

A book you'll actually read

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On Church Leadership



by Mark Driscoll

On Church Leadership

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Published by Crossway Books

a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers

1300 Crescent Street

Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Interior design and typesetting by Lakeside Design Plus

Cover design and illustration by Patrick Mahoney

First printing 2008

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-0137-1

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-0440-2

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-0441-9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Driscoll, Mark, 1970–

On church leadership / Mark Driscoll.

p. cm. — (A book you'll actually read)

Includes bibliographical references (p.).

1. Christian leadership. I. Title. II. Series.

BV652.1.D74 2008

262'.1—dc22

2008000489

VP	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	09	08
	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

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Series Introduction

On Church Leadership is part of an ongoing series of books you will actually read. The average person can read these books (minus the appendixes) in roughly one hour. The hope is that the big truths packed into these little books will make them different from the many other books that you would never pick up or would pick up only to quickly put down forever because they are simply too wordy and don't get to the point.

The A Book You'll Actually Read series is part of the literature ministry of Resurgence, called Re:Lit. Resurgence (www.theresurgence.com) is a growing repository of free theological resources, such as audio and video downloads, and includes information about conferences we host. The elders of Mars Hill Church (www.marshillchurch.org) have generously agreed to fund Resurgence along with the Acts 29 Church Planting Network (www.acts29network.org) so that our culture can be filled with a resurgence of timeless Christian truth that is expressed and embodied in timely cultural ways. Free downloads of audio and/or video sermons by Pastor Mark Driscoll on topical issues and entire books of the Bible are available at www.marshillchurch.org.

Introduction

In the fall of 1996 we officially launched Mars Hill Church in Seattle. I was twenty-five years of age and had been a Christian since the age of nineteen. Our city was among the least churched in the nation, with more dogs than either children or Christians. Our church was about as big as a Mormon family. Our budget was meager. Our leadership structure was informal. And, as a result, our ministry was painful.

In the first few years our church experienced a great number of tensions. Many of them were about conflicting theological beliefs on everything from the Bible to Jesus, hell, women in ministry, mode of baptism, and the return of Jesus, which I hoped would happen soon so I could get out of the mess I had made by starting a church.

Without formal leaders and structures in place, it was not long before the most vocal, networked, and pushy people started asserting themselves as leaders of our little church and causing a great amount of division. Their varying demands quickly sidetracked the mission of our church to love our city and see it transformed by the power of Jesus. Our internal church strife quickly overshadowed our external cultural mission.

At the root of all of our troubles was the issue of authority. Our people, most of whom were young in both age and faith, did not have a biblical understanding of or respect for authority. The issue of authority begins with Jesus himself. During his earthly ministry, those who heard Jesus teach were astonished by his authority,¹ which included the authority to forgive sins,² cast out demons,³ heal sickness,⁴ and mete out

1. Matt. 7:28–29.

2. Matt. 9:6–8.

3. Mark 3:15.

4. Luke 9:1.

our eternal judgment.⁵ After his resurrection from death, Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”⁶

Today, Jesus is seated on his throne in heaven as glorious, exalted, and supreme King, Lord, and God in authority. There is not one inch of creation, one culture or subculture of people, one lifestyle or orientation, one religion or philosophical system that he does not possess full authority over. Jesus is in the place of highest authority, as Paul says, “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.”⁷ The authority of governments and rulers,⁸ husbands,⁹ parents,¹⁰ bosses,¹¹ and church leaders¹² all proceed from Jesus.

Not only does Jesus possess all authority, but while on the earth he also gave us the perfect model of what it means to respect authority. On this point, 1 Corinthians 11:3 says, “But I want you to understand that the head of every man [or husband] is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.” The meaning of the word “head” in this verse has been hotly debated. But its most common use in Scripture is in reference to a position of authority. Jesus is called the head of the church because he has authority over the church.¹³ If Jesus is not our highest authority, then who is?

Furthermore, Jesus is ruling today through the authority of both Scripture and God the Holy Spirit, who has been sent to teach us Scripture and empower us for

5. John 5:27.

6. Matt. 28:18.

7. Col. 2:9–10.

8. Rom. 13:1; 1 Pet. 2:13.

9. 1 Pet. 3:1–7.

