

WHAT IS YOUR ATTITUDE TOWARD AUTHORITY?

16 Korah son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, together with several of the sons of Reuben, namely, Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On, the son of Peleth, became insolent ²and rebelled against Moses. With them were some of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty men, well-known leaders of the congregation, who had been chosen by the assembly. ³They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You take too much authority for yourselves, seeing that the whole congregation is holy, every one of them, and Jehovah is among them. Why then do you elevate yourselves above the assembly of Jehovah?" ⁴When Moses heard this, he fell facedown. ⁵Then he spoke to Korah and all his followers, saying, "In the morning Jehovah will reveal who belongs to him and who is holy, and he will cause that man to come near to him. The man whom he chooses he will cause to come near to him. ⁶Do this, Korah, and all those who are his followers: Take censers ⁷and tomorrow put fire and incense in them before Jehovah. The man whom Jehovah chooses will be the one who is holy. You have sought to take too much authority, you sons of Levi!" ⁸Furthermore, Moses said to Korah, "Listen now, you sons of Levi, ⁹does it seem insignificant to you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel and brought you near to himself in order to perform the service of Jehovah's tabernacle and to stand before the congregation and minister to them? ¹⁰He has brought you near to himself, and all your brothers, the sons of Levi, with you. Now are you also seeking the priesthood? ¹¹You and all your followers have banded together against Jehovah. Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him?"

¹²Then Moses summoned Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, but they said, "We will not appear before you. ¹³Is it an insignificant matter that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey in order to kill us in the wilderness? Must you also make yourself a ruler over us? ¹⁴Furthermore, you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor have you caused us to inherit fields and vineyards. Will you try to deceive these men*? We will not appear before you." ¹⁵Then Moses became very angry and said to Jehovah, "Do not accept their offering. I have not taken even one donkey from them, nor have I wronged any of them." ¹⁶Moses said to Korah, "You and all your followers are to appear before Jehovah tomorrow—you and they and Aaron. ¹⁷Each man is to take his censer and put incense in it, —two hundred and fifty censers—then let each man present his censer to Jehovah. You and Aaron are to present your censers also." ¹⁸So each man took his censer, put fire and incense into it, and stood with Moses and Aaron at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. ¹⁹Korah assembled the whole congregation against [Moses and Aaron] at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. Then the glory of Jehovah appeared to the whole congregation. ²⁰Jehovah spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ²¹"Separate yourselves from this congregation so that I may consume them in an instant." ²²But they fell upon their faces and said, "O God, the God of the spirits of all mankind, will you be angry with the whole congregation, [although only] one man has sinned?"

²³Then Jehovah said to Moses, ²⁴"Say to the congregation, 'Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.'" ²⁵Moses got up and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. ²⁶He warned the congregation, "I plead with you, move away from the tents of these wicked men and do not touch anything that belongs

to them, or else you will be consumed with all their sins.”²⁷ So in every direction they moved away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Then Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the entrance to their tents, together with their wives, their sons, and their little children.²⁸ Then Moses said, “This is how you will know that Jehovah has sent me to do all these things, for [I have not done all this] on my own initiative.²⁹ If these men die a natural death, or if they suffer the fate of all men, then Jehovah has not sent me.³⁰ But if Jehovah causes something totally different to happen, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive to Sheol, then you will know that these men have treated Jehovah with contempt.”³¹ As soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground underneath them split apart³² and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households, as well as all Korah’s followers and all their possessions.³³ So it was that they, and all who were aligned with them, went down alive into Sheol; the earth closed over them, and they disappeared from the midst of the assembly.³⁴ At their cries, all the Israelites who were around them fled, shouting, “[Let us flee], or else the earth will swallow us up, too!”

³⁵ Then fire came forth from Jehovah and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who had offered the incense.³⁶ Jehovah said to Moses,³⁷ “Tell Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest, to take the censers out of the smoldering remains and scatter the coals some distance away, for the censers are holy—³⁸the censers of the men [who sinned at the cost] of their lives. Hammer the censers into sheets to be a covering for the altar, for they were presented before Jehovah, so they are holy. They shall be a sign for the children of Israel.”³⁹ So Eleazar the priest collected the bronze censers that had been offered by those who were burnt up, and had them hammered out to be a covering for the altar,⁴⁰ as Jehovah had instructed him through Moses. This was to serve as a reminder to the children of Israel, so that no stranger, that is, no one who does not belong to Aaron’s household, should come near to burn incense before Jehovah, and, [consequently, suffer the same fate] as Korah and his followers.

