

Authority, Autonomy, and the Freedom to Love

BY SCOTT BADER-SAYE

We should be critical of the modern idolatry of autonomy even as we continue to be skeptical about unchecked authority. But if freedom as detachment does not produce real freedom and if authority as coercion only feeds resentment, what alternative vision can the Church offer?

From the 1970's bumper sticker that told us to "Question Authority" to the crowds in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* shouting in ironic chorus, "We are all individuals," contemporary culture celebrates the autonomous self even while tacitly acknowledging that there is no escaping the very authority that tells us to be individuals. Indeed, if there is a commanding creed of modernity, it is, paradoxically, "think for yourself." We live in a time when individual autonomy ranks among our highest cultural goods, yet it has become that which is inescapable and so is experienced as necessity. We moderns are *fated to choose*. Peter Berger calls this the "heretical imperative," noting that "heresy" comes from the Greek *haireisis*, meaning "choice" or "opinion."¹

The rise of the Tea Party with its anti-government rhetoric reflects this widespread cultural distrust of authority. We imagine that each individual is his or her own best ruler, rarely acknowledging that we are also often our own worst tyrants. All the while, we are at a loss to explain what our autonomy is for, and we lack good ideas for how to create a common life among all of these isolated and self-ruling individuals.

Ronald Beiner describes the modern obsession with freedom, choice, and autonomy this way:

The liberal way of life, upheld by a particular dispensation, a particular ethos, is one where the liberal self draws its constitutive identi-

ty from its capacity to choose autonomously how and where it will work, who it will marry, where it will live, how and where it will seek means of leisure, where it will drive its car; in short, what it will be. This is a way of life centered on choice, mobility, and maximal personal freedom.... The problem with liberalism is not that it deprives us of the delights of communal attachments, whether national, ethnic, sectarian, or whatever, but that it tends to cause us to forget that our destiny in this dangerous world of ours is a collective destiny, and that the perils of insufficient citizenship are likewise shared.²

For all its protestations to the contrary, the modern way of life that is grounded in individual "*liber*" (freedom) does not in fact elevate the human being or free it from external forces. Rather, it produces a kind of person who is sufficiently detached from community and tradition to become captive to a market that reduces citizens to consumers and a state that presents minimal opportunity for meaningful deliberation or choice. It is not that the modern world has eradicated coercive authority and freed the individual for self-fulfillment (though it claims to do so), rather it has freed the individual from one dispensation (shaped by Church, tradition, and a shared story) in order to deliver the individual to another (shaped by the free market, nationalist interests, and private values).

There are reasons for Christians to be critical of the modern idolatry of autonomy even as there are reasons to continue to be skeptical about unchecked authority. As to the first, we know that our fallen selves are always tempted to act out of self-interest, to sacrifice others for our desires, to justify the pursuit of selfish ends in the name of choice. As to the second, we know that human authority is only as good as the character of the one who wields it and that, as Tolkien reminds us in *The Lord of the Rings*, great power can easily corrupt even the best of people. Assertions of authority that lack persuasive reasons may rightly be seen as a cover for self-interested abuse of power.

The standoff between authority and autonomy arises because modernity teaches us to imagine a world fundamentally shaped by competing wills. In such a world *authority* is simply one will subjecting another, while *autonomy* is simply one will left to its own devices. Having given up on the belief in a public and reasonable truth about the world, we are left with only competing desires and opinions. Lacking the ability to persuade (because we lack a common vision) we turn instead to manipulation, "spin," and intimidation. The root problem, of course, is that we have detached both authority and obedience from a common source and goal. Lacking a shared understanding of what we seek as human beings or citizens or neighbors, we lack the ability to make sense of social, ecclesial, and political rule as anything other than struggles and compromises between competing interests.

If freedom as detachment does not produce real freedom and if authority as coercion only feeds resentment, what alternative vision can the Church offer? What would it look like, for instance, for the Church to reclaim the goodness of authority and to proclaim that we are not always the best rulers of our own lives? The challenge is to reframe authority and obedience as a shared pursuit of goodness and truth that issues in a perfect freedom and fulfills the self in the service of God.

TRUE FREEDOM IS NOT AUTONOMOUS

True freedom is not an arbitrary license to choose but rather the capacity to become who we are. Autonomy, as “self-rule,” describes not freedom but detachment, isolation, and unaccountability. Self-rule can quickly and easily devolve into a captivity to desires that fail to be directed to any good outside of themselves. In contrast, Jesus promises his followers, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31b-32). Note that freedom is not the starting point, the place of pure neutrality from which we make choices. Rather, freedom is the end point, an achievement of the soul; it is the result of formation in the word and practices of discipleship. Such discipline leads one to know the truth and knowing the truth, one is set free. Abstract and arbitrary choice, which is but an adolescent fascination with “doing whatever I want,” proves not to be freeing at all, but only a means of enslaving ourselves to our own basest desires and wants. True freedom arises when we know the truth about ourselves (who we are and what we are made for) as well as the truth about the world (what is real and good and thus worth pursuing). An untethered will is not free but rather open to endless manipulation by forces that are happy to capture and direct one’s desires for someone else’s benefit.

