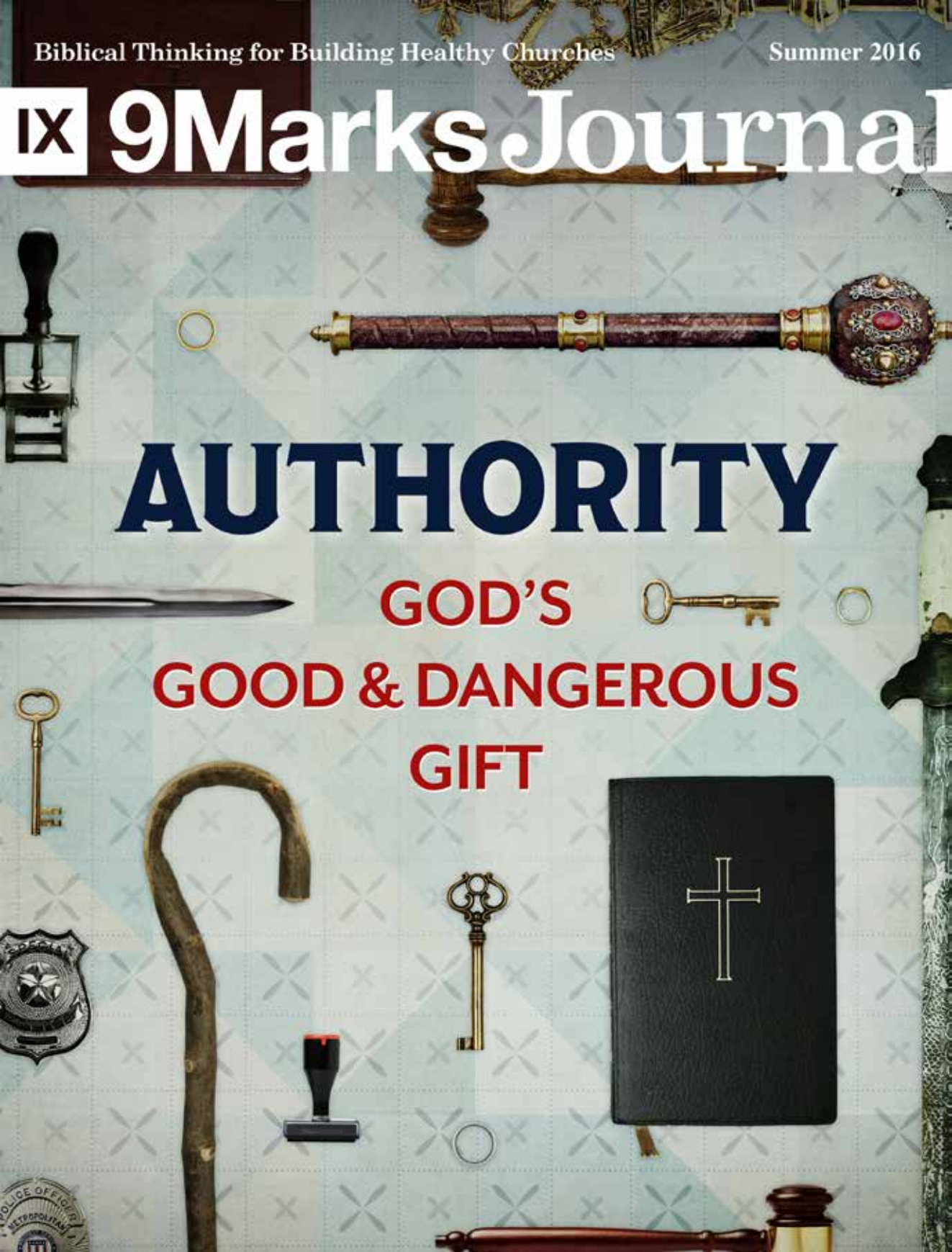


# IX 9Marks Journal

## AUTHORITY

GOD'S  
GOOD & DANGEROUS  
GIFT





Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches



# 9Marks Journal

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# Editor's Note



Jonathan Leeman

**T**he topic of authority befuddles Westerners today. We don't like the idea of authority, but it's difficult to get away from since our lives are suffused by it: hospital procedures, building codes, traffic laws, parental responsibilities, marriage covenants, student requirements, office rules, the laws of state, the grammar of language, the meaning of words—on and on we could go. Authority is the glue and gravity that enables people to live together. Apart from authority, all of life would be determined by the preferences of the moment. There would be no traditions, no predictability of behavior, no stability of meaning, no shared morality.

Behind every authority structure, after all, is a moral evaluation. When we say, “You must do this” or “We must obey him,” we are saying it's *right* to do so, and *wrong* not to do so. We are making a moral claim. The trouble is, we are a society that has destroyed its own ability to say “right” and “wrong.” We have no moral vocabulary left beyond the exaltation of personal desire and identity. Which means: it's nearly impossible with today's vocabulary to justify any claim to rightful authority.

Yet how, then, do we organize our lives together? More crucially, how do we enjoy anything of transcendent value that's worth protecting over time? You protect something with *rules*. How, in

other words, do we live as anything other than beasts whose only law is writ in tooth and claw?

To decry all authority is to decry anything of transcendent value in human life. It is dehumanizing.

Of course, there is a danger in another direction as well. If every set of moral evaluations comes with a matching pair of authoritative structures, who gets to say whose evaluations and structures are right? What if “he” uses “his” evaluations and structures to oppress me? History offers a heart-breakingly long list of such abuses. One group of people creates a moral narrative that enables them to rule over another group of people, exploiting them for personal gain. Reacting to this exploitation and abuse, we become anti-authority and anti-morality. (The irony, of course, is that we *assume* no individual or group should be abused and exploited because we have inherited the belief from Christianity that all individuals are worthy of respect; but now we’re like the rich spoiled children who love the inheritance and despise the parents who earned it. But that’s a conversation for another day.) Yet we cannot finally escape moral evaluation and authority structures. Life is simply impossible without them, putting Westerners into an unresolvable bind.

What’s the solution? A solution can only be found by pointing to the gospel and the people of the gospel, the church. This is the string that, when pulled, untangles the knot. The church’s moral narrative starts with a word of forgiveness. And those who have been forgiven can no longer lord it over any other person. Still, Jesus is king, which means his rule must bind these people together and govern their lives. In the local church, then, we find a society where heaven’s moral evaluations and authoritative structures are put on display. Any authority exercised in a church should be for the good of the members and the nations. Too often, of course, it’s not.

The goal of this 9Marks Journal is to consider the topic of authority as God’s good and dangerous gift. What is the church’s



authority? The pastor's authority? And what will keep churches and pastors from misusing their authority? Pray with us that this Journal would be used for good and not ill among many congregations. Pray with me that both your heart and mine would be wise to our own potential for self-deception, and that each of us would use whatever stewardships we've been given for the good of others and the glory of God.

# Authority: God's Good and Dangerous Gift



Jonathan Leeman

**A**uthority is better than you think and worse than you think.<sup>1</sup> It is God's good and dangerous gift.

## WHAT IS AUTHORITY?

The issue of authority goes to the heart of your existence and mine. You and I were created to rule. The idea is there in Genesis 1. God created Adam and Eve in his image, and then he gave them “dominion” over all the earth. He even tells them to “subdue” it (Gen. 1:28). How does humanity image God? By exercising authority.

Authority is not just power. It's the moral right to exercise power. It's an authorization. You might say that authority is the God-given moral right to make choices. Some have the moral right to make choices (exercise authority) over whole kingdoms, some over the thoughts inside their head. Yet everyone has some authority, some domain they rule.

Why did God give us authority? To create. To author. Authority authors. It creates and empowers and arranges and organizes

---

<sup>1</sup> Andy Crouch says this about power in his excellent book, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power*.

and builds and encourages. This is what God did with his authority: he authored a world. And this is what he means for everyone created in his image to do.

### A GOOD GIFT

Good authority doesn't just work from the top down, but also the bottom up. Let me be the platform on which you build your life. I'll supply you, fund you, resource you, guide you. Just listen to me.

Good authority binds in order to loose, corrects in order to teach, trims in order to grow, disciplines in order to train, legislates in order to build, judges in order to redeem, studies in order to innovate. It is the teacher teaching, the coach coaching, the mother mothering. It is the rules for a game, the lines on a road, a covenant for lovers. Trust me, and I will give you a garden in which to create a world. Just keep my commandments. I love you.

Good authority loves. Good authority gives. Good authority passes out power.

King David, who knew a few things on the topic, offered this: "When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth." (2 Sam 23:3-4 HCSB). Good authority strengthens and grows. You know this if you have ever had a selfless and loving parent, teacher, employer, coach, pastor.

What a glorious gift God has given by making us each kings! To rule in his image for his own glory.

### A DANGEROUS GIFT

Yet our first parents and we chose not to use our authority according to God's commandments. We stopped asking for God's moral permission, but relied on the serpent's since he appealed to our desires for supremacy. He promised loosing without binding, growing without trimming, innovation without study.

What has resulted is a rebellious and cursed world. We use our authority selfishly and so ineffectually. And since ineffectually then violently, believing violence will achieve our ends. Cain is not worshipped for his “worship” so he kills.

Sin, in other words, is nothing more or less than humanity’s misuse of authority. Adam’s bite and Pharaoh’s bloodshed belong to the same class, operate by the same principles, possess the same authorization. Pharaoh merely swung a much bigger hammer.

Bad authority discourages, cripples, wilts, sucks dry, dehumanizes, snuffs out, annihilates. It uses, doesn’t give. It is political imperialism, economic exploitation, environmental degradation, business monopolization, social degradation, child abuse.

Of course, bad authority doesn’t always wear such monstrous faces. Often it charms and persuades. It borrows truth and offers empathy. I know how you’re feeling. I recognize your troubles. Here is the solution. So listen to me. Keep *my* commandments.

Bad authority, don’t you see, takes a good and glorious gift that God has given to humanity and employs it for evil. It is a liar and a charlatan. Yet it is so very real, at least for a time.

## TWO DIFFERENT REDEMPTIONS

Westerners today have beheld the corpse-strewn battlefield of authority’s misuses and determined to dispense with authority altogether. This can’t actually be done since someone always has to make decisions for the group, moral and otherwise. Yet it’s easy to sympathize with the tactic. A world of androgynous gray seems safer. Call everyone special. Give all the kids an “A.” Forget the old rules. Claim that love doesn’t require covenants. Revolt against the autocracies of gender. Flatten church hierarchies and tear down the walls. Tell people to “Define yourself!” even if they end up laughing at the same shows, wearing the same clothes, adopting the same beliefs, making the same moral judgments, and becoming pathetically and predictably the same, consumers enslaved by appetite, lap dogs who bark at the slightest sound of an all-caps GOD standing outside the door.

It's a perspective that recognizes the realities of the fall, but believes redemption comes through denying the categories of creation. Since those categories are inevitable, woven into the fabric of the universe, this perspective "works" only as long as it quietly relies upon that which it repudiates.

Might there be another way? Might we reclaim the truths of creation but through the demands of redemption? Can we imagine brightly blooming wives who rejoice in the sunny warmth of their husband's Christ-like leadership? Church members who enjoy their elders' authority like dry earth the rain?

### STRIKING THE BALANCE

Christians must recognize the fallen nature of authority, including the potential inside of each of us to abuse it, even with the best of intentions. But to be suspicious toward all authority is both naïve and harmful. It leaves you isolated and cynical. You become incapable of trust, vulnerability, and true relationship because everything must remain on your terms.

The difference between what people call "community" and what the Bible calls the "church" finally comes down to the topic of authority. The assembly is not only a fellowship but an accountability fellowship, led by God's good gift of pastors and teachers. The Christian life will grow best, flower most beautifully, when nourished in this greenhouse. But beware the dangers. The weeds and toxins remain.

Our first order of business, perhaps, is to simply re-introduce the topic: What is authority? How is it a good gift? And a dangerous one?