⁴¹ The next day the whole congregation of the children of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, “You have killed the people of Jehovah!”⁴² But when the congregation that had assembled against Moses and against Aaron looked toward the Tent of Meeting, they saw the cloud cover it and the glory of Jehovah appeared.⁴³ Then Moses and Aaron went to the front of the Tent of Meeting,⁴⁴ and Jehovah said to Moses,⁴⁵ “Get away from this congregation so that I may consume them in an instant.” Then they fell upon their faces.⁴⁶ Moses said to Aaron, “Take your censer and put fire in it from the altar and lay incense on it; then bring it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone forth from Jehovah, the plague has begun!”⁴⁷ Aaron took the censer as Moses had instructed and ran into the midst of the assembly. The plague had begun among the people, but he offered the incense and made atonement for them.⁴⁸ He stood between the dead and the living, and the plague stopped.⁴⁹ Now those who died by the plague were fourteen thousand and seven hundred people, in addition to those who died because of Korah.⁵⁰ Then Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, for the plague had ceased.

17 Then Jehovah spoke to Moses, saying,² “Speak to the children of Israel and get staffs from them, one for each of the tribes, get a staff from the leaders of each of the tribes, a total of twelve staffs. Write each man’s name on his staff.³ You shall write Aaron’s

name on the staff of Levi, for there must be one staff for the head of each tribe. ⁴You shall then place them in the Tent of Meeting in front of the Testimony, where I meet with you. ⁵The staff belonging to the man I choose shall sprout, and so I will rid myself of the complaining against you by the children of Israel.” ⁶So Moses spoke to the children of Israel, and each of their leaders gave him a staff, one for each leader according to their tribes, a total of twelve staffs; and Aaron’s staff was among their staffs. ⁷Then Moses placed the staffs before Jehovah in the Tent of the Testimony.

⁸The next day Moses entered the Tent of the Testimony and saw that Aaron’s staff, which represented the house of Levi, had sprouted. It had even budded, blossomed, and produced ripe almonds. ⁹Moses brought out all the staffs from Jehovah’s presence [and presented them] to all the children of Israel. They examined them, and each man took his staff. ¹⁰Jehovah said to Moses, “Put Aaron’s staff back in front of the Testimony, to be preserved as a sign [witnessing] against those who are rebellious; in order that they may stop grumbling against me, so that they will not die.” ¹¹This is what Moses did; he did just as Jehovah commanded him. (Num. 16:-17:11)

*Literally, *“Will you put out the eyes of these men?”*

Introduction

Authority. What comes to mind when you hear that word? The president of the United States? (“I want to have his authority!”) A police officer? (“I don’t want him to exercise his authority over me!”)

In the 16th chapter of Numbers we meet men who had various sinful attitudes toward God-given authority. As we consider these men and their attitude towards authority, we must also consider the question, What is my attitude towards authority? As we shall see from this passage of Scripture, a wrong attitude towards authority can get you into serious trouble. Because authority is ordained by God, we must be careful to entertain a right attitude towards it, especially towards that authority that Christ exercises over our lives as our Shepherd.

I. Because Authority is Ordained by God, You Must Not Covet It

Korah (a Levite), together with Dathan and Abiram (of the tribe of Reuben), recruit a following (including 250 of the leaders in Israel) and rise up in rebellion against Moses (Num. 16:1-3.)

Moses charges them with having gone too far, they are seeking to usurp authority that has not been entrusted to them (16:7b.) He reminds them of the divine calling they have received: God had separated their tribe from the nation of Israel to serve the tabernacle and minister unto the people in the name of the LORD (16:8-10a.) But they are not content with the privilege and responsibility assigned to them by God, they want more: they want to assume Aaron’s role of high priest (16:10b.) Moses then proceeds to inform Korah and his cohorts that they are not withstanding Aaron, they are withstanding the LORD: *“You and all*

your followers have banded together against Jehovah. Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him?" (16:11.) In their desire to wield greater authority they are opposing the LORD. Not content to serve Him in the position to which He has appointed them, they are striving to gain for themselves a position He has not assigned to them.

