

PART TWO

POLITICALLY ALIENATED

Authority tends to operate impersonally with the potential for conflict and violence. Ideology accents the differences between people. Thus, ideology promotes conflict and fragmentation.

The death of ideology has its counterpart in the rejection of authority. No cause seems worthy. No leader seems worthy. People do not owe allegiance to institutions or employers. Traditional values have no claim on people that grasps their imagination. And why should people feel an obligation to follow the ruler of this present darkness?

The church has an incredible opportunity to present Christ as the one worthy to follow. Those churches that have made great strides in reaching baby boomers and busters find that this group, which has rejected authority, most loves to sing about the exalted Christ who holds all dominion as Lord. Postmodernity has not rejected the authority of Christ, because most of those growing up in this new age have never heard of him. They have rejected what they have seen, but they are actually on a quest to find a worthy authority.

The modern world had no binding ideological interpretation of reality, but it had many which claimed to be the truth: fascism, Communism, capitalism. During the modern age Christianity has had its share of ideologies that glorified an aspect of the truth to the exclusion of other dimensions of truth: Calvinism, Arminianism, Pietism, Pentecostalism, Puritanism, dispensationalism, fundamentalism, modernism, Evangelicalism, Higher Criticism.

The failure of ideology opens a door for the gospel, because the gospel has filled the void before in times of major cultural upheaval. There is an opportunity, but there is also a danger. The danger for the church in this time of upheaval is in its preference to preach the old culture rather than the old, old story.

CHAPTER FOUR

TRUST NO ONE OVER THIRTY: AUTHORITY

Augustine invented Christendom in the early fifth century when he wrote *The City of God*. This book describes an earthly city and a heavenly city. The difference between the two lies in the fact that the earthly city is not and never can be the city of God. Oddly enough, Christendom is built on the opposite idea: the earthly city must become the city of God. This view became a blueprint for the feudal system and the lines of authority within the medieval world. It was the basis for civil and ecclesiastical authority for a thousand years. Within what had been the old Roman Empire, some renegades in the west first divided the authority. The renegades were the patriarch of the church in Rome and a barbarian prince who presumed the title of Roman Emperor. The real emperor was in Constantinople where the universal patriarch was and where the patriarchs of all of the sees of the divisions of the Christian church met, but in the west, from the perspective of the east, there were some renegades who had usurped authority. Out of this claim to authority the division between the eastern Empire and the Holy Roman Empire, between the eastern church and the Roman church developed. In the west where there was no rival, the emperor and the pope managed to develop this sense of feudalism and who owed obligation to whom.

The first glimmers of the modern age came with the thirteenth century when the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and the pope quarreled over who had the ultimate authority: the pope or the emperor. Major conflict developed between these two heads of authority, but different kinds of

conflict were going on throughout Christendom, throughout the whole feudal system. The barons of England rebelled against King John in 1215 forcing him to sign the Magna Carta granting to them certain rights. The election of the popes became so political that at one point during the late Middle Ages Rome had three different popes. The English Parliament executed King Charles I for treason in 1648. They later deposed his son, James II, in 1688. The French executed their king in 1789. The Russians executed their czar in 1917. All through this period, authority gradually shifted from monarchs and popes to the people. It was a change in orientation as to where the authority lay.

As the modern age grew and developed, great political, educational, philanthropic institutions emerged. Civic organizations, hospitals, private colleges, symphony orchestras, museums, public libraries, political parties, environmental groups, civil rights groups, evangelistic ministries all emerged. People developed them to meet specific needs and generally oriented them toward care of the broad community. In some way, these great institutions were meant to benefit the large group. There was an outward orientation of people taking care of people in a variety of different areas. In the modern age we saw the development of causes, major causes of concern to which people became adherents, devoted followers, usually following some leader who rallied the group to the cause. In championing this development of authority and the theory of where authority lay, people like John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, Rousseau, and Thomas Payne championed democracy without an interfering God. Other people like Adolf Hitler and Mao Tse-tung championed dictatorship as a positive good without an interfering God.

