

Church Authority

Under the heading of church authority, one might think either or both of two questions were being considered. The first would be where authority lies within the church, and the second would be the extent of church authority. When we discover the answer to the first question, we will know better how to answer the second.

Three general forms of church government can be recognized: episcopal, congregational and presbyterian. I use these terms, not in reference to the denominations which have been named after them, but in reference to the forms of government they describe.

The episcopalian form derives its name from the Greek *episkopos*, meaning overseer, and translated bishop. In the episcopacy is found the one man authority rule. The Roman Catholic pope is the extreme example of this type of rule, but it is widely used among Protestant denominations.

The congregational form supposes to find authority in the whole congregation, and considers itself a democratic form of government.

The presbyterian form takes its name from the Greek *presbuteros*, translated elder. Churches with a presbyterian form of government are ruled by a group of elders.

Churches that adopt the congregational or democratic form of government make the same error that Korah, Dathan and Abiram did (Numbers 16:1-3) "Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy every one of them, and the Lord is among them: wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the Lord?" The fact that all of God's people are holy and that He is among them and that they should have equal standing in grace does not mean that they should rule themselves. Too many people make the error of supposing that since they have been made accepted in the Beloved of God that they are subject to no visible authority. A wicked spirit of rebellion still reside in them. This is evident in the fact that churches which attempt to practice this form of government split and splinter so often that the country is saturated with them. And they are all fighting and spitting at each other. The spirit of rebellion still reigns in every split and splinter and will rear itself up at every conference and business meeting. This is the Laodician church of Revelation 3:4. The word Laodician literally means "the rule of the laity." It is called the church *of* the Laodicians, not the church *at* Laodicia, as all the other six churches are. It is literally *their* church. It does not belong to Christ but them. God has spued it out.

Congregationalism was not taken from the scriptures. There is no Bible support for it, either in the Old or New Testaments. It was originally a reaction against the episcopacy or the papacy. Its advocates hoped to find in it a refuge from the despotism of one-man rule. But some evangelicals, recognizing the anarchy and confusion of congregationalism, have reverted to a localized form of the episcopacy, in which the pastor is sovereign in all the affairs of the church. He is a little pope with only one church, but in that one church he rules with an iron hand.

Support for the one-man rule is abundant in the Old Testament in the examples of Moses, Joshua, the Judges, the Prophets, and the High Priests. The fly in the ointment, however, is that there is *no* New Testament precedent for this practice. The apostles exercised a great degree of authority in the churches, but no one man ever emerged as sole authority. All the churches had a plurality of elders and were overseen, taught, fed and ruled by them.

Has the New Testament then departed from the principles laid out in the Old Testament in which God puts His authority in one man? Not at all. God always puts His authority in one man. The New Testament further demonstrates that the One Man in which God ever entrusts that authority is the Man Christ Jesus.

All Christian denominations give at least lip assent to the fact that the scriptures teach that Christ and Christ alone is the Head of the church. He rules it. It is obedient to Him in all things. As its Lord, He is its Saviour. But they then attempt to adapt their mode of government to this concept.

Congregationals say that Christ is in all the people and therefore all the people rule. That is as logical as saying that since Christ is in all the people, all are apostles. It is true that Christ is in all His people so far as their justification and righteousness are concerned. But He is not in each and every one in all His governing authority, not in all His knowledge and wisdom; He is in His people in widely varying gifts.

Episcopals and sole authority pastors take the papal position: Christ rules the church, but I am His vicar. Everything He says, He says through me, and therefore I am infallible when I speak concerning church matters. No evangelical would verbalize these thoughts, but the practice he assumes must presuppose them. He will not allow His rule to be questioned; therefore, He must consider himself to be the sole and infallible authority of God.

The only form of church government that will stand the scriptural test is presbyterian. I do not speak, of course, of the Presbyterian denomination, but rule by presbytery or elders. Christ is indeed head of the church. He does, in fact, rule it through elders, in which He indwells and empowers with His gifts of the Spirit. If the question now be asked, How do we know that elders have the ruling gifts and not the whole congregation, we answer that I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 make it clear that only men who possess such gifts are to be ordained elders.

The single-man authority that we find in the Old Testament are *types* of Christ the Head of the church. We readily recognize shadows and symbols in material things in the Old Testament that prophesy and speak of spiritual realities in the New Testament, but seem to forget the symbolic pattern when it comes to ruling authority.

We have a Life-principle in the New Testament church that is not realized in the Old Testament congregation. This Life is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself Who has diffused Himself throughout His church by means of spiritual gifts (Ephesians 4:7-8). Christ now rules His church through the authoritative gifts with which He has endowed the elders. All Christians have a measure of Christ Himself through His indwelling and by His gifts (Romans 12:3, Ephesians 4:7). As such, one has a ministry and an essential place in the body of Christ. But all have not ruling gifts. This is quite evident from Romans 12:3-8 and I Corinthians 12:27-30. We must learn to think soberly and soundly of ourselves, recognize that capacity wherein God has enabled us and that wherein He has enabled and gifted those who are given to oversee us.

Lest we should misunderstand this concept of ruling, let it be known that the New Testament knows nothing of one member (even an elder) exercising *person* authority over another member. The head alone rules the body. One hand has no authority over another, nor an eye over an ear or toes over the feet. They are mutually dependent, but none exercises personal authority over the other.

If one member gets out of line with the head, he can be rebuked, restrained and corrected by other members. Some members are used to carry out the wishes of the head to the other members, but it is yet the head who is in authority, not the more gifted members. In like fashion, Christ rules in church elders by the ministered word and by the gifts of the spirit.

A plurality of elders guarantees and safeguards against one man's fallibility. Christ distributes His ruling authority among different men so that no one man bears the responsibility of being an infallible oracle. In this way elders may submit themselves to the authority of Christ in their brethren, and when a decision is made, no one man has taken it upon himself to rule over his brethren. All have submitted to Christ.

Members of the Body of Christ minister and function by the power of Christ exercised in their gifts. The life that lives and ministers is not the fallen man but Christ (Galatians 2:20). Elders minister and rule by these gifts. It will be true, therefore, that some elders will be more gifted than others and exercise more authority. According to Revelation 2 and 3, one elder is designated as the church's messenger or preacher and is charged with primary responsibility for the church. This gives some validity for a church's having a single "pastor." But although this preacher exercises a superior authority by virtue of the ministered word, he is not the sole vehicle of authority in the church.

Now, since it has been demonstrated that Christ, not men, has all authority in the church, and that authority is exercised through men by spiritual gifts, we can more knowingly approach the question of how far does the church's authority reach.

Church authority is not called forth by a vote of members or a decree of a council. Opinions and judgments of brethren and ecclesiastical fathers are held in high esteem, but they in themselves constitute no authority over Christ's flock or over the affairs of men. That would be the members of the body ruling over each other again. It is Christ that is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The government is upon His shoulders. It is to Him that every knee must bow.

Church authority is found in the aggregate gifts of all its members. That is where Christ is. It is through His gifts in His people that Christ preaches, rebukes, restrains, corrects, instructs, blesses and saves men. He rules through the activities of His people, not by the decrees of their councils and business meetings. This is the sense in which Matthew 16:19 and John 20:21 must be understood. The church, His body, is His activity on earth by the power of the Holy Spirit in spiritual gifts. We have in Him the keys and the power to liberate men from their sins or lock them up to judgment. No one man or council has this power. It is in the fulness of Christ in His church.

- C. M.