

# WHOM SHALL WE FOLLOW?

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**T**HERE ARE many difficult questions concerning leadership and authority. There is scarcely any opinion that does not have some authority to support it. In every aspect of our lives, whether in religion, politics, morality, literature, art, there are conflicting opinions. Each of them makes a bid for our adherence. Whom shall we follow?

Among the world's religions there are conflicting claims. Each of them has its religious leader. Gautama Siddhartha for the buddhists is the incarnation of wisdom. For millions of chinese, Confucius was the great philosopher and teacher. For the muslims, Mohammed is the great prophet. For the christians, Christ is not only the great teacher and prophet. He is God incarnate.

Among christians themselves there are denominations with conflicting claims for authority. Catholics claim that their Church was founded by Christ, and that the Church has been fundamentally faithful to its founder. Throughout history, different persons have challenged this claim. They have presented their views of the meaning of authentic christianity which have attracted many followers, men such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, to mention only a few. Further from the christian tradition, but claiming religious authority, there are such religious leaders as Joseph Smith, founder of the mormon Church, Mary Baker Eddy with her christian scientists. The list could go on and on. Whom does one follow?

Even within various religious groups there are conflicting authorities, each one presenting his position as the truth. There are theologians against other theologians, scripture scholars against other scripture scholars; and in many cases, both theologians and scripture scholars line up against the authority of the pope, bishops, and the traditional teaching of the Church. In the past, many catholics looked out securely from their impregnable castles with a certain amount of complacency on the turmoil within other christian denominations. They saw the progressive fragmentation which fol-

lowed upon the principle of private judgment, or reliance on scripture alone. They saw professors take over the authority not only to teach theology, but to teach what was to be believed and not believed. However, the complacency is gone. The catholic coat without seam does not look that way any more. Within the Church we see a wide spectrum of opinions on such matters as papal infallibility, sexual morality, divorce, abortion, christology, and mariology. Again, the question presents itself: whom do we follow?

Frequently the term pluralistic is used to describe our present situation. Perhaps we are more conscious of pluralism today than were our forefathers. However, it is not a new phenomenon. From the beginning there have been two kinds of pluralism. There is the healthy pluralism of diversity within unity, shown for example in the different spirit in eastern and western christianity, and the different theologies in the history of christian thought. On the other hand, there is a pluralism that is divisive and sectarian. It was found even in apostolic times, and proliferated in the course of history.

All of this is not saying anything new. Because of competing and contradictory authorities, it always has been a problem to recognize which authority has a claim on our allegiance.

The question does not arise for men in the same sense that it might apply to animals. For animals the need to follow other animals does not arise from a search for meaning, but from the search for places to survive. For man, however, the question is inevitable. Man *must* follow because he belongs to the limited sphere of his time and place, and also to that which transcends his limited time and place. The only way he gets out of the immediacy of his own experience is through the meaning that is mediated through others. Though we have been accustomed to think of persons as primarily rational, or, if we follow an existentialist bent, as self-creative, we have to correct those views, or at least complement them. Man by his nature is a follower. He knows through the knowledge of others, through their experience. Man is the most dependent of beings. Because of the limitation of his time, he cannot know the past except through others; because of the limitation of space, he cannot know places where he has not been, or persons whom he has not seen; because of the limitations of his talents and energies, he cannot learn very much from his own experience. A walk through any large library will bring home the point we are making. By his very nature as a being in history, as part of the world constructed by judgments about what is true and good, man is existentially a follower. Again,

this highlights the importance of the question: whom do we follow? The need to follow is part of our nature. Whom we follow depends on many factors.

In practice, we do not begin by choosing those whom we follow. They are given to us. We are born into a situation which mediates meaning to us. Thus we are born into a christian family and culture, or communistic, or muslim, etc. In a sense, these leaders remain 'in possession', unless challenged by other leaders. When this happens, it is possible that a question might arise about leadership or authority. At this point, a real crisis could arise in a person's life, depending on how much of his life or world is invested in his leaders with all they represent. In religious matters, this is called an invitation to conversion. Among some philosophers it is called a motivation to shift horizons.

Not many in fact are led to challenge seriously the leaders who are in possession of their world of meaning. Even fewer are courageous enough to transfer their whole world into an entirely different world. We see examples, however, in the life of St Paul, St Augustine, Newman, Edith Stein, Chesterton, Maritain, Karl Stern. Very few reach the abyss separating their world from another. Even fewer have the courage to make the leap from one side to the other.

What we have said above serves as an introduction to the main point we want to make. Much of the New Testament literature is directed to answering this question about whom we should follow. In fact, the gospel of John makes this question one of the dominant themes. We want to show in the first place that in apostolic times there were competing and conflicting bids for leadership within the christian community, which were dividing that community; secondly, that these conflicts made it necessary for the writers to answer the question: whom do we follow?