In the modern age God became unnecessary for the body politic, and power lay with the people. It came from the people, and it was in their power to exercise authority. With all of this going on, Christianity also became wrapped up in the modern quest for authority after the collapse of the old feudal Christendom system. With the Catholic church, there was a resolution that authority lay with the pope. With the Protestant church, there was a resolution that authority lay in the Bible on earth. Both churches would say that final authority lay with God in heaven, but on earth the responsibility remained for someone or some way to administer authority. This condition existed as the modern world emerged from the Reformation. Over time we see a situation in which Catholic laity may acknowledge the pope as titular head of the church. They may maintain many questions and doubts while practicing as they please on an individual basis, regardless of what the official position of the church may be with respect to questions like birth control, abortion, divorce, and a number of other questions that are important to

the Catholic church. Protestants moving through the modern age, questioned the reliability of Scripture based on the growing influence of modern ways of knowing; such as empiricism and rationalism. The development of higher criticism and attitudes toward Scripture that would be quite different from the Reformation Protestant attitudes toward Scripture shook the Protestant understanding of authority. While all of this was happening, the church was exercising less and less influence in the cultural life and civic affairs of Western nations. It was present, but it was on the periphery. That is where we find ourselves today: present but on the periphery.

The postmodern generation has rejected allegiance to any external authorities. There is no sense of loyalty, obligation, duty, or civic responsibility to organizations or governmental structures. Whereas Christendom concentrated authority in the head and modernity concentrated authority in the people, postmodernity sees authority only in the isolated individual. That isolated aspect is an important part of the experience of the postmodern person. They are not interested in institutions or organizations. This situation has profound implications for philanthropic organizations of all kinds. Postmodern people are not joiners. Most young people have gone through this stage. We see the prodigal son going through this stage of rejection of parental authority. Typically one of the life crises of the adolescent is the assertion of independence and the separation from parental authority. We see the same thing going on in the life of Jacob when he tricked his father, Isaac, which was an unthinkable kind of thing to do in that culture at that time—to trick the father for the birthright. This sort of thing has gone on for ages and ages, but typically people grow out of it.

What we see now is more than just a generation going through a phase of rejecting authority as a group, which is what the baby boomers did. There was such a huge number of people going through it all at the same time, in a time of mass communication, that it was not an isolated matter. It became a mass matter, and it established a culture known as the *youth culture*. Some people call it the Peter Pan Syndrome, or perpetual adolescence, which has implications for commitment. Another of the crises of adolescence is the ability to develop the capability of intimacy and commitment. That ability has powerful implications for whether or not someone can enter into and maintain a marriage relationship. The baby boomers went through this experience together. The baby busters have gone through this same experience together, and the echo-boom is going through it. These multiple generations have been locked in this attitude since the 1960s.

The counterculture of the 1960s produced such phrases as “Don’t trust anyone over thirty.” We saw national scandals that emphasized and reinforced this attitude occurring on a regular flow from Vietnam to Watergate

to the televangelist scandals of the 1980s. It was fed by the regular, routine failure of leadership at the national level in politics, in business, in religion, in virtually every sphere of life. The postmodern generation would be a generation of people who as children grew up without heroes. They had no one to look up to, and oftentimes grew up without parents or with only one parent in the home. They never fully experienced, relationally, a positive model of authority relationship.

THE COLLAPSE OF MORAL AUTHORITY

The collapse of moral authority in the United States came gradually but steadily after World War II. The aims of the Allies in their crusade against fascism created a climate in which the “free” world rallied to the leadership of Churchill and Roosevelt. During the early days of the Cold War, the choices all seemed clear and the cause of democracy noble. The collapse of moral authority did not come because people consciously rejected morality. On the contrary, it emerged as a slowly growing cynical reaction to the inconsistencies and methods of democracy in its battle with Communism.

Joseph McCarthy led the fight to uncover Communists in the government and entertainment industry. The methods of McCarthy, however, left the public feeling sick over the way innocent lives could so easily be ruined. The cavalier way that the United States intruded into the affairs of small nations heightened the cynicism as people began to realize that military dictatorship, civil war, and assassination fit as easily with American tactics as with Russian tactics. The pragmatic view that “the ends justify the means” tarnished the nobility of the cause. Instead of fighting for freedom as the rhetoric of World War II suggested, it became apparent by the 1960s that America was only interested in its “strategic national interests.” In other words, the United States was out for itself even though it tended to cloak its adventures in terms of the old rhetoric.