Because authority is ordained by God, you must not covet it. We must not entertain the ambition of James and John who sought to gain the highest positions in Christ's kingdom for their own benefit:

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came near to him and said, Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we shall ask you. ³⁶He said to them, What do you want me to do for you? ³⁷They said to him, Grant that we may sit with you in your glory—one at your right hand and one at your left hand. (Mk. 10:35-37)

Observe the effect their ambition had upon their fellow disciples: *"Now when the other ten [disciples] heard about this, they began to be indignant against James and John"* (Mk. 10:41.) Take note of Jesus' definition of true greatness:

Then Jesus called them to himself and said to them, You know that those who are recognized as rulers among the Gentiles lord it over their subjects; and their high officials rule over them with tyranny. ⁴³But it must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever desires to be great among you, shall be your minister; ⁴⁴and whoever desires to be first among you, shall be servant of all. (Mk. 10:42-44)

We must not entertain the attitude of Diotrephes who loves to have the preeminence. Note that the apostle John identifies this attitude as being evil: *"Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God."* (3 Jn. 11.)

Consider the spirit of the devil and the judgment rendered against him as described in Isaiah 14:12-15,

How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! How you have been cut down to the ground, you who once laid low the nations! ¹³You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will exalt my throne above the stars of God. I will sit enthroned upon the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain! ¹⁴I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High!" ¹⁵But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the pit. (Isa. 14:12-15)

We must not imitate Korah and his followers who sought to usurp for themselves a position and exercise of authority that the LORD had not entrusted to them. In

sum, we must not grasp for a position of authority God has not entrusted to us; and when God does entrust us with authority, we must not misuse it:

I exhort the elders among you—I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ and also one who has a share in the glory that is going to be revealed—²shepherd the flock of God that is among you. Do not exercise oversight [merely] because you must do so, but do so willingly for God. [Do not do so] for material gain, but with a willingness to serve. ³Do not lord yourselves over those who are under your care; on the contrary, be examples for the flock. (1 Pet.5:1-3)

II. Because Authority is Ordained by God, You Must Not Resist It

Whereas Korah was a Levite who envied Aaron's authority, Dathan and Abiram were Reubenites who resisted Moses' authority. As descendants of the first born son of Israel, they resented the fact that Moses, (a descendant of Levi,) was the head of Israel.

When these men assemble before Moses they charge him with taking upon himself too much authority:

They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You take too much authority for yourselves, seeing that the whole congregation is holy, every one of them, and Jehovah is among them. Why then do you elevate yourselves above the assembly of Jehovah?" (Num. 16:3)

They maintain that since the whole nation of Israel comprises the people of God, there should be a holy "democracy;" Moses and Aaron should not hold positions of authority above the congregation.

The next day, when Moses summons Dathan and Abiram to appear before him to settle this controversy, the two of them refuse to come (Num. 16:12.) They charge Moses with poor leadership: *"Is it an insignificant matter that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey in order to kill us in the wilderness?"* (Num. 16:13.) They refuse to admit that the reason for their present situation is due to their own unbelief and disobedience. Recall the majority report made by the ten spies: *"We are not able to attack those people, for they are stronger than we are"* (Num. 13:31;) and the response of the people:

The whole congregation raised their voices and wailed...²All the children of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, "We wish that we had died in the land of Egypt, or that we had died in this wilderness! ³Why has Jehovah brought us to this land, so that we might be killed with the sword? ... Is it not better for us to go back to Egypt?" ⁴They said among themselves, "Let us choose a leader for ourselves and go back to Egypt!" (Num. 14:1-4)

But now Dathan and Abiram charge Moses with presumptuously seeking to make himself a ruler over them: *“Must you also make yourself a ruler over us?”* (16:13.) They neglect to remember that Moses was appointed by the LORD and they, acknowledging that fact, willingly followed him out of Egypt: *“When Israel saw the great power Jehovah had employed against the Egyptians, the people feared Jehovah; and they put their trust in Jehovah and in his servant Moses”* (Ex. 14:31.)