10. Ex. 20:12.

11. Col. 3:22–25.

12. Heb. 13:17.

13. Eph. 1:10, 22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:10, 19.

obedient, regenerated lives. Scripture itself claims to be God-breathed or inspired: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”¹⁴ Jesus himself also taught that “Scripture cannot be broken.”¹⁵ This is because the Scriptures are from God and therefore come with his authority and power. Furthermore, the early church treated the apostles’ New Testament teaching as authoritative, just as it did the Old Testament teaching of the prophets.¹⁶ Because of this we are told that the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles [New Testament] and prophets [Old Testament], Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.”¹⁷ Subsequently, Christians, including myself, rightly believe that Scripture (Old and New Testaments) is our highest authority, or metaphorical Supreme Court, by which all other things are tested. Practically, this means that lesser courts of reason, tradition, and culture are under the highest court of truth, which is divinely inspired Scripture. During the Protestant Reformation, the slogans *sola Scriptura* and *prima Scriptura* they became popular to summarize this conviction; they mean Scripture alone is our highest authority. This should not be confused with *solo Scriptura*, which is the erroneous belief that truth is only to be found in Scripture and nowhere else. Scripture itself tells us that God reveals truth to us in such things as creation and our conscience, but that the beliefs we may subscribe to from such forms of lesser revelation are to be tested by Scripture.

Therefore, Jesus is our example of how we should both act when we are in authority and react when we are under authority. First Corinthians 11:3 is one of the key texts for what theologians call *functional subordinationism*. It is the biblical teaching that

14. 2 Tim. 3:16–17.

15. John 10:35.

16. Acts 2:42; 15.

17. Eph. 2:20.

our Trinitarian God exists as a community of equals with different roles and deference for authority within the Trinity. For example, throughout his life we see Jesus constantly speaking of his submission to the authority of God the Father; Jesus continually states that the Father sent him to earth on his mission and that he was doing what the Father told him to do and saying what the Father told him to say. Other Scriptures also illustrate this principle, showing how Jesus Christ recognized the authority of God the Father while remaining equal to God the Father.¹⁸

While the authority of Jesus is always perfect, earthly authorities can at times be imperfect. If an authority is indeed acting sinfully and breaking the laws of a higher authority, rather than abandoning authority systems altogether, we should appeal to a higher authority for justice. For example, a husband is to both submit to the authority of God and his church leaders as Jesus submitted to authority, and also exercise authority over his family in a way that is loving and gracious like Jesus exercises his authority. However, if that man should become harsh with his wife or children, they should appeal to the higher authorities of church leadership and God's Word for justice. The answer to abusive authority is not an absence of authority but rather righteous authority that rules under the authority of Scripture and Jesus. The right response to abusive authority can be calling the church and even the police. Sadly, it is all too common that people in the church are guilty of the sin of Diotrephes, "who likes to put himself first, [and] does not acknowledge our authority."¹⁹

Anyway, getting back to our struggling little church of anarchy and dissent, it was at that time when I realized that I needed to install qualified leaders and empower them with the authority to help lead the church by disciplining some people, kicking others out, training the teachable, encouraging the broken, empowering other leaders,

18. John 3:17; 4:34; 6:38; 8:29; 12:49.

19. 3 John 9.

and reaching the lost before the lunatics completely overtook the asylum/church plant. We needed leaders so we could execute our mission of bringing the gospel of Jesus to our city in word and deed.

The obvious need for biblically based, formal, and qualified leadership led me on a lengthy study of how a church should be organized. I had never been a pastor in a church or even a formal member of any church in my life. So, I studied Scripture, read dozens of books on church government (which was as exciting as watching ice melt), read dozens more books on church history and Christian movements, and met with pastors of various churches to hear how they were organized.

In the end, I arrived at what I believed was a model of church government that was both biblically sound and practically effective. I taught our little church on these matters, and before long we had implemented the kind of church government that I was convicted was most faithful. Immediately, our church began to grow in both health and size.

However, many of the people who attended Sunday services with us in the early days left the church because they were unwilling to submit to any spiritual authority. Many do not attend church anywhere, and some have even stopped claiming to be Christians. Others have matured in their faith and returned to our church, where they respect respectable authority and have been a blessing because of their humility and teachable disposition.