We set up puppet governments like that of Diem in Vietnam and then, just as easily, conspired their overthrow. America grew more jaded as the Vietnam war dragged on. Nixon promised a secret peace plan if he were elected, and he succeeded in ending American involvement in the war. The plan turned out to be a promise to withdraw from Vietnam, and to sweeten the deal the United States cut off support for the South Vietnamese government.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed similar episodes of American involvement in the affairs of other countries based on pragmatism rather than conviction. In the Iran-Contra scandal, the United States outdid itself in duplicity. Congress had cut off funds to support the Contra insurgency in Nicaragua. The

United States also supported Iraq in the war with Iran. The United States had an arms embargo against Iran while protecting oil freighters in the Persian Gulf doing business with Iraq. To raise money to fund the Contras, we sold weapons to Iran. This kind of behavior at all levels of government characterized the climate in which the rejection of authority emerged.

The collapse of moral authority in government occurred while a comparable collapse of moral authority in the religious world took place. Evangelical Christianity became almost synonymous with the Republican Party during the 1980s. Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority organization linked conservative Christianity with the political establishment at a time when Americans increasingly viewed politics in the United States as morally and spiritually bankrupt. While the leaders of the religious right had the motive of providing a moral compass for the country, they undermined their own goals by adapting a methodology for acquiring authority that Americans viewed with increasing cynicism.

To make matters worse, several of the most visible leaders of conservative Christianity created a series of scandals. The combination of political power, big money, and media popularity provided a context ripe for disaster. Financial and sexual scandal exploded on the national scene. Oral Roberts drew major attention in his efforts to raise his hospital and medical college in Tulsa from financial ruin. In a television broadcast he suggested that if he did not raise the multimillion dollar shortfall within a matter of days, then God would call him home. The secular media jumped on the manipulative tactic. Political cartoons were savage as they represented God holding Oral Roberts for ransom.

The PTL Club scandal lasted longer and proved more devastating. It began in 1987 when Jim Bakker abruptly resigned from the leadership of PTL with the announcement of his marital infidelity. Jimmy Swaggart led the criticism of Bakker from his own nationally syndicated TV ministry. In time the scandal would lead to the disclosure of misuse of funds amounting to millions of dollars. It would also be followed by Swaggart's own sex scandal. At the time, the impact of these scandals tended to be evaluated in terms of declining income and viewers for the ministries involved. It is more difficult to assess how the scandals affected the moral authority of religion in general and Christianity in particular. The media and political ministries succeeded in making Christianity a big force to be reckoned with in the rough and tumble of politics and TV ratings. Christianity became big business. Unfortunately, this big business went by the name of "televangelism" and confused the message of the gospel with the politics and the glitz of the industry. The headline for an editorial in *Christianity Today* in their December 15, 1989, issue summed up the disaster: "Epitaph for the

Eighties: The decade that was supposed to revive the nation's morality put televangelists on the 'dishonor roll' instead."¹ Media Christianity became a favorite target for jokes on late-night television. The emerging postmodern generation did not reject the moral authority of the only exposure to Christianity they ever had. They never encountered any moral authority from that source. Broad cultural cynicism told them all they needed to know about religion.

THE DANGER TO RELATIONSHIPS

In rejecting external authority, people reject the possibility for significant ongoing relationship with other people. Authority provides a basis for maintaining order in a social setting. At the large community level, it provides the basis for government and the protection of people against violence. The rejection of external authority and of caring concern for the community have long served as essential elements to the definition of a criminal personality. Without external authority, society breaks down and a variety of forms of violence occur.

With the rejection of authority goes the personal discipline necessary to maintain relationships. Membership in organizations, public service, effective volunteer work, and marriage create obligations that require discipline. Sometimes the discipline means showing up somewhere at the right time, or showing up regularly at the same time. Sometimes the discipline has an affect on our finances due to the expectation that we will give money to the cause.

Marriage requires a significant exercise of discipline. It requires the partners to take each other into consideration before making a decision about virtually anything. It means controlling one's temper. It means taking the time to talk about little things when we could use the time "more productively." It means controlling our use of time. It means controlling our behavior with members of the opposite sex. It means thinking about what we are going to say before we speak. Marriage cannot survive without the acceptance of the restraints that the marriage promises create. Without submitting to the discipline of marriage, people cannot fulfill the vows of marriage. The disastrous divorce rate in the United States suggests the extent to which marriage has no more authority than joining a book club. It may be convenient for a time, but it creates no obligation.