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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# The Shift from Authority to Preference— And Its Consequences for the Church



Os Guinness

**O**ur modern world has shifted us from a stance under authority to one of preference. Or, expressed more carefully, our modern world tends to undermine all forms of authority other than its own and replaces them with the sense that all responses are merely a matter of preference.

## THE LORD AS AUTHORITY

It goes without saying that authority is central and crucial to both the Jewish and Christian faiths. Unique among the gods believed in throughout history, the Lord is transcendent, so what he says is truth, binding truth, because it addresses us as authority. To dilute this authority is to dismiss the Lord himself.

For Christians, “Jesus is Lord” is the central conviction and confession of the Christian faith. In the words of the previously

skeptical but then believing Thomas, we are followers of Jesus because we have reached the warranted conviction: “My Lord and my God” (Jn 20:28). Christians believe that Jesus Christ is fully God become fully human, the unique, sure, and sufficient revelation of the very being, character, and purposes of the transcendent God, beside whom there is no other god, and beside whom there is no other name by which we must be saved.

The follower of Jesus is therefore a person under authority, living before the transcendent majesty of God and unashamed to be so. What God tells us, we trust. And what God tells us to do, we obey. We therefore gladly acknowledge that we are not self-created, we are not self-sufficient, and we are not autonomous. No one in the world has a higher view and more solid notion of freedom than Jews and Christians. The Book of Common Prayer addresses God “whose service is perfect freedom.”

### **FREEDOM, NOT AUTONOMY**

But this freedom has a threefold framework, so it is never viewed as autonomous. First, it is understood as a gift from God and not an achievement of our own. Second, it is always relational, and therefore it is experienced and it matures only in relationship with our Master, our brothers and sisters, and our fellow citizens. And third, it is always lived out within the framework of the teaching of Jesus and the Scriptures. Jewish and Christian freedom is freedom within the form of the truth of God’s way of life.

This means the Christian faith is a faith constituted by the authority of Jesus. Whatever Jesus himself commands, or whatever other authority is given, Jesus’ stamp of authority is the final word for Christians who would follow him faithfully. Jesus’ own teaching and his attitude toward the total truthfulness and supreme authority of the Bible make the Scriptures our final rule and authority. What the Scriptures say, God says, and what God says, we obey.

## THE POWER OF PLURALIZATION

Critics dismiss this view of authority as quaint and rigid in the world of modernity. And modernity tends to render it unthinkable in a thousand ways, subtly and systematically. For a start, there's the inescapable presence and power of *pluralization*—the process by which the proliferation of endless choice and incessant change increases at all levels of modern life. If “everyone is now everywhere,” then everyone is aware of “all those others” all the time, and with all the awareness of others comes the reminder of all the choices and changes that are open to us at any moment. And if there's a wide array of choice today, tomorrow will bring even more.

To be sure, the dizzying array of choices is most obvious in a supermarket or a shopping mall, but the allure of choice has spread far beyond the walls of official consumerland. From breakfast cereals to restaurants and cuisines to sexual identities and temptations to possible sexual arrangements of all types to self-help techniques and philosophies of life, we are incessantly offered an infinite array of choices, and the focus is always on choice as *choosing* rather than choice as the *content* of what is chosen. Just choose. Simply choose. Experiment. Try it out for yourself. How else will you know unless you have tried it? After all, there are always others, there is always someone or something more, so unless you try them how are you to know whether you have missed the possible holiday, relationship, or philosophy that might really hit the jackpot?

“Love to one is only a barbarity,” Nietzsche wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil*, “for it is exercised at the expense of all others. Love to God also.”

There you have it. Even God is reduced to consumer choice, according to Nietzsche, and when truth is taken out of the equation, sticking to one choice is no longer a matter of intellectual conviction but a sign of timidity and folly.



Surely, the unspoken adspeak tells us, you should always be open-minded, for the genuine freethinker will always wish to choose and keep choosing, to experiment and keep on experimenting. Our freedom is the freedom to choose, regardless of whether our choice is right or wrong, wise or stupid. So long as we can choose, we are free. Choosing is all that matters. Truth, goodness, and authority are irrelevant to the central act and the main event: you are the sovereign chooser, and you are free to exercise your sovereign right to choose and choose and choose again in whatever way you like—until all choices seem the same and each one shrivels into insignificance.

### FREEDOM OF CHOICE V. FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

Anyone thinking along can immediately see why freedom of conscience and conscientious objection are routinely dismissed today. Freedom of choice and freedom of conscience are entirely different. Freedom of choice has become autonomous and a matter of entitlement, whereas freedom of conscience was never free. It was a duty and therefore duty-bound and not free. Conscience was once respected precisely because a person was duty-bound, or bound by the dictates of conscience—like Luther’s “Here I stand. I can do no other.” But in today’s world, freedom of conscience is confused with freedom of choice and therefore rendered dutiless and shorn of its rights.

The net effect of this concentration on choosing lies at the heart of our modern consumer society. Choice at the expense of the content of the choice elevates the sovereign chooser and devalues the content of the choice and reduces it to a preference.

Does it matter whether you choose Wheaties, Bircher Muesli, or Irish oatmeal as your breakfast, or football, baseball, or golf as your sport?

Does it matter whether you worship on Friday with the Muslims, Saturday with the Jews, Sunday with the Christians, or not at

all? Or whether your sister-in-law is straight or lesbian, or your boss is a heterosexual womanizer, a homosexual, or was once a woman?

There are different strokes for different folks. We are all different and all our lifestyles and journeys are different, so who are we to judge when we haven't walked in another person's moccasins? This is my choice. That is yours. We are all free to choose differently, and our choices only amount to different preferences, so who is to say who is right? Or to care what anyone else chooses? And what business do any of us have to judge other people's preferences?

Whatever.

## THE RESULT OF FREE-CHOICE CONSUMERISM FOR THE CHURCH

When such autonomous, free-choice consumerism washes over society from the shopping mall to the bedroom, the office and the ballot box, the result is predictable. What will be the price of obedience to authority, and what will be the respect accorded to principled dissent? Choice—unbounded autonomous, subjective sovereign individual choice—is the playboy king of consumerland, and with comfort and convenience as his closest courtiers and cronies, he now rules much of life. Authority and obedience are therefore banished together. They are the unwelcome spoilsports whose entry might ruin the fantasy game of infinite choices. The result is no surprise—a grave crisis of authority within the church, and a rash of positions and interpretations that in any clearer thinking generation would be frankly seen as the rejection of the authority of Jesus and the Scriptures that they are.

Evangelicals are especially vulnerable to this distortion of choice because of the exaggerated place they give to choice in the call to conversion. It may even be their Achilles' heel. Whereas the Jews are the *chosen people*, so that their faith is their destiny, Evangelicals are a *choosing people*, and their faith is often merely their decision.

The step of faith is of course a choice, the most important and fully responsible choice a person ever makes. But when the overwhelming emphasis is put on choice as an act of decision, choosing becomes everything, but it can then suffer the fate of many modern choices and shrink to being lightweight, changeable, and nonbinding. Choice and change are close companions, and those who decide for a faith because they choose to believe it can as easily defect from the faith when they choose not to.

Contrast this modern casualness with the early church's deep theology surrounding conversion. Choice today can always be casual, whereas the covenantal vow of faith is costly because we commit ourselves to Jesus and mortgage our very selves as we do so. We have chosen, and we are committed. We have picked up our crosses, and there is no turning back. We are no longer our own.

### THE TEMPTATION TO TRIVIALIZE CHOICE

The modern temptation to trivialize choice is not new. It ultimately stems from our human fallenness as truth seekers who are always inevitably truth twisters, too. Instead of seeking to shape our desires according to the reality of God's truth, we seek to shape reality according to our desires—and modern consumerism aids and abets us as never before.

St. Augustine addressed the problem in the fifth century, and his protest against the Manichaean distortions of the Scriptures could apply equally to those who attempt to rationalize their justification of homosexual marriage. Just so today, Christian advocates of homosexual and lesbian revisionism believe in themselves and in the sexual revolution rather than the gospel. They therefore twist the Scriptures to make reality fit their desires rather than making their desires fit the truths of Scripture. In Søren Kierkegaard's stinging term, they are "kissing Judases" who betray Jesus with an interpretation.

Protestant liberalism has long sauntered down this road, brazenly repudiating the authority of Jesus for the successive authorities of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment worldviews. To paraphrase George Canning's description of those who were fellow travelers of the revolutionary Jacobins, liberal revisionists are "friends of every faith except their own." In the process whole churches and entire denominations have effectively chased a mirage and committed spiritual and institutional suicide and rendered themselves as irrelevant as they are unfaithful.

The tragic story of extreme Protestant revisionism makes it all the harder to witness the pitiful attempts of evangelical revisionists to follow the Gadarene rush over the cliff. As I write, for example, the pastor of an evangelical church in San Francisco has announced that he regards the way of Jesus as "destructive" to human flourishing as it is now understood. He therefore proposes that it should be relaxed to allow for the more "compassionate" and contemporary lifestyle of homosexual marriage.

Sadly for him and his followers, he does not understand the lessons of the Bible and history—that he is courting spiritual and institutional suicide for himself and for those he is leading astray. Though to be fair, he and others like him are only reaping what others sowed with such fanfare a generation ago. For were we not solemnly sold a barrel of nonsense in the form of maxims that all good seeker-sensitive and audience-driven churches were to pursue? Here is one example from a well-known Christian marketing consultant: "It is also critical that we keep in mind a fundamental principle of Christian communication: the audience, not the message, is sovereign."

The audience is sovereign? No! Let it be repeated a thousand times, *no!* When reaching out as the church of Jesus, the message of the gospel and Jesus the Lord of the message is alone sovereign—and never, never, never the audience, however needy, however attractive, however prestigious or well-heeled an audience

may be. Yes, like the apostle Paul we are to be Jews to the Jews, Gentiles to the Gentiles, and all things to all our fellow humans, excluding no one in any age or any sphere or condition of life. That, of course, is one side of the truth of the seeker-sensitive approach. But the other side of the truth is that we are always and only to be all things to all people, not in order to join them but rather, like Paul, to bring them back to Jesus.

### ARE WE CHANGING THE WORLD—OR BEING CHANGED BY IT?

All such evangelicals should search their hearts. For a generation now the air has been thick with talk of “changing the world,” but who is changing whom?

There is no question the world would like to change the church. In area after area only the church stands between the world and its success over issues such as sexuality. Unquestionably the world would like to change the church, but does the church still want to change the world, or is its only concern to change the church in the light of the world? Something is rotten in the state of evangelicalism, and all too often it is impossible to tell who is changing whom.

There are always essential questions to ask of anyone we hear or anything we read. What is being said? Is it true? And what of it? All three questions are discounted in our modern age of information, but as Christians we must never allow the truth question to be removed from its central place. To be sure, faithfulness is costly in the short term. It is upstream and against the flow, and the flow that was once politically correct can suddenly become a raging and life-threatening intolerance.

But costly though that stand may be, it is never as costly as the long-term price of rejecting the authority of Jesus and abandoning the way of life in the gospel. Our Lord warned of that very danger: “Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt 10:28).

Today's evangelical revisionists should take sober note. Time and again I tremble when I hear or read their flimsy arguments. They may be lionized by the wider advocates of the sexual revolution for fifteen minutes because they are siding with that wider culture in undermining the clear teaching of Jesus and the Bible that stands in their way. For there is no question that Jesus, the Scriptures, and Christian tradition all stand resolutely in their way.

### ROADKILL, NOT HEROES

But in truth, the sexual revolution has no real interest in such evangelicals, and they will be left as roadkill as the revolution blitzkrieg gathers speed. But that is nothing compared with the real tragedy of the revisionists. It is no light thing for anyone to set themselves above and against the authority of Jesus and his Scriptures. The apostle Peter betrayed Jesus and was restored, but Judas stands as the warning for all who betray Jesus for their personal, sexual, or political interests and condemn themselves for their disloyalty.