One more preliminary note before we look at the New Testament. Different writers describe the meaning and relationship of authority in different ways. We understand the distinction as follows. Both have to do with the influence that a person or persons has over another for various reasons. We see leadership as influence which evokes a response because of its innate or acquired evocative power: for example, knowledge, skill, ability, etc. Authority, on the other hand, looks to the kind of influence that does not depend on a person's native or acquired talent. It is the right to command, which has as its correlative the duty to obey. Depending on the basis of the right and the duty, there are different kinds of authority:

for example, parental, governmental, religious, etc. When we use the terms leadership and authority, we use them with the overtones of the right to command and the corresponding duty to obey.

*The problem of leadership and authority in the apostolic Church*

Before taking a look at the apostolic Church, it would be useful to remind ourselves that the problem of leadership and authority marked the history of the people of Israel in the Old Testament. For example, the leadership and authority of Moses were threatened by Miriam and Aaron. 'Has Yahweh spoken to Moses only? Has he not spoken to us too?'<sup>1</sup> The whole of Israel rebelled against Moses and Aaron. 'Let us appoint a leader and go back to Egypt'.<sup>2</sup> Korah, Dathan, Abiram, together with two hundred and fifty of the important people, rebelled. 'These joined forces against Moses and Aaron saying to them, you take too much on yourselves! The whole community and all its members are consecrated, and Yahweh lives among them. Why set yourselves higher than the community of Yahweh?'<sup>3</sup>

In the Old Testament the prophets are the genuine leaders and authorities of Israel. However, their authority was not always accepted. Their claim to authority was challenged by others who claimed to be prophets, as well as by the people who resisted their message. Amos was told to go home. Jeremiah was mocked and threatened with death. The prophecies of Isaiah were mimicked, making them sound like the babbling of a child. There were false prophets and false prophetesses, irreligious kings and priests, the attraction of pagan cults.

Coming into New Testament times, leadership and authority were invested mainly in the scribes who belonged for the most part to the pharisees. The Jewish scribe was the scholar and the intellectual of Judaism. He received the title *rabbi*. He was an expert in the law, which encompassed all wisdom. The pharisees as religious leaders, the sadducees as the priestly caste, and scribes who were learned in the law, made up the leadership of the Jews. Each group had its influence. The most powerful was the coalition of pharisees and scribes. Throughout the New Testament they are the ones who challenge Jesus's claim to authority. They recognized that his claims could not coexist with their own. This leads us into the

<sup>1</sup> Num 12, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Num 14, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Num 16, 2-3.

central question of the problem of leadership and authority in the New Testament.

In the synoptics, in the first place, there is the conflict of Jesus's authority with the religious authorities of the jews. They all combined to make common cause against Jesus because his own claims relativized and evacuated their own claims to authority. He taught the people with authority, not like their own scribes.<sup>4</sup> There is a parallel between the authority of the centurion to command subordinates and the power of Jesus to effect healing by a word.<sup>5</sup> He has authority to forgive sins.<sup>6</sup> He can communicate his authority over the powers of evil.<sup>7</sup> His followers have only one rabbi, not many, namely, himself.<sup>8</sup> He is directly challenged to vindicate his authority for his action: 'what authority do you have for acting like this? And who gave you this authority?'<sup>9</sup> He makes the claim to have all authority in heaven and on earth and invests his disciples with his authority.<sup>10</sup>

Turning to the other New Testament literature, we are struck with the conflict of authorities and the effort to clarify the question: whom do we follow?

Among the Corinthians there were competing authorities. 'Each of you is saying, I am Paul's man, or I am for Apollos; I follow Cephas, or I am Christ's. Surely Christ has not been divided among you?'<sup>11</sup> There were others among them who were completely overturning the faith. 'Such men are sham-apostles, crooked in all their practices, masquerading as apostles of Christ'.<sup>12</sup> The Galatians are being turned away from the true gospel by false teachers. 'I am astonished to find you turning so quickly away from him who called you by grace, and following another gospel. Not that in fact there is another gospel. Only there are persons who unsettle your minds by trying to distort the gospel of Christ'.<sup>13</sup> 'The blame lies on the way they have tried to win you over: by separating you from me, they want to win you over to themselves'.<sup>14</sup>

Particularly in the pastoral letters we find the conflict of leadership and authority, with the constant warning to expose the false teachers, and to transmit the healthy doctrine of the gospel. He compares these false teachers to the egyptian magicians who opposed Moses, Jannes and Jambres, who seemed to perform the same wonders, but whose works were ultimately exposed as trickery.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Mt 7, 29.

<sup>5</sup> Mt 8, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Mt 9, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Mt 10, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Mt 23, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Mt 21, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Mt 28, 18-20.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Cor 1, 12-13.