By rejecting the sense of discipline necessary to engage in committed relationship, we also abandon the concept of personal responsibility. Without a sense of responsibility, we have the luxury of placing blame for everything somewhere else. The phrase "not my fault" comes to mind.

Without a sense of responsibility people settle into a state of apathy. The concepts of obligation and duty have no place in the experience of the post-modern person. They have grown up without this orientation. Through the popular culture irresponsibility has always been presented to them as charming. By rejecting authority, people reject the teaching that helps create a sense of responsibility. With this factor missing from life, a person feels no responsibility for others, for society, or for themselves. Other than the isolated gut feeling of the moment, people who have rejected all external authority and feel no sense of responsibility have also excluded from themselves the capacity of caring.

This denial of caring comes out in the rejection of authority when people reject rules or norms of behavior. This rejection of the rules of behavior happens to some extent every day when people violate traffic laws. In our neighborhood we have a long street with two stop signs, which young people completely ignore. They race along without even slowing down, because they do not see the need for the stop signs. I have two little girls, and I see the need to slow people down. When people run the stop signs, I do not usually think about the contempt for the law so much as I think about how little people care about the safety of my children.

Ultimately, the social and legal norms of behavior have to do with caring about other people as well as learning to care about yourself. The norms of social behavior are sometimes referred to as manners, politeness, etiquette, and civility. These rules of social behavior stand in contrast to other common forms of social behavior; such as vulgarity, rudeness, harassment, rape, abuse, insensitivity, racism, and inconsideration. Every society develops norms of behavior to protect people from the kind of uncaring irresponsibility that characterizes people who have lost the discipline necessary to function in society without doing violence and pain to others.

When we reject all external authority, we do great damage to ourselves. When my daughter was a little girl, I used to tell her the old European fairy tales that all end with the beautiful young girl marrying the prince. As a father who did not want his brilliant daughter growing up thinking that happiness depended upon her marrying a handsome prince, I would always add, "But you don't want to marry any old prince, Rebecca. We've thrown off the yoke of tyranny!" On one occasion, Rebecca smiled and replied, "Yeah, Daddy. Now we're our own tyranny." She was so right. When we make ourselves our sole authority, we submit to the reign of a tyrant who cares nothing about us. When we reject authority, we cut ourselves off from significant interaction with other people and the kinds of relationships we crave.

I have lived most of my life in the South, but I have lived elsewhere as well. When I was in high school, I lived on my own in Washington where I

was a page in the United States Senate. When I was engaged in doctoral studies, I lived for a time in Oxford. I also taught for a while in Minnesota. Through those experiences, I have learned that people in the English-speaking world have different concepts of polite behavior. The “rules” change depending on the culture.

While reading English Puritan history with Barrie White at Regent’s Park College of Oxford University, I always used the term of respect, *sir*, when speaking to him. I always said “Yes, *sir*” and “No, *sir*.” One day one of the English students asked me why I addressed Dr. White as “*sir*.” “It sounds so servile,” he argued. “No one talks that way except to the Prince of Wales.” Southern tradition insists that I say *sir* and *ma’am* to anyone in authority and as a matter of respect to someone older than I. Just how much older than I becomes a matter of intuition. No rule exists for knowing who deserves the title and who does not.

The authority of tradition depends upon personal relationships. The elderly had the primary responsibility for passing on the tradition. Of course, parents played their part as teachers, but the real authority lay elsewhere. My parents could teach me how to act and how to talk, but power of tradition does not lie in the transmission of the information, but in its acceptance. Why do people accept the tradition and make it a part of their lives as they live it out? Ultimately, the power of tradition does not lie in community sanction or taboo. It depends upon personal relationship. We appropriate the values and behaviors of the people most important to us.

I will never forget watching television with my grandmother forty years ago. A commercial came on in which a husband waited impatiently in the car honking the horn while his wife continued to get dressed in the house. My grandmother spoke gently but with finality to me and my brother, “I do not want to ever hear of you boys honking your horn for a lady. You must go to the door and wait until she is ready.” My grandmother made known her expectation of how to show respect. Whether or not the tradition continued from one generation to the next depended upon my personal regard for my grandmother.