To help our people understand how we are governed, I wrote a booklet that we published internally to answer their questions. Over the years, many thousands of these booklets have been given away by our church for our people to read and share with friends and leaders of other churches. After visiting our church, my friends at Crossway asked if I would be willing to rewrite and expand the booklet, which was a humbling honor. I have rewritten that booklet, and the result is this small book. My hope was to boil down some of the big concepts regarding church leadership into

a manageable and understandable format. The average person should be able to read this entire book in roughly one hour. You will not read a bunch of cute stories about bunny rabbits giving their lives to Jesus and such because I do not want to waste any of my words or any of your time. My hope is that through this book, Jesus would be honored, churches would be well served, and lost people would meet Jesus and grow in their love for him and his bride, the church.

Pastor Jesus

Before we can discuss church leadership, we must first define what we mean by “church.” The church is the community of all Christians throughout history who have been loved and saved by Jesus Christ,¹ including the believing people of the Old Testament.² In every church, there are people who are not Christians,³ including both lost people and wolves sent by Satan to lead people astray.⁴ While it is possible for Christians to know who else is a Christian (e.g., those people who use frequent references to Christian brothers and sisters), ultimately only the Lord knows exactly who is and is not a Christian.⁵ In this sense, “church” refers to every person of any age, race, and culture whose sins are forgiven through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; this is commonly called the “universal church.”

The various congregations of the universal church that meet together for such things as teaching, fellowship, and worship are commonly called the “local church.”⁶ In fact, many of the letters in the New Testament were written to help inform and direct the local churches of such cities as Philippi, Corinth, Ephesus, Colossae, and Thessalonica. Both the Old and New Testaments were written to communities of

1. Acts 20:28; Eph. 5:25.

2. Deut. 4:10; Acts 7:38; Heb. 2:12, cf. Ps. 22:22.

3. Matt. 13:24–30.

4. Acts 20:29–30.

5. 2 Tim. 2:19.

6. For example, see Heb. 10:25.

God's people who regularly gathered together for such meetings, to help inform and direct their lives together as the family of God on mission to see Jesus transform their cities. The Bible is clear that every Christian is a part of the larger church body and is expected to participate in the life of a local church with the gift(s) God has given him or her. This is so that God may be glorified and so his people may be built up through their service to one another.⁷ It is therefore a sin for someone who claims to be a Christian to not be actively loving his or her Christian brothers and sisters⁸ and seeking to build up the church as faithful members of a church.⁹

The Scriptures are clear that Jesus Christ is the head of the church.¹⁰ Jesus is the Apostle who plants a church.¹¹ Jesus is the Leader who builds the church.¹² Jesus is the Senior Pastor and Chief Shepherd who rules the church.¹³ And it is ultimately Jesus who closes churches down when they have become faithless or fruitless.¹⁴ Therefore, it is absolutely vital that a church loves Jesus, obeys Jesus, imitates Jesus, and follows Jesus at all times and in all ways, according to the teaching of his Word.¹⁵

Human leadership in the church is little more than qualified Christians who are following Jesus and encouraging other people to follow them as they follow Jesus. Because of this, church leaders must be good sheep who follow their Chief Shepherd Jesus well before they are fit to be shepherds leading any of his sheep. This is in large part what Paul meant when he told Christians in various local churches to “be imita-

7. 1 Cor. 12:1–31.

8. 1 John 1:7; 3:17–18; 4:21.

9. 1 Cor. 12:7; 14:6, 12, 26b.

10. Eph. 1:9, 22–23; 4:15; 5:23.

11. Heb. 3:1.

12. Matt. 16:18.

13. 1 Pet. 5:4.

14. Rev. 2:5.

15. Col. 3:16.

tors of me, as I am of Christ.”¹⁶ While it may seem obvious to insist that any discussion of church leadership begin with the centrality and preeminence of Jesus, sadly, many churches omit him from their organizational charts altogether. At the risk of stating the obvious, every church must place Jesus Christ in the position of highest authority and devotion in both the organizational chart and the life of the church.

Serving under Jesus are elders, deacons, and church members. Philippians 1:1 illustrates this church leadership structure: “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.” Packed in this verse we discover the three kinds of leaders who take responsibility for the health and progress of the local church. We will spend some time investigating each of their roles. First, there are elders (“overseers” in this verse), who are the senior leadership in the church. Second, there are deacons, who function as pastoral assistants by also leading the church alongside the elders. Third, there are “saints,” or Christians, who love God and help lead the local church by using their resources (time, talent, and treasure) to help build up their church as church members. In the remainder of this book we will examine each of these groupings as well as the role of women in local church leadership.

16. 1 Cor. 11:1.

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