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thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, MAY 03, 2006

The Shepherd and the Witness

This week I am concluding a series of sermons on the Gospel of John coordinated with the church calendar. The last few weeks have concentrated on the Resurrection narratives in John 20-21. There is an intriguing sub-theme running through the appearances: the relationship between Peter and the Beloved Disciple, who I will name John (acknowledging the debate and mystery surrounding his identity). I'd like to share the data with you, reflect on its meaning, and suggest some implications.

- John is the first to reach the empty tomb and see the linen (20:5-6)
- Peter is the first to go inside the empty tomb (20:6)

- Peter is the first to see the burial cloth (20:7)
- John is the first to believe (20:8)

- Peter decides to go fishing (21:3)
- John & the others follow (21:3)

- John is the first to recognize Jesus (21:7)
- Peter swims ahead of John & the others (21:7)

- Peter is commissioned to feed/tend Jesus' sheep/lambs (21:15-18)
- John is identified as the true witness of Jesus (21:20-25)

What is the significance of this relationship?

First of all, at the textual level Peter is identified as the *first in action* among the disciples. He is the mover and shaker, while the others follow his lead. He is the symbolic *leader* of the apostles, the titular head of the church, and Jesus' appointed shepherd of the flock. We get the impression that the disciples (including John) would not do anything until Peter does it first.

John, on the other hand, is *first in insight* among the disciples. He sees and understands what is going on. He is the *true witness*, the

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recorder of facts and insights, the seer into the deep truths and mysteries of the story of Jesus. We get the impression that the disciples (including Peter) would not know anything until John knows it first.

Secondly, it is clear that the community surrounding the author/compiler of the Fourth Gospel is concerned about the relationship between Petrine and Johannine authority. The Gospel of John acknowledges the authority of Peter (and his successors in Rome?), while at the same time establishing the authority of John (and his successors in Ephesus?). The Evangelist is able to acknowledge both simultaneously by employing the above distinction between the *authority of leadership* and the *authority of witness*.

Thirdly, the relationship between Peter and John raises questions about how we understand authority in the church today. I suspect that we assume authority of leadership and authority of witness are usually found in the same person. We expect our leaders (organically and institutionally, locally and denominationally) *both* to lead us into action *and* to express insight into truth. While it is not impossible that both charisms may be found in one person, the final chapters of John should give us pause in our expectations.

Could it be that we have expected too much from our authorities? Could it be that our greatest frustrations emerge when we expect witness from a leader and leadership from a witness? Could it be that a differentiated authority structure is possible (organically and institutionally, locally and denominationally)? Could it be that some of us are called to one form authority and not the other, and we should learn to respect those called to the other? Could it be that we would fulfill our vocations more fully if we stayed within our particular given authority?

Any thoughts?

Do you buy the distinction between leadership-authority and witness-authority?

What would a differentiated authority structure based on this distinction look like?

What other implications might this distinction have?

Labels: [Gospel of John](#), [Ministry](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 4:59 PM

[6 comments](#)

6 Comments:

At [5:14 PM, May 03, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

Now that's what I call good preaching! I don't know when I've heard such depth in a sermon. To me it's proof that you can actually

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preach powerful sermons after seminary, after you are aware that these texts are not just narratives of the events of Jesus but also reflections of the interactions of early Christian communities of faith. May you ever have congregations who can handle such meat!

At [8:50 AM, May 04, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

Wow... great stuff.

I wonder if what you're talking about is just the organic nature of "the body of Christ" applied to authority structure.

As it is we humans are very good at "getting things" from different authority structures: I get safety from the local criminal justice authorities. My children get an education from the local school board authorities. I get roads (and road construction :-() from the state authorities. I get theological accountability from my denominational authorities. I get financial accountability from my administrative director on staff. I get told to take out the trash on Monday nights by the chairman of the Drury Board (my wife).

We "divide authorities" all the time.

So it makes perfect sense to me to go to one authority for one thing and a second one for another.

(This has implications for denominations as they once tried to do everything for their churches and now they can only really provide a few lines of authority for their churches. For instance, fewer and fewer churches see their denomination as an authority in worship matters. In some denominations (like my own) the authority and accountability there is almost nil.)

At [9:24 AM, May 04, 2006](#), [ap](#) said...

i find this quite insightful, too. in fact, it relates quite well to a conversation i had yesterday with a gifted presbyterian pastor who takes seriously the debate currently happening in her denomination re: homosexuality. she wanted to be as knowledgeable as possible on the subject, recognizing that her skill in biblical studies was dwarfed by many from both camps. her leadership in action is not forfeited because of the leadership of others in witness. even better, the situation itself leads to humility in both gifts.

At [10:14 PM, May 04, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

John

When I Saw Your title "The Shepherd and the Witness" I thought I was going to find a Sermon that went along with the Lectionary, John 10: Ps 23 Acts.

I pastor a Holiness Church and follow the Lectionary.

["The Father is Greater than I" \(Bible Brain Buster...](#)

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Always looking for some good help.
Joe D.

At [11:15 PM, May 05, 2006](#), [Tony Myles](#) said...

Kind of reminds me of this one time I read something about how there is one body with many parts... or something like that.

At [12:22 PM, May 08, 2006](#), [pastorchris'place](#) said...

John...excellent.

Some denoms divide church leadership into these two branches. A friend is currently going through a struggle with a spirit of division in his Presbyterian church. He consulted me about "Church Discipline." He shared that his pastor's authority was "witness" and the local session was the "action."

By the way, I find hints that PETER saw this same structure of authority when he discusses exercising our gifts (administering God's grace in its various forms.) He lists only two type of gifts: speaking (witness, perhaps) and serving (action.) See 1 Peter 4.10-11.

Thanks for the great thought-provoking thoughts!

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