I grew up in the house my grandparents built in the town in which my family has lived since before the Revolutionary War. I grew up around old people who lived into their nineties. Manners, politeness, and civility grew out of personal relationship with them. It was always a matter of a living tradition because it grew out of personal relationship. None of it was a matter of rules as rules by themselves. It all came down to the matter of how to treat people and how to show respect for people. Over the years I have noticed the difference between those who only learned the rules and those who continued the tradition. The rules create a snare for trapping people when we

catch them off base. The rules create social barriers and a mechanism for establishing elitism. The tradition, on the other hand, exists to protect people from embarrassment and to show respect for all people.

One socially advantaged girl of our town a few years older than I knew all the rules but had no interest in the tradition. She used the rules like a club to bully and manipulate. At six o'clock she informed her husband, "It's time for a cocktail." When he made the unfortunate blunder of replying, "I don't care for a cocktail tonight," she replied with force, "Honey, I said it is time for a cocktail." So, he had a cocktail. The rules had no particular grounding or purpose, and she could not distinguish the difference between morality and choice of fabric for a spring day. Because her rule for moral behavior was based on "what would the neighbors think?" she had no basis for moral decision when she realized that the neighbors did not think about her at all.

The postmodern generation may have heard some of the rules. By and large, the rules seem foolish when cut off from a living tradition. The postmodern generation has not so much rejected the authority of tradition. Instead, they have never been a part of the living tradition. They do not know old people. They have not lived with old people and heard their stories. Apart from the stories, the tradition is only rules. Apart from the personal relationship, people have no reason to appropriate the tradition.

ACCEPTING THE AUTHORITY OF CHRIST

Where does that leave us in relating to postmodern people? It is important to remember that in rejecting authority, they have become not anarchists but cynics. The postmodern person does not so much desire the overthrow of government as not care about government. They represent the full flower of disillusionment and disappointment. They have not actually rejected Christ, because they have never heard of Christ. They have rejected authority, organizations, and movements as they have experienced them. They have rejected what they have seen.

Leaders often mistakenly believe that they have authority because of their position, rank, or power. A person may have all of these and still lack authority. Authority ultimately involves the claim of something or someone on the life of another. Loyalty to a cause or person relates to the idea of authority. People, organizations, causes, and nations have no automatic claim upon another person. It does not exist by right or decree. People decide who or what has authority over their lives. We have no control over who has power over our lives, but we have total control over who or what, if anything at all, has authority over our lives.

The marriage ceremony represents the surrender of autonomy. It is

possible to say the words of the vow without surrendering autonomy and submitting to the authority of marriage and all the responsibilities and obligations it creates. Authority has no power to force submission. It does not work that way. The recognition of authority comes from within a person as the appropriate response to what they regard as having authority over their life. In that sense, something stronger than mere brute power and force operates with the surrender of autonomy to some external authority. When a person enters into marriage without surrendering their autonomy, then selfishness has the upper hand in motivating behavior. When a person does surrender their autonomy, however, then love has the upper hand. From a Christian perspective, marriage involves mutual surrender in which two autonomous people surrender to each other and agree to become one.

In describing love, as opposed to passion, in any relationship, the apostle Paul explained the extent to which love has authority over the conduct of life:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (1 Cor. 13:4-7)

Love is not a theoretical or philosophical concept even though it can be discussed and described theoretically and philosophically. Love represents a holistic dynamic of emotion, intellect, will, and behavior directed toward a person or persons. Love cannot be forced any more than authority can. A person loves as the appropriate response to another person or persons.

When Jesus Christ walked the dusty streets and roads of Palestine two thousand years ago, he had no formal authority. He had no rank, position, or power. He had neither title nor dignity. He had neither wealth nor influence within the power structure. Yet, he had great authority. One of the first observations that people made of Jesus after he began his teaching ministry concerned the fact that “he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law” (Mark 1:22). During the modern era, the authority of the church has been similar to that of the authority of the scribes of antiquity. Their authority related to their official position within society. Jesus had a different kind of authority which attached to him personally. His authority operated at the physical, spiritual, and interpersonal level. He healed people physically, and he cleansed them of unclean spirits (Matt. 8:14-17). He spoke, and the waves on the Sea of Galilee responded to him (Matt. 8:25-27). He called people to follow him, and they did (Matt. 9:9). Even the demons obeyed him when he ordered them to leave people alone (Matt. 8:28-34).