<sup>12</sup> 2 Cor 11, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Gal 1, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Gal 4, 17.

<sup>15</sup> 2 Tim 3, 8.

Instead of preaching the gospel, many created their own sects. 'As for a man who promotes a sect, reject him after a first and a second admonition, knowing that such a man has been turned out of the way and is sinning and is self-condemned'.<sup>16</sup>

The same conflict among teachers who claim to teach with authority is found in other writings in the New Testament. 'But Israel had false prophets as well as true. You likewise will have false teachers among you. They will import disastrous sects'.<sup>17</sup> 'For among those who have gone out into the world there are many prophets falsely inspired'.<sup>18</sup> The whole letter of Jude is directed to this problem.

How does the New Testament confront this problem of conflicting authorities? There are two stages, so to speak. First of all the vindication of Christ's authorities over and against all others who claim to have authority. We cannot explore this in detail because of limitations of space. However, it is mainly through his signs that his personal authority is vindicated. Secondly, there are those who derive their authority from Christ. Paul, for example, constantly emphasizes that his authority is from God and from Christ and not from man.<sup>19</sup> Besides the authority that finds its authentication from being commissioned by Christ or by his apostles, there is the basic norm of *fidelity* to the gospel. Those who preach the gospel are stewards of the mystery, agents, envoys, ambassadors, heralds. Their mission is not to give their version of the truth, but to transmit what has been given. There are other signs also which are indicative of the authentic teacher, whether, for example, he lives off the gospel, or whether he actually lives the gospel in his personal life. But the two main norms to distinguish whom to follow are legitimate commission to preach, and secondly fidelity to the gospel message.

### *The johannine answer to the problem of authority and leadership*

The gospel of John explicitly faces the question, 'Whom shall we follow?' It does this by identifying the uniqueness of Jesus as the revealer of the Father. John's gospel is concerned not only about the authority of Christ as teacher, but about the question of authority in the Church. We stressed above that the New Testament

<sup>16</sup> Tit 3, 11.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Pet 2, 1.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Jn 4, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Rom 1, 1; 1 Cor 1, 1; 2 Cor 1, 1; Gal 1, 1; Eph 1, 1; 1 Tim 1, 1; Tit 1, 3.

literature was not written in a situation of tranquillity or peaceful reminiscence about Christ, but from the midst of conflicting claims to teach the authentic message of Christ. If this was the case with Paul, it was much more evident by the time John wrote. His gospel, letters, and the Apocalypse are filled with warnings about false teachers.

We shall comment briefly on John's answer to the question: whom shall we follow? He approaches it from three aspects: the uniqueness of Christ's authority in contrast with the authority of others; secondly, the dispositions one must have to recognize Christ's authority; thirdly, the way that Christ's teaching authority is transmitted in the Church.

The whole of John's message about Jesus as teacher is summed up in the verse he quotes from Isaiah, 'they shall all be taught by God', whilst he is speaking about the way that men come to him and to the Father.<sup>20</sup> In the passage in Isaiah, as well as in a similar passage in Jeremiah,<sup>21</sup> the prophet is describing the fulness of God's presence to his people in the messianic age. This is described in terms of immediacy: God will directly teach his people. Jesus quotes this passage to show that it is fulfilled in himself. His own word is really the Father's word. His own teaching is really the Father's teaching.

The whole mystery of the Incarnation is this mystery of the immediate presence of God through the mediacy of Christ. The words and actions of Christ are not the words and actions of someone other than God himself. They are not the words and actions of the sort of prophet who is given a function at a particular point of his career, of which he could be relieved at some other time. When we are being taught by Christ, we really are being taught by God. Immediacy through mediacy: this is the mystery of christianity. The flesh, actions, words of Christ are the medium in which we are touched immediately by God. This is also the mystery that is continued in the Church and the sacraments, and the ultimate foundation for authority in the Church.

This theme is brought out in many ways throughout the gospel, at one time emphasizing the identity of Christ's words with the message of the Father, at other times contrasting his authority with other teachers.

In the prologue, there is a description of his unique authority to

<sup>20</sup> Jn 6, 44, 45.