Autonomy seems to name something that Scripture would describe as moral chaos. The book of Judges, for instance, describes a time when everyone “did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25) and what ensued was anarchic violence. The problem, according to Judges, was that “in those days there was no king in Israel” (Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25). The implication of the text is that what was needed was a bit of kingly authority to keep the people in line. Of course, as we read through the rest of the Old Testament we find that the kings were often unfaithful rulers who abused their power, turned from God, and led the people astray. Neither autonomy nor monarchical authority seemed to provide the answer to the formation of a faithful people.

One is struck by how this Old Testament dilemma parallels Alasdair MacIntyre’s description of authority and autonomy in modernity:

There are only two alternative modes of social life open to us, one in which the free and arbitrary choices of individuals are sovereign and one in which the bureaucracy is sovereign, precisely so that it

may limit the free and arbitrary choices of individuals. Given this deep cultural agreement, it is unsurprising that the politics of modern societies oscillate between a freedom which is nothing but a lack of regulation of individual behavior and forms of collectivist control designed only to limit the anarchy of self-interest.³

Of course, the difference between MacIntyre's account of modernity and the Old Testament account of ancient Israel is that Israel's struggle to find the right political structure—confederacy or monarchy—was situated within a theological conversation about what it meant to be God's chosen people, to be a light to the nations, to embody God's ways in contrast to the Gentiles. So, while the struggle between more or less centralized power is not a new one, the people of Israel knew that the ultimate question was what made possible their faithful obedience to God. Today, the question seems to be reversed—how does a particular form of authority help me follow nothing but my own choices.

TRUE AUTHORITY IS NOT COERCIVE

True authority is not the power to coerce but the power to persuade; in the Church it is power that is transparent to God and thus dispossessed of purely private interests. Humans are never simply and properly rulers over one another except insofar as we mediate God's rule to one another ("there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God," Romans 13:1). This mediation, however, is no easy task. The danger is that a human authority will interpose itself between God and God's people, as when the Israelites call for a king in 1 Samuel. Their demand is seen as a rejection of God, a desire to replace God with an earthly authority ("they have not rejected you," God tells Samuel, "but they have rejected me from being king over them," 1 Samuel 8:7). The kind of rule that displaces God finally rests on idolatrous power. And so, notwithstanding the logic of Paul's description in Romans 13, the apostles in Acts knew that there were times to say, "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29).

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What, then, does it mean to "obey God"? First, we know that obeying God always involves some mediation of God's authority—through a text, a person, a community, or one's own conscience. There is never a pure, unmediated obedience, which means that we must always be aware that our specific interpretations of divine authority have the provisional and

unfinished quality proper to finite and inescapably self-interested human judgments. Second, we must be careful not to think of God's authority as just a bigger version of human power (a theological mistake played for great humor in the film *Bruce Almighty*). God is not simply one being among others who happens to be bigger and stronger and thus able to get his way. Rather, if God is the creator of all that is, then God is not a "thing" among others

but is that deep reality in which "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Therefore, God can never be one will competing with others. God's "will" (metaphorically speaking, of course) is that in which our wills rest and which gives capacity to our acting.

God's power does not mean God is "free" to make arbitrary and binding pronouncements—arbitrary

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power is a mark of the demonic not the divine. God's power, rather, means that God is free always to be true to God's self. And if, as John says, "God is love" (1 John 4:8), then God is always free to love and so wills love. To ask "what is God's will?" is to ask "what does divine love look like here and now?" God's will is not like ours because God does not compete for space in the world. God *is* the world's space and so the rule or authority of God is God's eternal determination to draw the creation into joyful participation in its own deepest truth—that we were made to image God in graced, excessive, reciprocal gifting. God's authority not only calls us to be what we are, but judges our failures and refusals. God's judgment is but God telling the truth about our lives. Divine authority, then, simply extends God's truth in the form of command—really only one command in two forms: love God; love neighbor.