The question of formal authority and personal authority appear in stark contrast when the religious “authorities” confronted Jesus about the source of his authority (Matt. 21:23). They had no doubt that he exercised authority, but it differed from their kind of authority. Some said that Jesus had authority because he was in league with the devil (Matt. 12:24)! The demons, on the other hand, recognized him immediately as the “Son of the Most High God” (Mark 5:7; Luke 8:28). People, it would seem, had the freedom to submit to his authority or not. The spirits, however, could not help submitting, for they knew him. The personal authority was inescapable.

In this present age, postmodern people accept the power of government over their lives with cynical fatalism. They acknowledge the reality of formal authority. In the matter of voluntary associations, like churches, civic clubs, the Daughters of the American Revolution, they do not have to join. For the most part, they have opted out. They do not see the point. They do not see what difference it makes for them. They do not want to be obligated to something that does not matter. Organizations do not have the compelling personal authority for postmodern people that would cause them to surrender their lives, or even a part of their lives, to the organizations.

The authority of Jesus rests in who he is. The demons expressed it their own way in begging not to be cast into the abyss. Jesus expressed it another way when he said “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (John 12:32). The apostle Paul said it this way:

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:9-11)

In Jesus Christ we see the melding together of both formal and personal authority. He has the formal authority related to position, power, dignity, and title. Yet, he also has the kind of personal authority to which people willingly submit based solely on who he is within himself.

Jesus preferred to speak of himself as the “Son of Man.” This title forms the basis for his claim to formal authority. To our ears in the twenty-first century, it sounds like a reference to his humanity, but to first-century ears it represented a claim to the fulfillment of the prophecy found in Daniel:

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all

peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” (Dan. 7:13-14)

This mysterious figure appeared to be just another human, but he shared with God something that God shares with no one: his authority, glory, and power. Not only that, but he receives the thing that God has forbidden people to give to anyone but God: worship. We tend to forget that Jesus was condemned by the authorities not for claiming to be the Son of God (a title used by the kings of Israel to indicate that they received the favor of God), but for claiming to be the Son of Man (Matt. 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:67-69). By claiming to be the Son of Man, he made himself equal with God, sharing his glory, sovereignty, authority, and worship. All of these matters relate to the formal authority of Christ, which he exercises whether people willingly respond or not. The irony of the Son of Man is that he did not present himself in power and dignity when he appeared to the world. Instead, he presented himself in weakness. The earlier passage that cites Paul’s description of the authority of Jesus does not begin with the evidence of formal authority. Instead, he explains the basis for the personal authority of Christ:

Who, being in very nature God,
 did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
 but made himself nothing,
 taking the very nature of a servant,
 being made in human likeness.
 And being found in appearance as a man,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Phil. 2:6-8)

In short, Jesus did not use his formal authority to cause submission to him, but he established his personal authority to which people have freely submitted.

The cynicism of the postmodern generation is nothing new. Some people say that it characterizes French culture. Jesus encountered it with his own disciples. When he prepared to go to Bethany following the death of Lazarus, he met resistance and cynicism from his disciples:

Then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.”
 “But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?”
 Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world’s light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light.”

After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (John 11:7-16)

The cynical response of Thomas betrays a basic outlook on life. He had no confidence for the future. He had no hope.

The idea of hope has a direct relationship to one's attitude toward authority. It mixes with feelings of confidence in leadership to bring about positive change and to make a way into the future. Cynicism represents a completely different attitude toward life. A cynic is someone who has reconciled to despair and hopelessness. It is worse than hopelessness, because the hopeless at least know that they have no hope. The cynic does not even know that hope is a possibility.

Thomas would follow Jesus to Bethany, but not because he thought Jesus could do anything. Jesus had personal authority over the life of Thomas. He would follow him, but he did not think it would make any difference. They had each other. They had a relationship. At this point Thomas did not have confidence in the formal authority of Jesus. After the Resurrection, Thomas, known to history as "Doubting Thomas," would bow to Jesus and recognize his formal authority with the confession, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

Postmodern people have the capacity for loyalty to individuals, but they have little confidence in power structures, big organizations, titles, and the egos that go with them. They have little hope. They have largely reconciled themselves to hopelessness. When I began my ministry as a prison chaplain at the Kentucky State Reformatory, I was totally unprepared for what lay ahead. Principal Chaplain Jim Dent wisely gave me instructions not to do anything for two months. During those two months I tagged along with Chaplain Darrell Rollins who knew the ropes. He knew how to recognize a con; but he also told me, "Hal, if you don't get conned at least once a day, you're not doing your job." He also helped me understand hope. Hope is not like a wish. Hope is real. It is not a matter of looking at life through rose-colored glasses. Hope exists in spite of how bad things are. Hope is a gift from God in the darkness, and God always gives us a concrete reason for hope. The rainbow is a visible reminder of hope.

