thoroughly “Gentile” way, lording it over his subjects as a tyrant. The prospect of a competitor King of the Jews exposes the fear that accompanies Herod’s exercise of his authority. To eliminate any pretender who challenges his authority Herod massacres the children of Bethlehem, the very ones the King of the Jews is called to serve and protect. Here is a clear case of “Gentile” authority carried out--ironically--by the official King of the Jews, a clear case

of what “will not be so among you” disciples of Jesus. The infant “King of the Jews” who escapes Herod’s pogrom here at the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel enacts his upside-down “authority under” till the end of the story.

In Matthew 20 all the disciples, not just the two, James and John, who were brash enough to ask, are dreaming of “Gentile” authority for themselves. They have no doubts that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to set up exactly that sort of regime. Doubtless his words “not so among you” come as a shock. Even more crushing are his words about his own authority “not to be served, but to serve,” and then “to give his life” in the full execution of his authority.

Can such an authority paradigm be predicated to parents? Aren’t parents by definition “over” not “under” their children, with priorities in age, intelligence, strength, etc.? Don’t they even have godly authorization to be parental authorities? Of course. Yet that says nothing as to how these superior qualities and the divine authorization are to be used in parenting.

If parents really related to their children as the children’s servants, wouldn’t the kids run all over the parents? Not necessarily. At least not if the parents indeed have some intelligence. To use our parental resources for the “best possible good” of the children would in no way commend “letting them run all over us.” In no way is serving one’s children merely consenting to whatever the kids want, or letting them have their way in everything. God’s appointed authorities are on assignment to care for those placed in their jurisdiction. Thus parents’ calling is to use their position and resources for the children’s own welfare, and of course that means discipline, sanctions, saying “no” when the opposite response would do harm.

Jesus’ authority-under style does not imply that there will never be conflict. Were that the case, then his words about “giving his life” would be out of place. Since both parents and children in any family, even “Christian” families, are not exempt from being sinners, conflicts--about authority too--will occur. And that being the case, there are additional family resources available in times of authority conflict when one or more of the family members is a Christian.

In the language of Matthew 20, such family members are beneficiaries of Jesus’ own authority exercised on them. Thus they are on the receiving-end of his serving them, of his giving his life for them. Disciples who persist in that posture of receptivity and entrust their lives to this upside-down authority of God’s own son, get a similar vision of whatever authority they exercise in their own daily lives. Precisely when they are tempted (or goaded) into using their authority in Herodian fashion, they have an experienced alternative to hold against it. That alternative from Jesus heightens the significance of our Herodian aberrations. Such misuses of our own authority, given the One who originally parcels it out is more than just a personal ethical failure. It signals that our malfeasance is not just with the kids we’ve poorly served, but with the Senior Manager whose middle managers we are.

It is here--again and again--that Jesus "giving his life a ransom for us" realigns our personal managerial account with the Head Office. That's how he serves us before we come up with any service to him. In that continuing servicing from him [in Word and sacrament] he encourages us over and over again to carry out our parental calling as he did his with us. "As the Father sent me, so send I you."

Such a practice of parental authority in the servant module is not uniquely reserved to Christians. Fathers and mothers of good will throughout the world can and do find resources to do their parenting in this upside-down way. Yet Christians have an additional resource in their own Christ-connection to model and support such authority-under parenting.

Knowing themselves to be recipients of God's own forgiveness via Christ's upside-down authority, they have access to the same option in their parenting. When the parent-child transactions do not run smoothly, both Christian parents and Christian children have the authorization and the resources to forgive one another--and to do so even "in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

Such events may be unusual even in Christian families, but the Christian Gospel commends it for those under Christ's authority. When parents forgive the sins of their children, and children do the same for their parents, their "old" relationship with each other is being transformed into a new one. Instead of parent and child, they become in that very transaction of Christian forgiveness siblings to one another. Parent and child are replaced by "brothers and sisters in Christ." And all of that by virtue of the "Big Brother" who has been their servant by giving his life a ransom for them.

Can such upside-down authority be implemented in our Herodian world today? Why not? The "old" world of the past has in every generation been Herodian in its manifold authority structures. And families for good or ill have been the seedbed where the next generation learned about authority and how to live with it. Where parents exercise Christ's own non-Herodian authority as their children grow up at home, what might that not bring to the other authority pyramids these children enter in the adult world? So what if the "old" world continues to operate with point-up pyramids of authority? Christians located anywhere in those pyramids by virtue of their secular callings could still strive to exercise their authority at those very points in upside-down fashion--serving rather than being served. No wonder "Gentiles" in the first centuries of the Christian era complained that Jesus' disciples were "turning the world upside down." Indeed they were.

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