<sup>21</sup> Jer 31, 33 ff.

reveal the Father, since he is the Word of the Father. He is the unique mediator on whom the angels of God ascend and descend.<sup>22</sup> 'He whom God has sent speaks God's own words: God gives him the Spirit without reserve. The Father loves the Son and has entrusted everything to him'.<sup>23</sup> To the Samaritans he is revealed not simply as another prophet but as the saviour of the world.<sup>24</sup> 'When a man's doctrine is his own he is hoping to get honour for himself: but when he is working for the honour of one who sent him, then he is sincere, and by no means an impostor'.<sup>25</sup>

The passage which sums up the meaning of Christ as the unique revealer of the Father is his reply to Thomas: 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life'.<sup>26</sup> Throughout the discourse at the Last Supper, the theme is presence in one form or another: the Father's presence in Christ, Christ's presence in his disciples. Here Christ declares that he not only points out the way but that he is the way. He is the way because he is truth and life. As truth, he is the fulness of what the Father has promised. As life, he is the fulness of what the Father wants to give, life. If he were not fulness of truth and life, he would be like one of the prophets who would point out the way without being the way.

Peter asks, 'Lord to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we know that you are the holy one of God'.<sup>27</sup> The whole of John's gospel develops this response. We do not go to John the Baptist who was just a lamp, a forerunner.<sup>28</sup> Not to Moses who simply transmitted the law,<sup>29</sup> who wrote about Jesus and will be the chief accuser of the jews.<sup>30</sup> Not to the scriptures where they think they find eternal life, whereas they simply testify to Jesus.<sup>31</sup> His teaching is not like that of the scribes, which they learned in the schools.<sup>32</sup> He is the fulness of light, and the one who walks with him will not walk in the darkness.<sup>33</sup> In the Apocalypse, Jesus is called the Amen, the faithful witness, the only one who can open the book of the Seven Seals. In contrast to Jesus all others who have come are thieves and brigands.<sup>34</sup>

It is clear, then, that this is one of the central themes in the johannine corpus. How is it that a person recognizes Jesus's authority? This is another important aspect of the same theme. This happens through a certain connaturality which we call faith. One has to do

<sup>22</sup> Jn 1, 51.

<sup>26</sup> Jn 14, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Jn 1, 17.

<sup>33</sup> Jn 8, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Jn 3, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Jn 6, 67-8.

<sup>30</sup> Jn 5, 44-7.

<sup>34</sup> Apoc 10, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Jn 4, 42.

<sup>28</sup> Jn 1, 5-8. 19-24.

<sup>31</sup> Jn 5, 35.

<sup>25</sup> Jn 7, 18.

<sup>32</sup> Jn 7, 16.



the truth in order to know the truth, seek the Father's will, if one is to recognize Christ. This connaturality of knowledge is brought out beautifully in the passage on the Good Shepherd. 'The sheep follow because they know his voice'.<sup>35</sup>

How is this authority transmitted through time and history? In the Apocalypse, the Church is described as being built on twelve foundation stones on which are written the names of the twelve apostles. What is described there symbolically is expressed in words and gestures in the gospel. The gentiles had come to Philip with the question, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus'.<sup>36</sup> This is the desire of all men through history. Though Christ is ascended, he can still be seen through his disciples: he can still be heard through those commissioned to preach the gospel. 'As the Father sent me, so I am sending you'.<sup>37</sup> Just as the Father is immediately present and active in Jesus, so also Jesus is immediately present and active in his Church. The twenty-first chapter of the gospel is a beautiful description of the way that Jesus is immediately present and operative in the work of his apostles during the twilight period between his first and second coming.

### *Conclusion*

Whom to follow? What authorities? For what reasons? Amid the welter of conflicting authorities where can one invest not only his career, his money, his mind, his heart, but his everlasting life? We have attempted to show that one of John's main concerns was to answer that question.

Jesus, the unique teacher, ascended into heaven. However, he did not leave us orphans, nor did he leave us a book, or scribes, or charismatic leaders. He is still present with the same mediate-immediacy he had during his life on earth. This takes place through the power of the holy Spirit who is given to the Church to declare all that Jesus has taught.

Whom shall we follow? This receives a different answer after the Incarnation than it did before: 'They shall all be taught by God'.<sup>38</sup> 'I am (with the connotations of that expression in John) the Way, the Truth, and the Life'.<sup>39</sup> Incarnation exists for sacramentalization. In the Church, the Way, the Truth, and the Life are sacramentalized. Christ teaches, guides, enlivens, forgives in his Church,

<sup>35</sup> Jn 10, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Jn 6, 45.

<sup>36</sup> Jn 12, 22.

<sup>39</sup> Jn 14, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Jn 20, 21.

particularly in those who sacramentalize the mission of the apostles, that is, the holy Father and the bishops. In one of his sermons, St Augustine said: 'We were sluggish in our walking, and the path came to us. Since the path has now come to us, let us walk it. Christ as man is our path. Let us not desert the path, so that we may thus attain the only-begotten Son of God, the Equal of the Father, transcending all creation, co-eternal with the Father, day without day, and Maker of faith'. As Christ is embodied in the Church, so is the path, since all that he is, is poured into the Church, 'the Church of the living God, which upholds the truth and keeps it safe'.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> 1 Tim 3, 15.