In the face of cynicism, the Resurrection represents the ultimate basis for human hope. Death represents the ultimate expression of human futility and

grounds for despair. The Resurrection demonstrates the power of God to make a difference in the future, regardless of how things appear in the present. In the midst of the greatest defeat and darkness, God gives the lie to cynicism. He demonstrated his authority over creation in the Resurrection and vindicated Jesus publicly.

In the present moment we do not see how Jesus Christ exercises his authority over all of creation. We continue to live in a fallen world governed by Murphy's Law: what can go wrong will go wrong; of all the things that could go wrong, the worst of all possible will go wrong; no good deed goes unpunished. Though he exercises formal authority over creation, people experience Christ most consciously through his personal authority, as Hebrews observes:

In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (Heb. 2:8-9)

What we know of Christ, we do not know from seeing his formal power, glory, and dignity. On the contrary, we know of Christ through his humility and personal character expressed through his actions and teachings. We see someone with tremendous personal moral authority who now has the formal authority to make a difference and provide hope for the future.

The postmodern generation's rejection of authority coupled with a disinterest in belonging to formal organizations and groups stands in conflict with a basic human need to belong. People have rejected an authority that they judged morally bankrupt and politically spent, only to subject themselves to another authority even worse. The French rejected the authority of a king during the French Revolution only to subject themselves to the authority of the Reign of Terror. The Russians rejected the authority of the czar only to subject themselves to the authority of the Communist dictatorship of Lenin and Stalin. The fact that the postmodern generation has grown cynical about leaders and organizations does not mean that leaders and organizations are a thing of the past. It means they are looking, yearning for something. The Germans deposed the kaiser after World War I and found a new leader in Adolf Hitler. We stand in a most dangerous yet opportune moment in time in which an entire generation is yearning for someone worthy to follow.

By presenting himself in human form, assuming the role of a servant, and dying for us, Jesus Christ revealed himself as someone worth following. The great hymn of the entourage of God in the book of Revelation deals with this theme of the worthiness of Christ:

“You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being.

“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased men for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation.
You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth.

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!”

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever!” (Rev. 4:11; 5:9-10, 12, 13b)

It is possible to hold formal authority, yet not be worthy of worship and praise. Through the gospel we understand that Jesus Christ not only has the authority, but he is worthy of the authority.

At critical stages in the life of the church over the last two thousand years, a new hymnody has emerged. Usually associated with periods of renewal, the development of new music reflects a renewed sense of the immediacy of Christ in the lives of people. It happened with the Gregorian chant. It happened with the songs of Francis of Assisi and Bernard of Clairvaux. It happened with the Reformation hymns of Luther and the Great Awakening hymns of Wesley. Today we see what may be a minor blip on the musical horizon or a great change in the direction of church music with the contemporary choruses and worship songs. They have had great popularity with the postmodern generation while receiving tremendous criticism for lacking the great theological themes of the Reformation. It does not take very close examination, however, to recognize that the contemporary songs have an overwhelming preoccupation with the authority of the exalted Christ over all people and creation. They sing songs like:

“He Is Lord”
“He Is Exalted”
“Our God Is a Mighty God”

The theological concern of the songs strikes at this central issue of postmodernity. When postmodern people become Christians, they want to sing about the Christ to whom they have submitted. They want to sing about the true and final authority for their lives who offers hope and a future. They want to sing about the one in all creation who is worthy to be followed.

We hope we can remember that we do not offer an organization, though there is a tendency for Christians in their evangelism not to present Christ but to present their church. The invitation is not to know Christ, but to come hear our pastor, which means "Come join our organization"; "We want your money"; "We want you to do our work for us"; "We want you to bolster our sagging membership roles." The invitation to join the club is not an offer, it is a demand. The "organizational church" offers nothing to the postmodern person. In presenting a clear picture of Jesus Christ, however, we offer someone whose personal authority makes a claim on people that offers them a future. It is not necessary to convince these people that they ought to become joiners and recognize authority. It is only necessary to introduce them to Jesus Christ without whom no authority has legitimacy.