Because authority is ordained by God, you must not resist it. We must not think like Dathan and Abiram and view the church as a “spiritual democracy” in which we can make our own rules for living. The church is a theocracy under the authority of Christ: *[God the Father] put all things in subjection under [Christ’s] feet, and he appointed him to be head over all things for the church* (Eph. 1:22.) We must not act like the people of Israel did in the days of the judges: *“In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did what was right in his own eyes”* (Judg. 21:25.)

Remember that it was the unbelieving Jews who refused to accept Christ as their rightful King: *“they shouted, ‘Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!’ Pilate asked them, ‘Shall I crucify your King?’ The chief priests answered, ‘We have no king but Caesar”* (Jn. 19:15.) But note Luke 19:27, a parable in which Jesus warns of the consequence of rejecting His lordship: *“But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and kill them in front of me”* (Lk. 19:27.)

III. Because Authority is Ordained by God, You Must Respect It, Especially Christ’s Authority

When Korah challenges Moses and Aaron, Moses asserts, *“in the morning the LORD will show whom He has chosen”* (16:5.) Moses instructs Korah and his followers to each present a censor filled with incense and present it to the LORD—the LORD will make known whom He has set apart to be His divinely appointed priest and mediator (16:6-7.)

The next morning, when Korah and his followers and Aaron each present their censor before the LORD, the glory of the LORD appeared (Num. 16:15-35.) The LORD instructs Moses to order the whole congregation to separate themselves from Korah, Dathan and Abiram (16:23-24.) He then caused the earth to swallow up the three leaders of the rebellion, and His fire devoured the 250 followers of Korah who offered their censors of incense before the LORD’s altar (16:31-35.) **Note:** In this region of the wilderness, (the Arabah rift valley between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba,) there are mudflats. Over a deep mass of liquid mud and ooze there is formed a hard crust of clay-mud on top of layers of hard salt and half-dry mud, about thirty centimeters thick. Under normal conditions one may walk over the crust without any problem (K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, pp.191-192.) But as an act of

judgment against Korah and his cohorts, the LORD caused the crust to break open, sending the rebels plunging into the slimy abyss.

On the following day the LORD commanded Moses to instruct the leaders of the tribes of Israel to each bring a staff to the Tent of Meeting (Num. 17:1-2.) Each tribe was to carve their name upon their staff (vs. 2); Aaron's name was carved upon the staff representing the tribe of Levi (vs. 3.) Then the twelve staffs were to be placed in the Tent of Meeting, with the LORD declaring that He would cause the staff of His chosen one to bud (vs. 5.) When Moses retrieved the staffs the next day, the LORD had caused Aaron's staff to produce buds and blossoms and ripe almonds, thereby indicating that he was chosen and appointed by the LORD (vs. 8.)

Because authority is ordained by God, you must respect it, especially Christ's authority.

We must acknowledge the fact that Christ has been entrusted by His Father with all authority:

Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ... ⁴No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was. ⁵So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, ... You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. (Heb.5:1,4-6)

Then Jesus came to them and said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. (Matt. 28:18)

We must submit to the authority which Christ exercises:

*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹**Take my yoke upon you and learn from me** [i.e.; submit to My discipline and become My disciple], *for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls; ³⁰for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.* (Matt. 11:28-30)*

We must respect the fact that Christ exercises His authority in His church by His Word and through the officers appointed by the congregation under the direction of His Word and by the leading of His Holy Spirit:

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Heb. 13:17)

Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. ¹³Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. (1 Thess. 5:12-13)

Conclusion

What is your attitude towards authority?

Because authority is ordained by God, we must be careful to entertain a right attitude towards it. As we learn from this passage of Scripture: a wrong attitude towards authority can get us into serious trouble, and bring us under the judgment of God.

May the LORD grant to each of us the grace to heed the instruction of His Word: *“All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another; because “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” ⁶Therefore, humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God” (1 Pet. 5:5b-6.)*