A COMMON MIND, A COMMON LOVE

Divine authority rests not on what we might call "blind obedience" but on participation in a common mind or common *logos*—as Paul describes it in Philippians 2:5, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." To be under Christ's authority is to let one's mind be conformed to that of Christ, so that his self-giving pattern of life arrives not as a coercive, external demand but as the true inclination of one's own heart. Paul makes a similar point in his description of the Church as "the body of Christ." In this metaphor, Paul does not give teachers, apostles, or pastors the role of "head" of the body. Christ is the head of the body (Ephesians 4:25, 5:23; Colossians 1:18) and

therefore human leadership in the Church can only gesture to Christ as the true head. Yet the imaging of Christ as head and not, for instance, the *heart* of the body, leads us back to Paul's words in Philippians 2—growing up into maturity as the body of Christ means coming more and more to share the mind of Christ, to be drawn into his wisdom, to participate in the *logos*, the very mind and reality of God that became incarnate in Jesus.

In this way we might understand the words of sixteenth-century Anglican theologian Richard Hooker:

For men to be tied and led by authority, as it were with a kind of captivity of judgment, and though there be reason to the contrary not to listen unto it, but to follow like beasts the first in the herd, they know not nor care not whither, this were brutish. Again, that authority of men should prevail with men either against or above Reason, is not part of our belief.⁴

Hooker was trying to find a middle way between Roman Catholic and Puritan arguments over where authority resides. He saw in each the danger of substituting human power for a true authority that points to God. One way to resist the kind of authority that binds rather than frees, he suggests, is to test whether the commands of authority are "against or above Reason." His point was not that human rationality should stand above the Word of God, but that God's Word, being true to God's nature, would be consistent with the deep logic of creation—the same logic, or *logos*, embodied in Christ.

Faithful human authority that points to God's peaceful rule seeks, like Paul, to shape a community to "have the same mind" as Christ, a common mind ordered to self-giving, kenotic love. Faithful authority, then, will always require persuasion—giving reasons and exchanging arguments. To test human authority by reason is to confess that human authority is justified by its transparency to God's rule and so must be shown to be consistent with the logic of divine love.

In John's gospel, Jesus stands before Pilate and offers an account of kingship as grounded in truth and enacted in peace. Such a way of ruling, of course, Pilate cannot understand.

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify

to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

John 18:33-38

Jesus marks off his kingdom from the kingdoms of the world not by contrasting the spiritual and the material but by contrasting a worldly power based on fighting with a divine power based on speaking the truth. Pilate confirms his own commitment to coercive power and worldly authority by showing himself deaf to the truth who stands before him.

True authority takes the risk of persuading, of speaking the truth, testifying to the truth, and trusting that those who belong to the truth will hear and respond. As Stanley Hauerwas writes,

Christian social ethics depends on the development of leadership in the church that can trust and depend on the diversity of gifts in the community. The authority necessary for leadership in the church should derive from the willingness of Christians to risk speaking the truth to and hearing the truth from those in charge. In societies that fear the truth, leadership depends on the ability to provide security rather than the ability to let the diversity of the community serve as the means to live truthfully. Only the latter form of community can afford to have their leaders’ mistakes acknowledged without their ceasing to exercise authority.⁵

Because the Church is made up of many members with many gifts, those in authority have the task of unifying and ordering those gifts for the common purpose of serving God’s kingdom. Leadership in the Church is not about making up for the weaknesses of the community but about naming and nurturing the gifts of the community. Recognizing this giftedness means that leaders do not have a monopoly on authority. Each person in the community bears an authority in relation to their area of giftedness. Each one, then, becomes at different times both leader and follower. The gathering up of gifts into common purpose comes through the authority that is transparent to the mind of Christ – that gives reasons and calls forth reasoning from the entire community. It is a leadership and authority that must rely on persuasion to draw others more deeply into the love that is the *logos* of creation. Such authority is rooted in “answerability.” Those in authority are answerable to those whom they oversee, and they have authority precisely because they answer to something beyond themselves.

This understanding of authority and obedience counters the cultural tendency to focus authority on moving the will rather than persuading the mind. It counters the cultural tendency to reduce authority to management, controlling and directing others for the sake of efficiency and productivity. It counters the cultural tendency to reduce freedom to autonomy, mistaking

choice for a good in itself. It counters all of these with a vision of true freedom as the *telos* of discipleship, the capacity to do the good and thus, beyond authority and obedience, to become friends of God.

NOTES

1 Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1979), 17.

2 Ronald Beiner, *What's the Matter with Liberalism?* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 32, 34-35.

3 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, second edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 35.

4 Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Volume I (London: Everyman Library, 1965), 271.

5 Stanley Hauerwas, *Community of Character* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 11.



SCOTT BADER-SAYE

is the Helen and Everett H. Jones Professor of Christian Ethics and Moral Theology at Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas.