

Who's Number One?

In this article,¹ I want to look at two closely-connected words, each of which is used only once in Scripture – *prōteuō* – ‘to be pre-eminent’, ‘to be first’ (Col. 1:18), and *philoprōteuō* – ‘to love to be pre-eminent’, ‘to love to be first’ (3 John 9).

Here is the context of the first:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything **he might be pre-eminent**. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Col. 1:15-20).

And here is the second:

I wrote to the church, but Diotrophes, who **loves to have the pre-eminence** among them, does not receive us (3 John 9).

The first passage, of course, refers to the Lord Jesus Christ: Paul is declaring that Christ is pre-eminent, Christ is first. And, please note, the apostle specifically includes the *ekklēsia*² in this pre-eminence of Christ: ‘He is the head of the body, the church [*ekklēsia*]. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent’. As he puts it later in the same letter: ‘Christ is all’ (Col. 3:11).³

¹ See also Rick Petersen: ‘In His Image: Sola Christus or Alter Christus?’.

² I use the new-covenant term, *ekklēsia* – ‘the called-out ones’ – to distinguish it from the man-made institution called ‘the Church’,

³ ‘In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge... the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God’ (Col. 2:3,19).

In the second passage, however, John is clearly talking about a man called Diotrefes, one who has carved out a primary position for himself within a local *ekklēsia*: John says he loves to be first, loves to be top dog, loves to be pre-eminent among the believers in that place.

Now that's a remarkable thing! Even in apostolic days, men were usurping Christ within the *ekklēsia*, seeking to sideline Christ, wanting to be pre-eminent, grasping after the chief seat over the people of God!

John might have been referring to this attitude in his second letter:

Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God (2 John 9).

As M.R.Vincent observed, some think that John was referring to:

...those who would set themselves up as teachers, or take the lead.⁴

John was not the only apostle who had spotted what was going on. Peter saw the danger, and wrote against it:

I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow-elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not ***domineering [lording it]*** over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock (1 Pet. 5:1-3).

Moreover, Paul felt the Satanic temptation for himself – but resisted it. Even though he had apostolic authority – and exercised it – he was meticulous in ensuring that he could, without fear of contradiction, say to the Thessalonians that:

Just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who

⁴ M.R.Vincent: *Word Studies*.

tests our hearts.⁵ For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed – God is witness. ***Nor did we seek glory from people,***⁶ whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us (1 Thess. 2:4-8).⁷

As he told Philemon:

Though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you (Philem. 8-9).

And as he could remind the Corinthians, though he had apostolic authority, he would never use it to ride roughshod over the people of God:

...not that we ***lord it over*** your faith (2 Cor. 1:24).

But he well knew that the Corinthians were, in fact, yielding to men who did lord it over them:

You tolerate it if anyone enslaves you, if anyone devours you, if anyone takes advantage of you, ***if anyone exalts himself***, if anyone hits you in the face (2 Cor. 11:20).

They were 'tolerating' this abuse! That is, they were bearing it, putting up with it. I very strongly suspect that Paul was doing here what he does elsewhere (Acts 21:39; 2 Cor. 11:19; 12:13, for example): namely, using *litotes*, a deliberate understatement, or

⁵ He had said the same to the Galatians (Gal. 1:10).

⁶ Christ had said the same to the Jews: 'I do not receive glory from people... You [however] receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God' (John 5:41,44).

⁷ In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul illustrated what he was saying: 'We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labour we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate' (2 Thess. 3:7-9).

irony. (Indeed, Paul's use of irony is nowhere more prevalent than in his second letter to the Corinthians). The truth is, the Corinthians loved top men! Their cult of man was Paul's opening complaint against them in his first letter (1 Cor. 1:10-17), and little had changed in this regard when he came to write his second. You can almost hear them talking: 'We've just got a super-apostle as our new Minister!'

The truth is, the early believers were facing the same temptation as Judah of old, and some of them, at least, were committing the very same sin⁸ as the men of the old covenant:

An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes? (Jer. 5:30-31).

'My people love to have it so'! Yes, indeed, but as the prophet went on: 'But...'. There's always a 'but'!

Christ explicitly warned his disciples against grasping after pre-eminence:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:25-28).

Again:

The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honour at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the

⁸ I use the word 'sin' because I am reminded of the first commandment of the decalogue in the old covenant: 'You shall have no other gods before [besides] me' (Ex. 20:3).

marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted (Matt. 23:2-12).

Clearly there is – note my use of the present tense (see below) – a temptation among the people of God to lust after men who want to climb the greasy pole to reach the top. So Christ warned. The apostles repeated the same. Pre-eminence, and the love of it – other than the pre-eminence of Christ – should be utterly unknown among the people of God.

Despite these clear prohibitions, alas, the evidence is incontrovertible: the first believers, even in the time of the apostles, were not free of the sin of putting men – often, a man – in top position, and thus, in effect, replacing Christ as pre-eminent within the *ekklēsia*.

What happened after the apostles? I will be very brief and simply summarise what I have fully argued elsewhere.⁹

After the apostles came the Fathers. What contribution did they make to this sinful, disastrous exaltation of man? Although they knew that Christ had fulfilled the old covenant and rendered it obsolete (Heb. 7:18-19,22; 8:13),¹⁰ even so the Fathers went back to the old covenant to call upon the levitical priesthood in order to establish a theology which would eventually lead to a clergy/laity split within a State-Church. In time, this institution would be ruled by a hierarchical clergy, kitted-out with ranks, titles and vestments. This would eventually produce a multiplicity of ‘chief men’ at the local level, with one overall top dog – the pope, the

⁹ See my *The Pastor: Does He Exist?; The Priesthood of All Believers: Slogan or Substance?*; See also my *Battle for the Church: 1517-1644; Relationship Evangelism Exposed: A Blight on the Churches and the Ungodly*; and so on.

¹⁰ See my *Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law*.

so-called Vicar of Christ ('one who stands in place of Christ and has his authority in the Church') – ruling over Christendom.

This appalling state of affairs held sway until the Reformation which, although it accomplished a great deal – especially in the recovery of much scriptural ground in the matter of soteriology – essentially left intact the institution of the clerical, hierarchical, State-Church. The Anabaptists, rejecting both Rome and the Reformed (and detested and persecuted by both), tried to get back to scriptural principles, but were not altogether successful. And so it went on. Despite various efforts to get back to Scripture, this institutional corruption – Christendom – has endured to this day. Endured? It has grown fat!

Like those who went before them, contemporary evangelical leaders who have found a comfortable niche within the system, when faced with the scriptural warnings against this cult of man, often make strenuous – but pathetic – efforts to explain things away, to gloss their unscriptural practice, and so try to justify their blatant disobedience to Christ. But in vain.

This leaves most believers today locked in an unscriptural system. Christendom is the norm, the clergy rules, and the overwhelming majority of local churches hanker after the 'chief man' – the Senior or Head Pastor. Notice boards, prominent outside Christendom-buildings, unashamedly proclaim it for all to see, titles and all. Indeed, with the internet/social-media explosion, the cult of the super-star preacher in a global big-buck business, which is increasingly shown to be corrupt and lordly-manipulative, has reached dizzy heights, to become the settled order of the day.

In saying this, I stress I am talking about evangelicals. We must rid of ourselves of the notion that the offence in question is confined to Rome, and only Rome. That is nothing but a convenient cop-out, a passing of the buck. Nor is the corruption confined to the mega-church. Both Rome and the mega-church

stand convicted, of course. But wherever the single-pastor¹¹ – or the head-pastor as chief among several (this being one of the evangelical ploys to get round Scripture) – reigns, there we are have come face to face with one of the many sons of Diotrephes. Moreover, I wonder how many ‘little’ pastors have within them a ‘bigger’ pastor struggling to get out.

‘Hang on! That’s too strong! You’re claiming to be able to read men’s hearts!’

I can hear the objection.

Let me reply. Will the same accusation be levelled at John? Or are we to understand that he, being an apostle, was able to read men’s hearts whereas we, of course, cannot? If so, 3 John 9, while it is an interesting glimpse into a historical episode two millennia since, has nothing to say to us. We can’t read men’s hearts so we need not worry our heads with questions about the cult of man and the love of pre-eminence. All the warnings I have quoted amount to nothing more than wallpaper. Really?

In any case, are we not told that elders must have their heart in their work? I have already quoted this from Peter for another purpose, but listen once more to what he says about leadership and men’s hearts:

I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow-elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but *willingly*, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but *eagerly*; not domineering [lording it] over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock (1 Pet. 5:1-3).

And Paul was explicit:

If anyone *aspires* to the office of overseer, he *desires* a noble task (1 Tim. 3:1).

¹¹ I exempt an *ekklēsia* where there is only one able man, but the aim is a scriptural plurality of elders.

The words used by these apostles speak of a willing, earnest desire, a craving for, a coveting of, a reaching out for, a stretching out for the work of an elder. No elder can be outwardly compelled to do the work, constrained by threat or whatever; he must want to do it, be eager for it, love to do it. So said the apostles.

The idea that a ‘pre-eminent’ elder loathes doing his work, that his heart is not in it, that he is repulsed by it, that he detests being pre-eminent, is ludicrous. The stubborn fact remains that God still has to rebuke his people over this matter of pre-eminence: ‘My people love to have it so!’ Are we to believe that a ‘pre-eminent’ man in the *ekklēsia* hates the very idea of it? That he cannot stand the *kudos* (and, it might well be, the financial perks) involved? Well, the remedy is in his own hand, is it not? Let him step aside, kicking the nonsense into smithereens. If he doesn’t, at the very least he gives the impression that – as John says – he *loves* pre-eminence, he *loves* being top dog!

For a start – but only a start – he could always take C.H.Spurgeon’s advice:

There are some companies into which you will go... where everybody will be awed by the majesty of your presence, and people will be invited because the... minister is to be there. Such a position reminds me of the choicest statuary in the Vatican. A little room is screened off, a curtain is drawn, and lo! before you stands the great Apollo! If it be your trying lot to be the Apollo of the little party, put an end to the nonsense. If I were the Apollo, I should like to step right off the pedestal and shake hands all round, and you had better do the same; for sooner or later the fuss they make about you will come to an end, and the wisest course is to end it yourself. Hero-worship is a kind of idolatry, and must not be encouraged. Heroes do well when they, like the apostles at Lystra, are horrified at the honours done to them, and run in among the people crying: ‘Sirs, why are you doing these things? We also are men of like passions with you’. Ministers will not have to do it long; for their foolish admirers are very apt to turn round upon them, and if they do not stone

them nearly to death, they will go as far as they dare in unkindness and contempt.¹²

And while I don't agree with all that was in Spurgeon's mind when he was saying this,¹³ this much I do agree with:

It is true that God has a church, that that church has been redeemed and will be preserved for his glory, and it is equally true that everything that is done to the church, in the church, or for the church either with the permission or by the power of God, is for God's glory, as well as for the church's weal. You will notice, in reading Scripture, that whenever God has blessed [his people], he has secured himself the glory of the blessing, though they have had the profit of it... God is jealous of his own honour; he will not suffer even his church to be delivered in such a way as to honour men more than God; he will take to himself the throne without a rival, he will wear a crown that never head did wear, and sway a sceptre that never hand has grasped, for as truly as he is God, the earth shall know that he, and he alone, has done it, and unto him shall be the glory. Now, my object this morning will be to glorify God, by showing to you, who love the Saviour, that the preservation and the triumph of the church are both of them to be accomplished, not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of God, in order that all the honour might be to God, and none of it to man.¹⁴

The sooner we recover this attitude the better it will be.

But, alas, I do not publish this article with any expectation of making any impression on – let alone stopping – the Gadarene descent I have tried to highlight. I do it, rather, to try to assuage my sense of frustration at the continued reign of Christendom. And not only a sense of frustration. I want to warn. Alarmist I may well be dismissed as, but I foresee an impending disaster if evangelicals maintain their present course with its cult of man, its stress on global business with the rule of the mega-buck, promoting a thinly-disguised entertainment-circus which passes

¹² C.H.Spurgeon: 'The Minister's Ordinary Conversation' in *Lectures to My Students*, Vol.1

¹³ His view that Israel was the church, for instance.

¹⁴ Spurgeon sermon 149

for *ekklēsia*-life, with its galaxy of ‘chief men’, and all the rest.
We are sowing the wind, and will surely reap the whirlwind.¹⁵

¹⁵ See my *Attracting Unbelievers to Church: Points to Ponder*.