

Building Up “Spiritual Authority” in Your Service

By Rev. Derek Li (translated by Deacon Robert Lam)

After careful planning and preparation for 2-3 years, SCBC Constitution Amendment is now completed and will be implemented gradually starting next year (2019). All ministries and departments may need some restructuring and changes in their modes of operation. From an institutional perspective the constitution amendment is merely an attempt to define more clearly the roles, responsibilities and accountability of respective ministries and departments. Are there any differences between how we should look at authority and responsibilities in the church versus secular institutional settings? In the former setting should there be an added element of spirituality? If the answer is yes, let me call this “spiritual authority” for the time being.

Under the Jewish system in the Old Testament the authority of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees was derived from their position of sitting in Moses’ seat, so the people had to be careful to do everything they were told (Matt 23:2-3). Likewise, in a modern secular institution the power and responsibilities of a leader are associated with the position held by that person. While such “positional authority” is essential for the effective operation of a secular institution, it is inadequate for leading a church. Leadership in a church cannot be exercised solely through “positional authority.” Leaders must also show the qualities of their spiritual life in order to convince the congregation to follow them. In this regard Jesus had set an excellent example for us. When Jesus had finished saying something, the crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law (Matt 7:28-29). It meant Jesus’ words had revealed certain spiritual dimensions and power that was capable of touching people’s hearts and lives. This was what I referred to as “spiritual authority” above. Our leaders must not lead by virtue of the position they hold in the church alone. They must also demonstrate spiritual growth and maturity in order to convince the congregation that they are leading in the right way, as leaders chosen by God.

Below are some suggestions for empowering an institutional position with “spiritual authority”:

1. Set the good example of a faithful servant: Jesus taught us not to do what the teachers of the law and the Pharisees do, for they do not practice what they preach (Matt 23:3). While their actions relied on the power derived from their institutional positions, and we are obliged to submit to such authority that comes from the law of Moses as revealed by God, we must first realize the transforming power of God’s word before we are empowered to live out the word of life. Paul wrote to Timothy who was working in Ephesus to encourage him that though people may look down on him because he is young, if he sets an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity, he would gain “spiritual authority” in his service. People would admire and submit to his authority because they admire and submit to the Lord whom he serves.
2. Speaking with God face to face: God regards it as important that we have his word (as revealed through the Bible) in our service. As the elder sister and brother of Moses, both Miriam and Aaron thought that, from a secular perspective, God would use them more than their younger brother. They asked, “Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Hasn’t he also spoken through us?” They did not realize that God had chosen Moses to be the leader of the Israelites in the exodus and they were only his assistants. When they looked down on the leader chosen by God and spoke against him, God was angry and punished them, but

protected Moses. God said, “But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” (Num 12:7-8). Note that Moses was built up spiritually by regularly speaking face to face with God.

3. Don't be too calculating: When you dedicate yourself to serve as a pastor, deacon, committee member or in any other leadership role in the church, do not haggle over time spent, wages, role and reputation. Don't regard serving in the church as a job. It is our response to God's salvation grace, our new life in Him, and our co-working with Him in the Kingdom ministry. Employees haggle over benefits, but not God's servants and members of His household. “Home” is a place where we should not be calculating nor arguing about everything. It is a place for love and making sacrifices. Our Lord Jesus did not bother with counting how much we owe, he just willingly gave us everything including his life. Today people talk about fairness but not giving out and giving up, not to mention giving oneself to and for Jesus. My life goal is to make full use of my gifts to serve in response to His calling. In my 35 years of full-time ministry I often said to my students and coworkers that if we are always figuring out our earthly gains of our service, we might as well take control of ourselves and return to our original careers. We cannot dedicate ourselves to full-time ministry on the one hand and be counting our gains and benefits on the other. If we want to co-work with God on building up lives we must turn our eyes only upon the Lord and not on our personal gains and losses.
4. Be faithful to the people God entrusted to us: People created and saved by God form the most valuable core in both God's Kingdom and the Church on earth. Organizations are merely the means in God's plan to build lives. The history of redemption as revealed in the Bible shows that the job of the servants chosen by God is to teach people is to help others understand God's plan so that they can live out the new life given by Jesus. Those who gain a new life are those who grow in a relationship with God in their lives. They are to be pastored and built up. That is so they can bear strong witness to the substance in their new life, glorify God, and live in the grace of God's creation and redemption. The word of the Lord came to the prophet Ezekiel describing types of sheep in the flock – the weak, the sick, the injured, the strays, the lost, the well-fed and the healthy. God has entrusted us, his servant-leaders, with the above types of sheep. When we respond to His calling, whether we like it or not, we have no choice but to take care of the flock: strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back the strays and search for the lost. As church leaders we need personal breakthroughs and must give up personal benefits and preferences in caring for the flock. Trust in the Lord to directly meet , come into close contact with, and build up the flock entrusted to us.

If our leaders have truly experienced and practiced the above four life changes, they will grow in their “spiritual nature” which brings “spiritual authority”. Leaders who respond to God's calling will be given this “spiritual authority.” It will not come from their institutional positions but is acquired through acts of growing in their own spiritual lives. Further, institutional authority will be enhanced as leaders grow in “spiritual authority” as they build up other's lives. Finally, the flock should also learn to respect the servant pastors chosen by God, as taught in Hebrews 13:17, “Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you”.