Both Jesus and the apostle Peter tell us to “remember Lot’s wife” (Lk 17:33), but our Christian revisionists should remember Lot himself. Having chosen the benefits and privileges of living in the well-watered garden country of Sodom, having married into their social circles, and having worked his way up into the inner leadership of the city, Lot was suddenly confronted by his moment of truth. He had been utterly naive and deluded in trusting the Sodomites. When the chips were down, they had no respect for his hospitality, no time for his different moral standards, and they threatened to deal with him as brutally as with his guests: “This one came in as an alien, and already he is acting like a judge; now we will treat you worse than them” (Gen 19:9).

Poor Lot had become a joke even to his in-laws. In spite of all his efforts and contrary to all that he imagined, he had still not arrived, and he was never accepted as he imagined. He was al-

ways the alien—as Abraham never forgot that he was and was respected for being. We of course should always be resident aliens as faithful Christians who are in the world but not of it—regardless of the world’s pressure on us to change with the times and line up with them on the so-called right side of history.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Os Guinness is a prolific writer and social critic. You can find him on Twitter at @OsGuinness.

#### **EDITOR’S NOTE:**

*This is an adapted excerpt from Os Guinness latest book Impossible People: Christian Courage and the Struggle for the Soul of Civilization.*

# The Nature of Church Authority



Jonathan Leeman

**T**he idea of church authority is a mystifying one for Protestants. We know we don't want to say a church has the authority actually to *make* or *unmake* a Christian, whether through the ordinances or in some other fashion. We also have a strong conviction that the individual Christian must finally heed his or her conscience over and against a church should a church ever defy Scripture. Each believer will give an individual account to King Jesus on Judgment Day, and so each believer must, in the final analysis, decide for him- or herself what biblical obedience requires.

What room is left, therefore, for a church's authority?

If you go back and read what the early Protestants wrote about the church, you will discover they took the idea of church authority for granted. It didn't scare them. This was true among the high church Anglicans and the low church Baptists alike. Most evangelicals today, however, don't know how to think about the concept. What categories or language do we use? Or worse, might church authority just be an idea that power-loving shepherds use to lord over the sheep?



## CHURCH AUTHORITY = AGREEMENT

In fact, I don't think the idea of church authority needs to mystify or scare us. It's really quite simple. To strip off all the layers and whittle it down to its barest minimum, church authority is nothing more or less than *two or three people agreeing about the gospel*.

Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. (Matt. 18:19–20)

Suppose you and dozen other people are living on a desert island. You find a Bible, read it, and become convinced of the truths of Christianity. You repent and believe. You're now a Christian, or at least *you* say you are. You share the gospel with two others. They, too, repent and believe. The three of you can now gather in Jesus' name, because it's no longer just you saying you're a Christian; they're saying it, too.

The authority of your church of three consists entirely in your agreement with one another about Jesus and about each other.<sup>2</sup>

## WHAT IT MEANS TO GATHER IN JESUS' NAME

Let me unpack this a bit more. What does it mean to gather in Jesus' name? It means not only that each of you believes the good news about Jesus, it means that each of you agree with each other's professions about the good news of Jesus.

Person 1: "I believe that Jesus was fully God, fully man, lived a perfect life, died on the cross for sins, and rose again so that all who repent and believe can be forgiven. Is that what you believe?"

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<sup>2</sup> In other publications, I have described church authority as an interpretive judgment (or the power of the keys). The "agreement" I am highlighting here involves that interpretive judgment. The two or three are agreeing upon an interpretive judgment of what the good news about Jesus is, and who is a genuine follower of Jesus. See, for instance, *Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ's Rule* (IVP, 2016), ch. 16.

Person 2: “Yes, that’s what I believe, too! And you?”

Person 3: “Yes, me three!”

The ability to *gather in Jesus’ name* presupposes (i) an agreement with one another about the good news of Jesus, (ii) as well as an agreement that the other two persons possess genuine faith in the good news about Jesus. And right there, in those two points of agreement, we find the very heart and substance of church authority. It’s two or three or three-thousand agreeing that we’re talking about the same good news; agreeing that we’re all his followers.

### HOW CHURCH AUTHORITY SHOWS ITSELF

Church authority shows itself (becomes evident) when a fourth person walks up to our group of three and says, “Hey, I’m a Jesus’ follower, too. He’s my favorite rabbi.” And we say, “But is Jesus your Savior and Lord?” When the person replies, “No, not a savior, just a great teacher,” we know we cannot gather in Christ’s name with this person, at least not in the sense described in Matthew 18:20. We will not name him or her as one of us—Christ followers—through baptism (28:19).

The authority of our little church of three also shows itself if two of us have to exclude the third for hypocrisy or heresy, as the larger context of Matthew 18:15–18 teaches.

### A POLITICAL OR GROUP-ORGANIZING AUTHORITY

In other words, church authority, at its heart, is a political or group-organizing authority. It allows the people of an invisible new covenant to become corporately visible. It enables Christians to “go public” together.

In that sense, church authority is just like the authority of every kind of group on the planet, formal or informal. From the

chess club, to an actor's guild, to the cool kids' clique, it's the authority to say "You're one of us" or "You're not one of us," based on certain agreed-upon beliefs.

That kind of language might sound too exclusive to our contemporary ears, but doing away with it is nonsensical. Without it, there's no baptism, no Lord's Supper, no visible church on earth. Administering a baptism requires two or three people to agree. Enjoying the Supper requires two or three people to agree. Being a visible "assembly" (which is what "church" means) requires two or three people to agree. And the authority of a church, once again, is that agreement. Without church authority there is no group; there's just a bunch of self-defining individuals.

Which means, by definition, an individual Christian cannot possess church authority, because church authority requires the agreement of two or three. Agreeing with yourself doesn't do much to build a church.

Those who adhere to episcopalian, presbyterian, and congregational forms of church government will disagree about who must join the individual applicant in exercising the agreement. Does the professing Christian need the bishop, the session, or the whole congregation's agreement? Our traditions offer different answers to that question. But the core is always the same: we agree on who Jesus is and that we're each qualified to gather together in his name.

## JESUS' OWN AUTHORIZATION

One more thing: church authority is not simply born of the sociological necessity for how groups must form, i.e. through agreeing with one another that they are a group.

Rather, Jesus puts his own authorization behind the agreement in two ways. First, by referring to the agreement of "two or three" in Matthew 18:20 (as in verse 16), Jesus invokes a Jewish courtroom principle from Deuteronomy 19 that says two or three witnesses

must agree in order to bring a legally binding charge. Yet now Jesus puts that old principle to new work. These two or three who agree now “legally” bind one another from the standpoint of his kingdom. They are “covenanted” together, as we sometimes say. The Old Testament judicial glue finds a fresh use: binding a church together.

Second, Jesus seals that agreement with the promise of his own presence. “Where this happens, I’m there. They have my seal of approval. They raise my flag. They represent me, just as the temple once represented God’s authority and presence.”

## CONCLUSION

Church authority does not make or unmake a Christian. And church authority, when in error, must be contradicted by the individual. Jesus alone is the final, final judge, after all.

Still, church authority is what allows for the church on earth to become visible—to go public. It’s how a group of individual Christians speaks in unison to the nations, “Here we are, a new nation and race. We represent Jesus and we have good news for you!”

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# Is There Such a Thing as Church Authority?



Greg Gilbert

In our day and age, it's at least mildly controversial to say the local church isn't just a voluntary association of Christians, or a resource center for your Christian life, or a means of fellowship that you're free to take advantage of if you want. It's probably equally controversial to say that, in fact, the local church plays a unique and vital role in God's work of redemption because it is the embassy of the kingdom of heaven in this dark and fallen world.

In other words, the local church was created by King Jesus himself, commissioned to do a particular thing in the world, and chartered with authority to speak in His name. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "I'm giving you the keys of the kingdom." So, you—that is, believers who have mutually affirmed the soundness and genuineness of each other's allegiance to the King, and have recognized one another as members of one body—you *together*, as a church, now have authority to speak for me regarding the *what* and the *who* of the gospel, both what the gospel is, and who is rightly confessing it. That's the keys.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed treatment of "keys of the kingdom," see the fourth chapter of Jonathan Leeman's *Don't Fire Your Church Members*.

But how does this all work out practically? How does an individual local church go about using these keys and exercising this authority Jesus has given? Some say the Bible doesn't speak to the question, and so we're left to pragmatism (what works); others say it does speak. Then there are those who argue for all kinds of different structures of church government—episcopacy (bishops with a pope at top), presbytery (set of interlocking courts), modified Presbyterianism where there's no hierarchy but the church is still ruled by its elders, and then congregationalism.

But even among congregationalists, some say a church is led by pastor and deacons as a Board of Directors; or a pure democracy; or even that a church can be spread out in several locations over an entire city or even state or nation or all over the world and led by a centralized person or group of people.

So do we make sense of it all?

First, I want to make the case that the Bible does speak on this topic—and it actually says quite a lot. King Jesus hasn't left his embassy without instructions on how it's to organize itself and operate. In fact, the instructions he gives hold out a form of government we might best call *elder-led congregationalism*, where the assembled church as a whole holds and exercises the authority of the keys of the kingdom, but is led and taught in that use of authority by its elders.

Put simply, King Jesus has given all local churches two things—the keys of the kingdom, and elders to lead and teach how to use them.

I hope what follows will be helpful to you in understanding better why the church is so important, not just to you as an individual Christian, though that's true, but in the working out of God's purpose in the world to create a new holy nation centered on his Son.

To that end, here are seven points regarding the keys of the kingdom, and how local churches exercise authority through their use.

## 1. JESUS GIVES THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM TO ACTUAL ASSEMBLIES OF BELIEVERS—GROUPS OF THEM WHO REGULARLY GATHER TOGETHER.

If you were to attend the church I pastor, among the first things you'd hear is our service leader say, "Welcome this gathering of Third Avenue Baptist Church." The language there is important. Why? Because our assembling together—our *gathering*—is not incidental to our identity as a church. In fact, it's essential to it, and there are several reasons biblically speaking to think so. Briefly, here are three.

### *1. It's just what the word translated "church" means.*

"Church" itself is actually a terrible word—it's an Old English word taken from the Greek word *kyrikon*, which means the Lord's house, which means, literally, "the building a lord lived in." This is an awful usage, and I wish we'd stop using it. After all, that word *kyrikon* is never used in Bible; what's used in the Bible is the word *ekklesia*, which means "assembly or gathering." That's word Jesus chose to describe us—a group of believers who come together to do certain things.

### *2. The images the Bible uses to describe the church point to this togetherness.*

A building made out of living stones, a body with its members, a flock of sheep. All those point to something that is literally together, that has a literal physical geographic location.

### *3. The responsibilities Jesus gives to the church assume this togetherness.*

If we're to affirm, protect, and disciple one another as Jesus says, and do that with any real knowledge of each other at all, that presumes that we'll regularly be together in order to build the kind of relational knowledge that allows all that to happen.

So, all that is why Third Avenue Baptist Church will never be what's come to be called recently a multi-site "church." In fact, it's why—to be sharply accurate about it—there's really no such thing as a multi-site church, any more than there can be a multi-site building or a multi-site body.

Here's the point: A church isn't defined just by a shared name or leadership or budget or offices. It's a group of Christians who regularly—the Bible would say weekly, on the Lord's Day—gather together to carry out the functions of an embassy of King Jesus. That's exactly what the first church in Jerusalem did—all 10,000 of them met in Solomon's Colonnade right up until persecution forced them to scatter, and then they didn't become franchises or arms or campuses of a centralized "Colonnade Jerusalem"; they became new, fully-functioning embassies or churches of their own.

So Jesus gives keys to actual assemblies of believers.

## 2. JESUS GIVES THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM TO THE GATHERED CONGREGATION, NOT TO ANYONE ELSE.

This is a pretty simple point, but crucial one, and if you get it, it'll answer a thousand questions all at once regarding how the church is supposed to be organized and operate. Jesus gives authority to the assembled *congregation*, not to a group of elders or presbytery or bishop or pope.

Look at Matthew 18:15–17. The last step Jesus mentions is to "tell it to the church," not "tell it to elders" or appeal to the college of cardinals or to the pope. What the church says goes. You can also see it in Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia. They've been taught by false teachers, but Paul doesn't hold those teachers ultimately accountable; he holds *the churches* accountable for accepting the teaching! He even says they have the right to reject *him* or *an angel from heaven* if he's teaching something contrary to the gospel. They—not he, not the teachers, not the angels—hold the keys and the right to speak in Jesus' name.



So that's what I mean when I say we are to be "congregational." It means, under the King himself, the final earthly court of appeal in matters regarding the who and what of the gospel is the assembled congregation. Not elders, not a presbytery or pope or deacon board, and not you as an individual, but the entire congregation.

So each member at my church currently holds 1/423 of responsibility for making sure gospel is faithfully preached. And not just for the time they're here, but for centuries to come. Hundreds of saints did that for 130+ years, and if Jesus doesn't come back, they must make sure this embassy of the King is here for 130 more.

### **3. THE POWER OF THE KEYS IS THE AUTHORITY TO PROTECT THE CHURCH AND ITS WITNESS, AND TO EXTEND THE REACH OF JESUS'S KINGDOM.**

Protect and extend. Where does that come from?

You can see it in particular places in New Testament, but first I want you to see this authority to protect and extend isn't just built from a few proof-texts. It's actually the culmination of a history that's been unfolding since the Garden of Eden.

To get right to it, God gave Adam a certain job in Eden, a certain office that he was to carry out. This office had two parts to it: he was to be a priest and a king in Eden. As king, he was to have dominion, to multiply and expand and ultimately subdue the earth under him and ultimately under God. As priest, just like later priests in the Temple, he was to guard the Garden, protecting it from impurity and evil. But of course he fails completely. Instead of protecting the Garden, from Satan, he joins Satan's rebellion.

The whole story of the Bible is the story of how God would restore those two offices by sending someone who would act as king and as priest in all the ways Adam failed. And through ups

and downs, hopes and despairs, that promise finally comes to rest on shoulders of Jesus. He's the king Adam should have been who subdues the world; he's the priest Adam should have been who destroys Satan.

But here's the kicker—when you recognize your sin, trust in Jesus, bow your knee to him, and are united to him by faith, the Bible says *you* take on those two offices, too. You take on the responsibilities of kingship and priesthood, of protecting the place of God's dwelling and extending the reach of his kingdom. But you don't get to just stand there and assert that for yourself; somebody's got to affirm you really *do* hold those offices, you really are united to Jesus.

That's what baptism and membership do. It's the church saying to the world, "Yes! From all we can see, you are a Christian. So now, join *us* in exercising this authority and responsibility to protect and extend the kingdom."

Church members have the job to protect its witness and extend the reach of God's kingdom. Let's look at each individually.

#### 4. THE CHURCH EXERCISES ITS KINGLY AUTHORITY TO EXTEND THE KNOWLEDGE OF AND RECOGNITION OF JESUS'S KINGDOM THROUGH EVANGELISM.

In other words, the Great Commission most particularly defines that authority. This isn't terribly controversial, but notice I called evangelism an *authority*, not just a responsibility. It is a responsibility, but it's also an authority, a *right* given to us by King Jesus. I mean, think about the wording: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. *Therefore . . . go!*"

This is why no national border or program of persecution and suppression will ever stop the church in its work of proclaiming the gospel and making disciples. Because it's a work backed by the authority of the King of the universe.

## 5. THE CHURCH EXERCISES ITS PRIESTLY AUTHORITY TO PROTECT THE INTEGRITY OF JESUS'S KINGDOM THROUGH CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AND CHURCH DISCIPLINE.

When a church brings someone into membership, they are saying, “Yes, you seem to understand the gospel and really believe it; you seem to be submitted and united to Jesus.” This is a kind of offensive protection, marking out boundaries on the front end.

But there's also another kind of protection, a defensive one. This happens when a church has to say to one of its members, “Now, your life doesn't look like a Christian's, and if you're going to hang on to your sin and forsake Christ, we can't let you go on living like that while calling yourself a Christian.” In other words, the church invalidates or disaffirms that individual's claim of being a Christian. Historically, that action has been called church discipline.

Jesus talks about this in Matthew 18, where he's to be treated as an outsider. Paul talks about it in 1 Corinthians 5, where Paul says to remove the sinful man, judge him, cleanse him out, even purge him—amputate him from the body like a gangrenous limb.

So what does that mean? What's really happening? This is not at all the Roman Catholic idea of excommunication, where it's argued that through excommunication the church is actually consigning someone to hell. Only King Jesus has that authority. But it *is* to say, “We're not going to continue to affirm your profession of faith because your life is not lining up with what it means to be a Christian.” So we don't affirm your baptism; we no longer welcome you to the Lord's Supper. This is small thing, and even if local churches don't have the authority to send the unrepentant to hell, when it hands down that kind of considered judgment, it ought to make a person fear King Jesus himself will one day say, “I never knew you.”

Notice, too, local churches don't take this action for just anything. All Christians sin, and churches should not pursue excom-

munication just because a member had a greedy thought or said something too sharply. No, churches exercise this authority for sins that are *serious*, *outward*, and *unrepentant*.

### *Serious*

Serious sins are those that are uncommon to Christians, those which, either by nature or repeated pattern, cause you to question whether a person really is a Christian who is at war against the flesh.

### *Outward*

A church shouldn't exercise discipline for things like pride, but only outward, visible sins.

### *Unrepentant*

In every act of discipline, the goal is repentance, so a church should never excommunicate a professing Christian who professes repentance for a particular sin. Of course, repentance doesn't mean just saying sorry. I can imagine situations where a simple verbal professions of repentance aren't immediately believable, which leads the church to take time to determine if repentance is genuine (for example, after a season of habitual lying or a sin that's particularly scandalous)..

Church discipline too often confuses people. They think it's mean, or its purpose is to humiliate and embarrass. But that's not true at all; the Bible actually holds out several purposes for church discipline and far from being an act of meanness or hatred, it's actually a profound act of love.

— Love for the individual, because the goal is always repentance. In Matthew 18, Jesus talks about “winning your brother.” In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul encourages the church to discipline “so he might repent and be saved,” which he perhaps does (2 Cor. 2:6–7). Discipline is the church saying to a man or woman, “If you persist, it's dangerous!”

- Love for the church, because it warns and protects the remaining members, telling them as well, “Don’t do this!”
- Love for the watching world, because it lets the church speak clearly about what Christianity looks like.
- Love for Jesus, because we take his honor and reputation seriously.

At this point, though, comes a question: Can’t the church get it wrong? Can’t they *wrongly* discipline? Yes, of course. And there are at least two remedies to that. The first is that King Jesus will set everything right at the end. The other is local churches are free to disagree and act to take a previously disciplined person into membership.

Though church discipline is always a heavy and sad action, it’s an action ultimately born of love and aimed at the good of the person being disciplined. It’s not to say “we hate you,” but “we love you, and we want you to repent and be restored.”

## 6. THE CHURCH IS LED IN ITS EXERCISE OF THE KEYS BY ELDERS.

Where you have a church in the Bible, you have elders. And those elders have a specific role—to lead the church in its exercise of the authority Jesus has given. Notice, elders don’t *hold* the keys; the church does. But elders lead the church as it uses them. This is not just an advisory role either. There’s some real authority in that leadership.

It’s why you have places in Bible like Hebrews 13:17: “Obey your leaders and submit to them.” Or, Acts 20:28 where Paul calls them “overseers.” Or 1 Peter 5 where Peter says to “be subject” to elders.

This kind of language scares people, because authority in general and submitting to authority often has a bad name—and rightly so in many cases. But throughout the Bible, authority is held out to us as something good and life-giving when it is used well.

This is true of the authority elders hold in a church. But it's also a certain *kind* of authority elders hold—not so much an authority of command, but an authority of counsel. States and parents hold authority of command; they speak, and then they have immediate authority to enforce through sword or rod.

But some, even most, authorities aren't given the means to enforce; they instead rely on the account that's to be given to Jesus at the end. That's the kind of authority elders hold—an authority of counsel. They can recommend and explain, but they can't enforce. That's why the Bible makes such a big deal about elders needing to be able to teach because that's how elders exercise authority, by teaching the Word and persuading.

Some might hear that and think, “Oh, well, good. That's not *real* authority.” But it is because it's an authority backed by Jesus. If elders counsel and you decline, it's not over; you'll give account for that at the end. Maybe you're right, maybe not—but it's wise to be careful.

Practically, this works out in the mechanism of elders recommending and the church voting. The church always has the right and authority to reject elders' recommendations, and even to remove and replace the elders. But again, the need to be ready to give account, which leads to my last point.

## 7. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A CHURCH AND ITS ELDERS SHOULD BE ONE OF TRUST, NOT SKEPTICISM.

Sometimes people think the best posture for a church is to act as a check to the elders, to hold their feet to the fire. There can even be some theology behind that—they're fallen and sinful, and so, like the US government, we need checks and balances to keep them from going off the rails.

But the church isn't intended to operate like the US government. In fact, the US government was *designed* to operate on mutual skepticism—branches of government looking out for their

own power and being in tension. It's designed for checks and balances precisely because the Founders knew the nation was made up of selfish people.

But the church is fundamentally different, and we must start with assumption that yes we're fallen, but we're also regenerate. Therefore, relationships ultimately ought to be marked by trust, not checks and balances and skepticism.

Practically speaking, this means it's actually *good* when a church has a run of unanimous votes. It may be frustrating to some, because they'll think it's a failure of the kind of robust congregationalism they want. If votes are unanimous, they chalk it up to apathy in the congregation or, worse, intimidation by the elders.

While it *could* be those things, I'd argue it could also point to a congregation that's trusting its elders in just the way Jesus intended. In fact, if a church has too many divided votes, it probably needs to get new elders it can trust!

But what about voting no? Essentially, if you're going to vote no, you need to do it with full integrity. What I mean is you must really desire for the motion you're voting against to fail. The worst kind of no vote is the kind where a person doesn't *really* want it to fail—because consequences would be too big or whatever—but votes no anyway to make a statement and just relies on the rest of the church to pass it.

If you elect to vote no, do so with integrity—because you really think this is a bad use of the keys, one worth acting against recommendation of elders and one you're willing to give account to Jesus for one day.

Jesus intends the relationship between elders and local churches not to be one fraught with tension and conflict, but a beautiful one of trust and love. After all, the Bible says elders are *gifts* to the church, given by the King from the throne of heaven. It also says elders are to do their work always remembering Jesus obtained

these people for himself with his own blood, that he identifies with them, and to abuse them is to abuse him.

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#### EDITOR'S NOTE:

For more on these subjects, consider Jonathan Leeman's *Understanding the Congregation's Authority, Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*, and *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus*.



# What is the Nature of Pastoral Authority?

A BAPTIST, PRESBYTERIAN, AND METHODIST PERSPECTIVE



Matt O'Reilly



Kevin DeYoung



Benjamin Merkle

**W**e asked three pastors from three different traditions to answer the question: What is the nature of a pastor's authority? Below are their responses.



## A METHODIST PERSPECTIVE

By Matt O'Reilly

A snapshot of pastoral authority in the Wesleyan-Methodist tra-

dition is best framed in terms of its source and goal. The source of the pastor's authority is Scripture; the goal of the pastor's authority is holiness. Let's take those one at a time.

Methodist founder John Wesley considered himself "a man of one book," and that book was the Bible. Wesley believed that essential doctrines must be grounded in scripture. His attitude toward pastoral ministry was no different. This is clear in Wesley's sermon, "On Obedience to Pastors," in which he expounds Hebrews 13:17. He introduces the sermon insisting that the nature of pastoral authority can be understood if we "simply attend to the oracles of God" and "carefully examine the words of the Apostle." Later in the sermon he rejects views on pastoral authority that cannot be proved from Scripture, and he refuses to "appeal to human institutions," insisting again on what "we find in the oracles of God." Wesley also believed Scripture puts limits on the pastor's authority. He didn't expect members of a congregation to obey the pastor if that pastor instructed them to disobey Scripture. And when pastors shepherd the flock in a way that accords with scripture, Wesley says, "we do not properly obey *them*, but our common Father" (*italics original*). The point should be clear: faithful Methodists locate the source of a pastor's authority in scripture.

Wesley's sermon, "On Obedience to Pastors," also highlights the congregation's growth in holiness as the goal of a pastor's authority. Based on his reading of Scripture, Wesley believed the power of God's grace in Christ and through the Spirit is far greater than the power of sin. This means a Christian's life should be decreasingly characterized by sin and increasingly characterized by holiness. When this sort of transformation happens, God is glorified because progress in sanctification is a work of his grace. Pastors are responsible for nurturing those under their care so they grow in holiness. Pastors do this by explaining and applying Scripture to the lives of individual believers and the community

as a whole. This includes nourishing the congregation; they teach doctrine, warning people not to turn from the faith and correcting those who have strayed. Pastors also nurture holiness by earnestly watching over the flock with patience and diligence ensuring they are equipped to grow in grace. For Wesley, it's serious business to be entrusted with shepherding those for whom Christ died, and pastors are accountable to God for exercising their authority in a way that cultivates holiness in their lives.

In order to make progress toward the goal of holiness, both pastor and congregation must be committed to self-giving love. Wesley insisted that embracing the pastoral vocation meant giving one's whole self to promoting the "present and eternal salvation" of those under their care, while resisting the temptation to seek one's own honor. For the congregation, submitting to pastoral authority means obeying Jesus' command to take up the cross and practice self-denial. When both pastor and congregation honor Christ by taking this attitude toward one another, they're in the best position to increasingly embody Christ-like holiness that magnifies the glory of God.

That's the heart of pastoral ministry in the Wesleyan tradition.



## A PRESBYTERIAN PERSPECTIVE

By Kevin DeYoung

Since the word count is limited, and I was asked to give a "perspective" not a "polemic," I'm going to focus on the nuts and bolts of pastoral authority as we practice it, rather than giving a biblical, historical, and theological rationale for the Presbyterian system. If you want the skinny on Presbyterian polity check out Guy Waters' fine book *How Jesus Runs the Church*; and if you want the fat pick up James Banner's classic *The Church of Christ*. But I'm going to forgo the *why* questions and get right to the *what*.

The pastor's authority in Presbyterian polity is an authority shared with all the elders and exercised jointly through the Session and the other courts of the church.

Whether a church has elders and pastors as two different offices (like most Reformed churches), or teaching elders (i.e. pastors) and ruling elders as different designations within one office (as in most Presbyterian churches), the net result is more or less the same. At the local level, the authority to receive members into the congregation, exercise discipline, and establish rules for the government, worship, and theological integrity of the church rests with the board of elders (usually called the Session, or in Reformed polity, the Consistory).

In the Presbyterian Church in America, there are three “courts” in which this authority is exercised: the Session (the pastors and elders in the local church), the Presbytery (the pastors and churches—represented by the ruling elders—in a geographic area), and the General Assembly (all the churches in the denomination). The nature of the pastor's formal authority is simply this: he has a voice and a vote in each of these courts. The Presbyterian pastor is not a bishop, nor the *de facto* ruler in his own little fiefdom. He is a teaching elder, whose vote counts no more and no less than the other installed teaching and ruling elders—whether that vote is for a member to be excommunicated, to plant a church, or to pass a licentiate's ordination exam.

This means the pastor's authority may look big or small depending on your church experience. Pastoral authority in Presbyterianism can look big because almost every formal decision resides with the Session (rather than the whole congregation). Apart from calling a pastor and voting on church officers, most congregational votes in Presbyterianism are only advisory. So, the pastor, as a key member of the Session, can wield tremendous influence. On the other hand, the pastor's authority may be less than you think. He doesn't always get his way. He can (and does!) get outvoted. He has

no more formal authority than any of the other elders. Furthermore, he must submit himself to the Presbytery for spiritual care and accountability, and above that to the General Assembly.

Of course, formal authority is only one part of the equation. The teaching elder who preaches week after week to the same people will inevitably set the doctrinal, doxological, and evangelistic direction for the church. In most Presbyterian churches, the pastor knows the people best and speaks to them most. If the congregational dynamics are healthy, most people will follow the pastor's leadership (in a host of areas) and consider him the "buck stops here" voice on whether dozens of little projects move forward or not. Moreover, as the moderator of the Session (as stipulated by the Book of Church Order), the pastor will normally set the literal agenda for the elders and preside over all meetings. In larger churches, the senior pastor is typically at the head of organizational chart, with staff members ultimately reporting to him even as he gives account to the Session and the Presbytery. Under the Session, the senior pastor usually has the final determination in what takes place in the weekly worship service.

In short, the nature of pastoral authority in Presbyterianism is both *informal* (in dozens of areas, from preaching, to casting vision, to having a broad understanding of the issues in the church, to making lots of daily decisions), *formal* (as a member and moderator of the Session), and *shared* (as only one voice and one vote when it comes to making the most important decisions facing the courts of the church).



## A BAPTIST PERSPECTIVE

By Benjamin Merkle

First, it's clear in Scripture **pastors have authority**. Believers are expected to "respect," "honor," "obey," "submit," and "be subject

to” those who “labor,” “are over,” “admonish,” “rule,” “preach,” “teach,” “care for,” keep watch,” or “devote” themselves to the work of the gospel ministry as those who will “give an account” for the tasks entrusted to them (1 Cor. 16:15–16; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:4–5; 5:17; Heb. 13:17; 1 Peter 5:5).

The primary duties of pastors also communicate the fact of their authority. As *teachers*, they’re charged with the task of proclaiming God’s Word authoritatively. They’re not merely offering suggestions or voicing their own opinions but are declaring, “Thus says the Lord.” Consequently, the congregation has the duty to obey not merely the words of the pastor, but the words of God, insofar as the pastor accurately and faithfully conveys the gospel message. As *shepherds*, pastors are given the task of leading and caring for God’s people (Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11; 1 Peter 5:2). If some are leading as shepherds, the assumption is others are following their leadership. Finally, as *representatives*, they speak and act on behalf of the entire congregation (Acts 11:30; 20:17).

Second, **the authority of pastors is derived**: it comes from God (not the congregation). Although the congregation affirms their calling and authority, it’s an authority with divine origin. Paul tells the Ephesians elders the Holy Spirit made them overseers (Acts 20:28) and later indicates leaders are gifts given by Jesus to the church (Eph. 4:11).

Third, **the authority of pastors is limited** in at least three ways.

(1) *It’s limited by the Scriptures*. Pastors do not have absolute authority because they stand under the authority of God and his Word. Therefore, when they stray from the Word, they abandon their God-given authority. Furthermore, the authority pastors possess is found not only in their office, but also in the duties they perform. On one hand, pastors should be obeyed because they have been appointed by God for that particular office (Acts 20:28). Their authority is given by God and is not inherent in themselves. When a person obeys or submits to a pastor, it could be

said that he is obeying or submitting to God. But, on the other hand, pastors should be obeyed because they have the responsibility of shepherding and teaching the congregation. And when their shepherding and teaching stray from Scripture, their authority as shepherds and teachers is compromised and may no longer be binding on the congregation.

(2) *It's limited by the nature of shared leadership.* The biblical example of church government is not to set up an aristocracy or an oligarchy, but each local congregation should have a plurality of pastors/elders. There's no example in the New Testament where one pastor (elder) leads a congregation as the sole or primary leader. There were a plurality of elders at the churches in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30), Antioch of Pisidia, Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe (Acts 14:23), Ephesus (Acts 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17), Philippi (Phil. 1:1), the cities of Crete (Titus 1:5), the churches in the dispersion to which James wrote (James 1:1), the Roman provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1), and possibly the church(es) to which Hebrews was written (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24). Thus, a pastor has accountability to the other leaders.

(3) *It's limited to their congregation.* That is, the authority of a pastor does not exceed beyond the local church. There's no evidence in the New Testament that pastors exercised authority outside their congregation similar to that of the apostles. As shepherds, they ministered to their flock, but once they ventured outside their community to another congregation, they no longer functioned authoritatively.

(4) *It's limited by the congregation.* Congregations were involved in choosing new leaders (Acts 6:2–3), commissioning missionaries (Acts 13:3), making important theological decisions (Acts 15:22), and disciplining unrepentant church members (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:2; 2 Cor. 2:6). In addition, Paul always addressed the entire congregation rather than the leaders of the church (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:2; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess.

1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1) and the New Testament undeniably affirms the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

Therefore, key decisions—such as the addition of new leaders, the approval of the budget, and a change to the statement of faith, constitution, by-laws, or official church documents—shouldn't be made only by the pastors. Instead, such changes should be brought before the entire congregation for approval. Because the church is a body (and not merely a head or feet), all in the church are important and should be allowed to be a part of major decisions. Because of this, pastors are not only accountable to the Lord Jesus Christ, but also to each other *and* the entire congregation.

Consequently, pastors must be those who are filled with the Holy Spirit and exhibit a spirit of humility in their relations with others. As Jesus declared, “But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all” (Mark 10:43–44).

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# Delighting in Authority: How to Create a Culture of Happy Complementarians



Whitney Woollard

If I were a man, I would be a church planter.

I'm a strong leader with the gifts and wiring essential to the call. I thrive when casting vision, making disciples, training leaders, preaching the Word, and evangelizing the lost. I've been "thinking in sermons" since I was fifteen. I can't help but target potential leaders. I constantly wonder how to reach my community. It's *instinctive*. When I hear a powerful sermon, I feel a compulsion to preach. When someone leaves the church, I can't sleep at night. When I study a text, I obsess over theological clarity.

But I'm a woman—a woman who believes God has spoken authoritatively in his Word on all matters pertaining to life and godliness. A woman whose conscience is bound by the conviction that the authoritative teaching office of God's covenant community is reserved for men. I'll never plant a church as the lead pas-

tor/elder<sup>4</sup> not because I'm incompetent or lack the desire but because I believe the Word speaks with authority on this issue, and I trust the God who authored it. In fact, I *delight* in the authority of the Word, my husband, and the local church. I'm convinced everything God ordains, including various spheres of authority, is the *best possible plan* for his glory and my good. I'm what you would call a *happy* complementarian.<sup>5</sup>

### “COMING OUT” AS A HAPPY COMPLEMENTARIAN

Unfortunately, not everyone delights in God-ordained authority. On the one hand, pop-culture has done a fine job of convincing women that femininity and freedom can only be found in throwing off the patriarchal shackles of previous generations to discover our “true, empowered selves.” I'm told my feelings and desires are the ultimate source of authority. Even an unbeliever would encourage me to plant a church if that meant “following my heart.” Today in Portland, Oregon—where I live—to be a strong woman is to reject any limitations on what I can or should do.

On the other hand, some Christian sub-cultures (particularly strands of fundamentalism that uphold a view of complementarianism suspiciously close to subordination) have created miserable women who outwardly affirm complementarian convictions while inwardly despising authority. Some have tragically suffered spiritual abuse from leaders and no longer know how to distinguish godly authority from an ungodly authoritarian. Others feel so trapped by manmade traditions and superficial limitations that they become like caged animals provoked even by innocent bystanders. They're the bristly ones who affirm male headship but are *bitterly offended* at the slightest talk of authority.

4 This truth doesn't mean women cannot be involved in church plants. Of course they can. They *should* be! A well-rounded planting team would include trained, equipped women in the core group. I'm speaking to the lead, authoritative role as *the* church planter.

5 A complementarian holds the theological view that men and women are created equal in dignity, value, and worth but hold differing, complimentary roles in marriage, family, and the local church.

I want to reject both extremes, even if it invites disapproval. I'm tired of apologizing for being a strong female *and* a conservative complementarian. In one circle, I'm too educated, too theological, too opinionated, and ask too many questions. In another circle, I'm too conservative, too prudish, too restricted, and don't speak enough.

It's time for the church to create space in its local assemblies for strong females who happily affirm authority (e.g., male headship and eldership) while advocating for more opportunities for women to flourish according to their gifts and qualification. Imagine how the gospel could be displayed to the watching world if churches were filled with biblically-minded women who embraced God-ordained authority as a blessing rather than a burden? This counter-cultural impulse would offer continual opportunities to share the gospel with a world that's desperate for truth.

### HOW CAN PASTORS HELP FEMALE LEADERS DELIGHT IN AUTHORITY?

But how can you do this when the overwhelming voice of culture smacks of anti-authority sentiments? The ideas below are neither novel nor exhaustive, but they do come from someone whose entire life is and has been directly affected by her views on authority.

#### *1. Cultivate A High View of God's Word.*

Any discussion on authority must begin and end with the Bible. To start anywhere else is to build your "theological house" on the sand. Too often, people will start with a John Piper sermon or a CBMW article without pushing women to grapple with the biblical texts themselves. But only the Word of God has the power to penetrate to our innermost being and shed light on areas we desperately try to hide—like our anti-authority predispositions.

It was a high view of God's Word that brought me to my current convictions. Early in my Christian walk, I realized I had a dog in the "egalitarian versus complementarian" fight. I applied

myself to the Scriptures, earnestly desiring to know what God said about leadership roles in the local church. I came to the conclusion that the authoritative teaching office of God's covenant community throughout redemptive history has always been and should continue to be restricted to men (e.g., priests in the Old Testament, apostles during the Apostolic age, and elders in the New Covenant). And after coming to this conclusion, I felt joy! God gave me a clear conviction on this matter, and the issue has been settled ever since. My conscience is held captive to the Word of God. And to echo Luther, I believe to act against conscience is neither safe for me, nor open to me.

By constantly pointing to the Word, pastors can help women become the kind of people who are controlled by biblical conviction rather than personal preferences or pragmatism. Encourage them to search the Scriptures and see what God says about women in leadership. Discuss the central, debated texts and facilitate open dialogue. Create environments where women can ask questions as they wrestle with the issues. Help them think well about the Scriptures and be willing to graciously challenge any preconceived notions that may not be rooted in the Word. Ultimately, equip *them* to make informed decisions based on good exegesis that leads to God-glorifying convictions.

## *2. Cultivate A High View of Women.*

From Genesis to Revelation, the testimony of Scripture is that both male and female are created beings invested with great dignity, value, and worth. And both are tasked with the awesome responsibility of making visible the invisible God through their work and service. The church should be the primary place where the glorious image of God is showcased through men and women carrying out the Great Commission together with mutual love and respect.

All too often, however, the church has devalued women by not providing provision for them to serve and flourish within their

respective gifts. I see this regularly with women who have leadership and teaching ability. The church may have a strong position articulated on paper, but functionally they don't know what to do with these women . . . so all too often they don't do anything. This isn't necessarily malicious or calculated; I think it's just the state of affairs in conservative churches today—but it's one in need of continual reformation. As a female gifted to lead, I can tell you it's not helpful (in fact, it's confusing) to form a theology of women in leadership that never gets implemented.

I have been in churches (large “progressive” churches) where my husband and I agreed with everything on paper, but I wasn't actually allowed to do anything within my gift set. It turned out a young woman without kids could never teach women. This reveals a low view of women that's too pervasive in many conservative complementarian churches. Women are an essential part of the body, gifted by the Spirit to serve the church, and they should be encouraged to minister in all the ways the Bible permits.

Part of good, God-ordained male leadership is creating environments in which women feel valued, protected, and encouraged to serve in the ways God has wired them. Show women you value them by forming a robust, biblical theology of women in leadership and then actually implementing it. Here are a few suggestions:

- Provide opportunities for aspiring female teachers to get proper training so they can teach and preach the Scriptures to other women well. Perhaps consider one of these Simeon Trust workshops for women.
- Offer seminary-like classes on basic Bible, theology, and spiritual formation for your women.
- Give the women's Bible study team time each semester to go over the curriculum and help them teach it well.
- Invite feedback from women on your sermons, on the worship, on the formation of small groups, and on the Sunday School classes.

- Ask women how you could better serve them in the way you preach, pray, and lead. After all, on average half of your congregation are women so wouldn't it be helpful to get insight into the spiritual needs of your women . . . *from a woman?*
- Have women do things like serve communion, pray, read Scripture, or share their testimonies from the front. I cannot tell you how encouraging it is when I visit a church and hear a woman pray or read Scripture. It communicates volumes to the women sitting in your pews.
- Periodically ask yourself, "Are the women in my congregation flourishing? Are they being provided various opportunities to serve? Are they being treated as co-heirs of eternal life and partners in ministry?"

Every one of these points comes from the practice of my local church, a conservative, Bible-teaching, gospel-centered, Baptist church. I recently told my pastor I would be complementarian wherever I go because my conscience is bound to biblical convictions, but he sure does make it easier for me to be a *happy* complementarian!

I've been a Christian for fifteen years, and this is one of the first churches where the lead pastor has made me feel like a blessing rather than a burden for being a theologically-minded woman. That's *fifteen years* of struggling to find my place in the local church because I was made to feel like a burden for the way God wired me. I'm not entertaining self-pity here, but I do think that's sad.

I believe many women would be more willing to graciously embrace male authority in the church if they felt valued by the male leadership and given opportunities to serve Jesus in meaningful ways. Pastors, I urge you to use your God-ordained authority to help female leaders to flourish in your church. Make authority a pleasant experience for them.

## HOW CAN FEMALE LEADERS HELP PASTORS DELIGHT IN AUTHORITY?

Part of being a “happy” complementarian is helping facilitate a culture in which male leaders find *joy* in leading us. We should (along with all believers) submit to authority in a way that helps leaders care for our souls “with joy and not groaning” (Heb. 13:17).

I’ll be the first to confess I haven’t always done this well. I can’t imagine how much “groaning” I’ve caused my pastors in the past. But, through much repentance and grace, I’m growing. Here are helpful suggestions I’ve learned along the way, primarily through my own sin and short-comings:

- Give others a “category” for you. Oftentimes, people just aren’t sure what to do with strong, theologically-minded women. Graciously help them see that you’re a woman who loves Jesus, delights in male authority, and desires to teach the Bible to other women.
- Speak highly of the male leadership in your church and home (if married). One of the most harmful things a woman can do is publicly criticize her pastor or husband. If we truly delight in male headship, our words should reflect it.
- Look for ways to encourage your pastors and elders. For example, tell them when a sermon was especially helpful or mention specific ways you’re praying for them.
- Thank your leadership for the *current* opportunities women are given to serve the church. Let them know it doesn’t go unnoticed.
- Be quick to communicate and slow to assume. Communicate that you have a passion for teaching women the Bible rather than assuming leadership knows and is intentionally withholding the role from you. A lot of hurt feelings are built upon false assumptions.
- Ask if there is or will ever be provision to serve within your gifts. Display a willingness to be trained and equipped accord-

ingly. Show your pastor(s) that you're also willing to serve outside of your gifts in order to help the church.

Ladies, let's make authority a pleasant experience for the men in leadership over us by being a blessing to the body. May our words, actions, and attitudes help them view their God-ordained role as a delight.

### FINDING FREEDOM WITHIN LIMITATIONS

The Psalmist declares, "I run in the path of your commands for you have set my heart free" (Ps. 119:32).

This reflects my heart on the issue of authority. Years ago, I bowed before God's infinite wisdom on the matter of women in leadership and discovered the path beneath my feet was broadened. There's a delightful freedom to be experienced when one accepts God-given boundaries. My conscience is clear, my convictions are firm, and my ministry is meaningful.

I'm not *sad* that I'm not and couldn't be a church planter or lead pastor. I don't feel restricted or resentful. Instead, I feel full. Submitting to the authority of God's Word, specifically as it plays out in the local church, has freed me to run in the path of God's commands. I have found great freedom within authority.

What about you?

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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# Is It Self-Serving to Teach on Your Own Authority?



Bob Johnson



Jeremy Yong

**W**e asked two pastors the question: Is it self-serving to teach on a pastor's authority? If not, then how should you do it?



**BY BOB JOHNSON**

Is it self-serving to teach about your pastoral authority? If not how do you do it?

According to Hebrews 13:17, the answer is no. It certainly could be self-serving to teach about your pastoral authority, but it

is not inherently wrong. In fact, if you did not address it when the text does, it would be fair to say that it's actually self-serving *not* to teach about your pastoral authority. But Hebrews 13:17 speaks of obeying leaders (plural), not a leader (singular), which demonstrates the wisdom for a plurality of elders in a local church. So, how do you do it? 1 Corinthians 4 is helpful.

*1) Speak the truth in love (4:14).*

Faithful expositional preaching will give you plenty of opportunities to address this, because this issue is found throughout the Scriptures. If you are faithful to preach the text week in and week out and not skip the tough parts, your congregation will grow in their trust of you. So, when this issue comes up in the text, and you preach it like you do the rest, it minimizes the potential to be seen as self-serving. If you're a young pastor, however, it would be unwise to make a big deal about it.

*2) Practice what you preach (4:6).*

Faithful shepherding involves the regular exposure of your life to the life of your people. Keeping watch over the soul of another is deeply personal. In order to watch someone's soul, you have to be connected at the heart level. The word you preach is powerful, but don't forget that a life that is marked by truth and love is also authoritative. In order for you to ask your people to follow you and the elders, they need time to see your example—and your example will matter profoundly.

*3) Call your people to imitate you (4:16).*

Think of it like this. Marathon races generally offer pacesetters who will set a particular pace so that, if a runner stays with the pacesetter, he or she will finish at his or her desired time. Pastoral authority is like that of a pacesetter. You're not a cheerleader standing on the curb telling the runners to go faster, and neither

are you the one doing all the running while your members cheer you on. Instead, you call the members of your church to run alongside of you. You ask them to join you in the race where you have already demonstrated experience. Calling others to join is exercising authority but it's doing so in a manner that asks them to serve *alongside* of you, not serve you.

Here's an example:

You and the elders want to institute church discipline in your congregation and a number of the members are leery. You're speaking to the congregation before the vote. Can you say, "As your elders, we are telling you to follow us and trust us. In fact, the Bible tells you to just that"? Sure, but would it not be better to say, "Your elders are committed to following everything that Christ commands us in his Word. We promised you and God we would do this. This vote is an opportunity for you to join us. Will you?"



**BY JEREMY YONG**

It certainly can be, depending on why and how one does it. But it doesn't have to be. In fact, teaching on pastoral authority can be honoring to the Lord of the church.

I don't teach on pastoral authority from the pulpit very much. I teach on it when the text I'm preaching calls for it. Consistently preaching expositional sermons through books of the Bible brings me to passages that speak directly to pastoral authority (e.g. 1 Tim 3:1-7 and the qualifications of the elder), as well as passages that apply to the topic (e.g. Exod 18:13 where Jethro exhorts Moses to find additional judges for Israel).

Here's a brief explanation of what you'll find me teaching the congregation, as well as why I teach it.

**1. A pastor's authority is God given.** I have been handed a job description. Thus my authority as pastor has been delegated, making me accountable to the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4).

My aim in emphasizing this is to lift high Christ Jesus, the Lord of the church and his authority. I want the congregation to know that I too am a man in submission.

That said, in my context, members have come from churches where pastors have twisted these truths, giving an impression the pastor is untouchable and above the law. It's as if these pastors said, "I am called of God himself. Therefore you ought to listen to me!" These abuses bring me to point two.

**2. A pastor's authority is to correlate to a man's ability to rightly handle the Word of God.** If I do not rightly handle the Word of God, I ought not be a pastor and the congregation ought not recognize my assumed authority (cf. Titus 1:9; Gal 1:8–9).

My aim is to lift high the Lord of the church and the Lord's law that is to govern it. I want people listening to what I say because they're convinced it's what the Lord has said according to his Word.

Practically, I encourage the congregation to be like the Berean Christians, who examined the Scriptures to see if the teaching is according to sound doctrine (Acts 17:11). I typically follow that up with an encouragement to fire me if I ever preach a false gospel (Gal 1:8–9).

**3. I also teach that pastoral authority is to be congregationally recognized.**

I believe the congregation possesses responsibility to call and even discipline its pastors as the case requires. Final authority rests with the congregation.

Here, I aim to place the weight of responsibility on the congregation's shoulders—a weight that calls them to humbly examine

my life and doctrine, alone with the life and doctrine of anyone they consider following as pastor.

In short, I try and teach the pastor's authority is God given, Word-governed, and congregationally recognized. I hope this encourages the church to submit ultimately to the Chief Shepherd, abide in His Word, and embrace their own God-given responsibility.

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# Views of Authority from around the World



Tiago J. Santos Filho



Mike Gilbert-Smith



Joshua Fang

**W**e asked three pastors to reflect on how the people of nation—Brazil, Great Britain, and China—tend to respond to exercised authority. Their responses are below.



## A BRAZILIAN PERSPECTIVE

By Tiago J. Santos Filho

“Authority: without it humans cannot exist, and yet it delivers as many errors as it delivers truths.”

— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

This maxim by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is very true in Brazilian culture. In Brazil, we have an ambivalent relationship with the idea of authority, mixing misconceptions with some elements of truth. On one hand, there's a strong rejection of authority, as instilled by European postmodernism and seen in what French philosopher Michael Foucault called "the battle against relations of power."

This sentiment has influenced important sectors of both the Brazilian media and the academy, thus jeopardizing legitimate authority figures such as the armed forces and the police, fathers and bosses. On the other hand, there's a tendency among Brazilian people to celebrate figures who exercise a dominant form of authority, especially those with charismatic and populist personalities. This is commonly seen in politics.

When these distortions are celebrated, it's clear people aren't able to distinguish authority used well and authoritarianism. In Brazil, it's easy to blame our tumultuous political past, marked by dictatorships from 1937–1945 and 1964–1985. Or, more recently, we could look to the Brazil's embrace of gigantic government. These are just a few explanations for this reliance on strong and authoritarian leaders, while simultaneously depending on the state for almost everything.

### **AUTHORITY IN THE BRAZILIAN CHURCH**

This trend is also very strong in evangelical churches. A lack of understanding regarding the Bible's teaching on authority leads many Christians to capitulate to these cultural forces and develop a critical and even suspicious attitude toward pastoral and congregational authority. This lack of clarity compromises pastoral work, especially exhortation, leadership, and counseling, and it jeopardizes the community life of the church, especially its commitment to keep each other accountable in the fight against sin.

At the same time, there persists a mistaken admiration of leaders who impose themselves on their congregations as almost

absolute powers, as if they're mediators between men and God. Many of these leaders call themselves apostles or give themselves special titles that make them seem inaccessible to their followers. This tendency may have its roots in a long Roman Catholic heritage marked by the priest as mediator between God and men, giving him a superior status before the laity.

## BRAZIL'S ROMAN CATHOLIC HERITAGE

This is also the logic behind the notion of the *ex cathedra* infallibility of the Pope, who must be obeyed because he is the "Successor of the Apostle Peter, and representative of Christ on earth." Brazilian theologian Augustus Nicodemus has called this "the Roman Catholic soul of the Brazilian evangelical." A familiarity with a single priest figure may also explain many Brazilian evangelicals' resistance to a plurality of elders, especially lay elders.

Certainly, these distortions do great harm to Christians in our country and can only be corrected by the grace of God through faithful preaching and teaching. In order to guide God's people toward a healthier understanding of authority, three important biblical principles may be highlighted:

### 1. The affirmation of God's absolute authority.

Although the word *authority* doesn't appear in the account of creation, the idea is entirely there. Few phrases evidence the absolute weight of authority more clearly than *Dixitque Deus: Fiat lux. Et facta est lux* (And God said, Let there be light and there was light).

The creation of heaven and earth, the formation of man, and the granting of *Imago Dei* shows the Creator's supreme authority. God is revealed as the one who has absolute dominion and power over all creation, an emphasis both throughout Scripture and vital to a proper relationship between God and mankind (Exod. 15:18; Job 38–41; Ps. 9:7, 8; 11:4; 29:10; 93:1; 146:10; Jer. 18:6; Is.



40:12–31; Dan. 4:34–37, Rom. 9:21). This major Christian tenet remains the most important teaching regarding authority, for from this teaching will people ultimately understand that authority is both good and inherent to God’s nature.

## **2. Authority delegated to men.**

All human authority, then, is delegated authority. As Creator, God gave man the mandate to exercise dominion over creation by developing culture and technology, forming families, and organizing society (Gen. 2:15–25; Ps. 8). Dutch theologians Herman Dooyeweerd and Abraham Kuyper, both under the influence of John Calvin, taught what was called the *sovereignty of the spheres*. They argue God created every institution—family, state, vocation, etc.—and each has a specific area of authority.

And the church is one of those institutions. This teaching should help to correct the foolish idea that authority is something essentially evil, something that must always be resisted. In reality, authority is part of God’s created order. In the local church in particular, this reminder should provide meaning, direction, and order to the community of believers (Ex. 18:13–27; Mk. 6:7). What’s more, this principle will help Christians understand the proper exercise of authority in the church is God’s mandate for the good of both the people and those who are in authority and will one day give account to God (Heb, 13:17).

## **3. The universal priesthood of believers.**

One of the most important teachings of Martin Luther during the Protestant Reformation was the biblical concept of *universal priesthood of believers* (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:5,6). In his 1520 work *On the Freedom of the Christian*, Luther shows that priests and lay people share the same dignity before God because all men have the same access to God through Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5).

Luther also showed how all vocations are equally worthy before God, which consequently freed men from their fear of and dependence on priests. Luther reminds us that every Christian is a child of God who has access to the Father through the Son by the Spirit. What's more, every Christian is a “*diakonos*” (minister) of God and has the responsibility to serve God with their gifts in the Christian community. No man has absolute power over another in any sphere of creation, let alone in the church. Everything he has is the result of grace.

### IN CONCLUSION

At the end of the day, the truth is man rejects the authority of God and usurps it for himself. John Milton notes this in his classic work *Paradise Lost*:

*The execrable son! so to aspirate  
Above his brethren;  
to himself assuming  
Authority usurped,  
from God not given.*

To fight this universal temptation, we must point people to the Bible, showing them how God established authority in the world before the Fall. Since that day, even those of us who have been redeemed struggle to submit to good authority. So we wait for that day when Christ returns and finally establishes his perfect rule across the whole earth.



## A BRITISH PERSPECTIVE

By Mike Gilbert-Smith

The United Kingdom is a complex society of competing cultures that shape our views of authority.

This can be seen in the political upheavals that have taken place over the past two years: in September 2014 Scotland voted to remain a part of the United Kingdom by a margin of 5.3%. In June 2016 the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union by a margin of 1.9%. In both referenda those who voted to leave often cited issues of sovereignty as their primary motivation. Why should Westminster, or Brussels tell us what to do?

On the other hand, those who voted to remain in both referenda most often cited economic reasons. That we are all stronger and more prosperous is of greater importance than where political power lies.

Such tensions are visible in a British attitude to authority more generally. On the one hand there are many who seem to care little who exercises that authority so long as things are going well, and we are prospering (the experts are proving their expertise). On the other hand, there is a strong feeling that authority is a necessary evil that must therefore only be exercised by those who are closely accountable to, and removable by, those over whom they exercise authority. Those who cannot be removed (like the monarch!) should have very little real power.

Factors that affect the many divergent views on authority would include

- 1) The complexities and injustices of the British class system.<sup>6</sup>
- 2) Multiculturalism.<sup>7</sup>

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6 In many people's estimation authority has for too long been exercised by those with privileged upbringings. (19 British Prime ministers attended the same High School!)

Whereas 88% of British schoolchildren attend comprehensive schools only one Prime Minister (has attended such a school in Britain's history. Shockingly, the first education minister to attend a comprehensive school was appointed 3 weeks ago!

Upwardly mobility is increasing only very slowly. The very way someone speaks and the school you attended still effect the progress of your career. Though some upper and upper middle class traditions and manners are on the wane (how should one cut the cheese, pour the tea, word an invitation or a thank-you letter, wear a suit, shake a hand, laugh, refuse to cry?) more subtle invisible barriers still remain.

7 Fewer than half of London's population are now white British. Over 200 languages are spoken as a first language. If one is to talk about a single British view of authority it would ignore the fact that there are British Muslim, humanist, Seikh, Protestant and Catholic views of authority that often fail to understand one another. The ridicule received by politicians promoting "British Values" was well deserved, because if one wants to find

3) Collective guilt over our colonial history.<sup>8</sup>

4) A media that is dominated by a postmodern liberal elite who push moral autonomy and toleration of everybody else's moral autonomy.

Because authority is so often seen as an evil, even within the family, where God has designed for people to learn that lovingly exercised authority is a blessing, people are often nervous of talking about parental authority, and talk only of parental responsibility. My children have visited families where other children do not need to obey their parents, but to obey 'house rules' to which the parents are also subject, and have to do their time on the 'naughty step' if they break the rules.

Authority within the church has its own very British complexities. As the established church, the Church of England's 30 most senior bishops are ex officio members of the the upper house in the UK Parliament. The Church of England is therefore seen in some regard as having a moral authority (bishops will often have their views of political and social policy published) but as the established church it has a precarious position: 'how can an establishment figure in a multicultural society expect us to listen to this biblical nonsense?' Thus bishops too often sound like politicians espousing 'British Values' in their indistinctive banality.

What do these complexities mean in pastoral ministry where the rightness and goodness of lovingly exercised authority is to be taught, exercised and enjoyed?

As an Englishman with a very privileged social and educational background pastoring a multicultural and significantly work-

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common ground between competing sets of British Values, such values are so unspecific as to be utterly banal, and by no means distinctively British.

<sup>8</sup> There is a reticence to take up authority exacerbated by a caricatured history of our colonial past that rightly recognises the evils of the establishment of British Empire, whilst failing to acknowledge anything good about how that Empire was managed, or eventually dismantled.

ing class church, I have been very aware of the danger of trying to exercise authority. Too often in Britain people from my background have been perceived as feeling 'entitled' to positions of authority. Authority must be understood to be within the context of a loving pastoral relationship rather than 'pulling rank'.

But I have found that the pervading culture has largely given good opportunities to clarify and attempt to exercise loving authority. There is no univocal view of authority meaning that we can make few assumptions in what people will think about it, other than what the bible already teaches us about all people: they are sinners who would love excuses to preserve their autonomy, but will find salvation only as they come to recognise and enjoy Jesus as Lord.

Pastoral authority comes from the pastoral relationship. If all authority is to be loving authority to picture the loving authority of the Lord, then we cannot adequately exercise authority towards people who have had no experience of our love.

Teaching and loving are therefore the two key elements to the pastoral responsibility of helping people come to love the authorities that the Lord has established in people's lives.

Membership classes have been very useful in teaching on the authority of and within the local church so that biblical teaching about the shape the church has been given can be received before people then experience it. An apologetic for loving authority is thus taught first and then enjoyed.

This cuts both ways. All of us are both under authority and in authority.

Taking Jesus as the model of being under authority and Jesus as the model of being in authority has been the single most useful pastoral tool in helping people to see the goodness of God's plan for authority in the family, church and society.

Whenever we exercise authority and whenever we submit to it, we are following Jesus and we should be as happy as he in both those roles.

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## A CHINESE PERSPECTIVE

By Joshua Fang

Early ancient Chinese society was organized according to patriarchs. Community authorities were inherited by blood relationships, and the rules were clear and understandable. In those steady authority structures, people were supposed to submit to patriarchal authority in their private life and obey the political authority in their public life.

But since the time of Confucius, this structure has started to corrupt. After the Qin and Han dynasty (1<sup>st</sup> century), though the Confucianism was treated as the official political theory, the operation of political powers often slipped into disorder. And since the Yuan dynasty (13<sup>th</sup> century), Chinese political structure became rigid, relying heavily on violence and military power.

In modern China, because of the influence of the Western world, extreme individualism and anti-authoritarianism has a solid ground among Chinese thinking. People get used to a model in which they openly affirm one form of authority, but in private they resist, deny, and escape any responsibility to that authority (Vaclav Havel described this in his work *The Power of the Powerless*, though he is talking about the Czech people).

What does this look like in church life? For example, during the membership interview, new members would openly admit they both agree with everything elders teach and are willing to obey the authority of the church. However, in private, in word or in deed, they might demonstrate their disagreement with the church's teaching or even the church's confession of faith. They also lack any understanding that they have a responsibility to affirm their church's authority in both their public and private lives.

This incorrect understanding of church authority brings trouble to church life, especially when members may profess agree-

ment with their mouth but disagree or even resist in their heart. For example, members would agree that church leaders have the authority to decide when and where a congregation meets. But if the decided time or venue was inconvenient or not in their favor, they'll quickly complain or show up late.

Some would agree that joining an evening service or members' meeting is their member responsibility to serve and support the church's ministry. But in deed, they never or rarely come to the afternoon meetings.

How can a pastor shepherd a congregation like this? Here are four efforts we need to make. First, we should teach the gospel. The gospel demonstrates an authority who loves his people, and is willing to die for his people. It's different from traditional authorities that "exercise authority over them" (Matt. 20:25). When you teach the gospel, people see that the authority is from God and for their good.

Second, pastors need to labor among people and demonstrate what a servant-leadership looks like in both the church and family. When people actually see the difference between exercising authority in the church and the world, their negative view of authority should diminish.

Third, involve the congregation in making biblical decisions like accepting new members, exercising discipline, and affirming leaders. Pastors should teach about authority and lead the congregation to practice authority well.

Finally, in discipleship and private teaching, leaders must try to influence godly people so they can influence the rest. When the body grows together, wrong understandings go away more quickly.

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# How a Roman Catholic View of Church Authority Compares to a Protestant View



Gregg Allison

**O**verheard in a conversation between a devout Catholic and a Protestant: “At least we Catholics know who’s in charge of our Church! And our Church has lots of authority. You Protestants are like tribes without a chief, like ships without a rudder. ‘The Bible, and the Bible only!’ is your cry, but look where that’s landed you: Anglicans. Presbyterians. Methodists. Lutherans. Baptists. Want me to continue? Having no authority leads to the chaos you’re in!”

This conversation is typical when it comes to the topic of church authority, and it underscores one of the great differences between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism: their respective views of authority. In the following, I will outline both views of authority, then I will assess the Catholic position and suggest application for the Protestant position.

## ROMAN CATHOLIC AUTHORITY

The Roman Catholic view of church authority can be envisioned as a three-legged stool: *Scripture*, *Tradition*, and the *Magisterium*. One leg is *Scripture*, the inspired Word of God in written form. (Remember that the Catholic Old Testament, which contains the Apocrypha, is different from that of Protestants.)

Another leg of the stool, *Tradition*, consists of the teachings that Jesus orally communicated to his apostles, who in turn orally communicated those teachings to their successors, the bishops. This Tradition is maintained in the Catholic Church and, at times, is proclaimed as official doctrine (for example, the Immaculate Conception of Mary [1854], and the Bodily Assumption of Mary [1950]).

Importantly, Scripture and Tradition “are bound closely together and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing and move toward the same goal” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 80). Thus, Scripture and Tradition together make up authoritative divine revelation for the Catholic Church.

This divine revelation must be interpreted, and “the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone” (CCC 85). This third leg of the stool is this office, the *Magisterium*, consisting of the pope and the bishops with him. Their role is to provide the authoritative interpretation of Scripture, to proclaim Tradition and authoritatively interpret it, and to exercise authority as leaders over the entire Church and as the priesthood that administers grace through its seven sacraments. At the head of the Church is the Pope, who is the vicar (representative) of Christ on earth and the successor of the apostle Peter; according to Ro-

man Catholic tradition, the Pope stands in apostolic succession (an unbroken line of authoritative leaders) with Peter and all the popes following him.

In summary, the authority structure in the Roman Catholic Church is like a three-legged stool, with Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium. Each of the three, and the three together, are necessary and work seamlessly together as the authority for the Church.

## PROTESTANT AUTHORITY

The Protestant view of church authority centers on authoritative divine revelation, which is Scripture. The Protestant formal principle of *sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone—means that Scripture is the ultimate authority in the church, which contradicts the Catholic position of Scripture *plus* Tradition.

This principle of Scripture alone does *not* mean Protestants ignore all other input. Wisdom from the past forms a small-t tradition, as exemplified in the early church creeds, the historic Protestant confessions of faith, and evangelical affirmations. These guides provide Protestants with much counsel and insight. But it's necessary to note that they function in a ministerial (serving) capacity, not in a magisterial (leading) role. In Protestant churches, ultimate authority belongs to Scripture alone.

This commitment is the ground for the Protestant emphasis on the Word of God's relationship to preaching, teaching, discipling, counseling, worshiping, leading, praying, translating, distributing, and more. Because Scripture is the Word of God, to obey Scripture is to obey God himself. To disobey Scripture is to disobey God himself. This is not to equate Scripture with God, but it does emphasize how the authority of God is expressed through his authoritative Word.

According to, and under, this authoritative Scripture, a local church is governed by qualified leaders called pastors or elders.

They have the God-ordained responsibility and authority (1) to teach Scripture and communicate sound doctrine; (2) to lead under the Lordship of Christ; (3) to pray (especially for the sick); and (4) to shepherd the church by providing stellar (yet still sinful) examples of Christ-likeness and thus protecting the church from heresy and sin through preaching, discipling, and exercising discipline.

According to some Protestant denominations, authoritative governing structures exist above the local church level. For example, in episcopalian churches, bishops exercise an authoritative role over churches in their jurisdiction. In presbyterian churches, elders from local sessions exercise an authoritative role over churches in their presbytery, synod, and general assembly. Whether organized in a congregational, episcopalian, or presbyterian manner, Protestant church authority has nothing resembling the Catholic Church's Magisterium: no Pope, no apostolic succession, no church/papal infallibility, no authority on par with Scripture.

## ASSESSMENT OF ROMAN CATHOLIC VIEW OF CHURCH AUTHORITY

The first critique of the Roman Catholic view of authority focuses on Scripture *plus* Tradition. Such a view finds no biblical basis. Not to mention, it's a late development in church history, and it's associated with the claim that the Church/Pope is infallibly led by the Holy Spirit. It is an inherently unstable position, as seen when Scripture and Tradition are in conflict (of course, the Catholic Church would say that such a conflict can never happen).

The Scripture *plus* Tradition formula also contradicts two other important Protestant doctrines: the sufficiency of Scripture (Scripture is all the church needs to please God fully) and the necessity of Scripture (the church would lose its way if Scripture would disappear).

The second critique centers on the authoritative role ascribed to the Church, especially its Magisterium. This role is grounded on the principle of the Christ-Church interconnection: the Roman Catholic Church self-identifies as the ongoing incarnation of Jesus Christ, who is present in the Church in his totality—divine nature, human nature, and body—through the Church’s members, especially its hierarchy. This notion of a prolonged, continuous incarnation has no biblical support. Furthermore, it wreaks havoc with the ascension, the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and the future return of Jesus. According to Scripture and orthodox Christology, Christ in his human nature has been exalted to the glorious heavenly realm. He has sent the Holy Spirit to take his place as *another* Comforter. He will return bodily one day. That is, Jesus is *not* here now. To affirm that the whole Christ is continuously present in the Catholic Church is to wreak havoc with these realities so integral to the Christian faith.

In summary, the Catholic view of authority as consisting of Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium is wrong.

### APPLYING THE PROTESTANT VIEW OF CHURCH AUTHORITY

The Protestant view of authority is lived out concretely in many ways, three of which will be mentioned here.

First, Protestants are attentive to Scripture—ready to obey, trust, be warned, offer praise, and other applications as they understand it. Second, Protestants focus on Scripture in every aspect of church life and ministry: preaching, teaching, worshiping, discipling, and other activities. And as communities of the Word, they joyfully submit to and trust Scripture. Third, Protestants obey and respect their divinely-appointed, qualified leaders. From them, members receive the Word of God as it is preached and taught, and find help from their pastors in living out Scripture. Members are also instructed and exhorted by Scripture to engage in ministry under the direction of their gifted leaders, so

they “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph. 4:15–16).

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# Authority Not Authoritarian



Taylor Turkington

Several years ago, a woman sat in a meeting with her pastor. Clinging to her chair with eyes to the ground, she took a deep breath and said slowly the line she'd been praying about for weeks: "I think maybe you've been harsh with me."

After multiple meetings with her pastor, she struggled with the difficult interactions that began when she first sought his counsel. She felt trapped in repeated accusatory encounters and had asked for advice. Her mentor suggested she humbly talk to him about it. His response didn't lead to what she'd hoped. "What kind of woman says that to her pastor?" he asked. He moved on to rebuke her pride and continue to make his point.

## CHRISTIANS AND AUTHORITY?

When we discuss authority within the church, Christians should joyfully affirm its place. We believe authority is a good thing given by God. Simultaneously, we must assert we do not use the term in the same way as the world. In the secular culture today, *authority* is often a by-word, meaning control, dominance, or a privilege belonging only to the powerful. Christian authority means none of these things.

Yet Christians are sinners, too. We can use authority for self-rule and prestige. We can use authority like those who don't know Jesus Christ. Christ's humble example fades while desires for control or efficiency take center stage. These temptations are true of anyone with authority and influence. I've seen the lustful draw in my own life.

When Peter addressed the elders in his first letter, he spoke to the temptation to abuse authority. He called these men with unique authority in the church to “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 over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:2–3).

I've often heard teaching that brushes over the last warning—“not domineering over those in your charge.” But the multiple high-profile stories of pastor's misusing authority suggest we need to consider it.

### WHAT IS “DOMINEERING”?

The word “domineering” brings to mind such hostile images that it's easy to assume everyone who works in a civilized manner is safe from this transgression. But in reality, it's a danger to everyone in authority.

Domineering occurs when the person in authority feels the need (even for good ends) to dominate, subdue, or master those under his or her authority rather than lead, care for, and serve them. Perhaps Peter remembered the scene when Jesus used the same word to describe how the Gentiles ruled. They lord it over others, he said (Matt. 20:25, Mk. 10:42). They gain dominion by manipulating. It's how sinful people have exercised authority since the Fall, so it makes sense for Jesus to expose it.

“But it shall not be so among you,” Jesus states. He wants to lead his disciples to a contrasting paradigm of leadership, one governed



by *servanthood* and *humility*. Then he offers the greatest example of such leadership himself by going to the cross (Mark 10:45). So it is no surprise that his followers must follow in his footsteps. They shouldn't cling to supremacy and control for their own good, but rather lead as shepherds who serve, just as Peter describes.

This is true explicitly for elders of local churches, but Peter's principles apply to all facets of our lives. All Christians should exercise their authority—in the home, the workplace, or the public sphere—like Jesus. I've failed to use my authority this way, and though I'm not an elder, my domineering still has devastating consequences.

#### 4 WAYS TO DIAGNOSE DOMINEERING

In the life of the church, elders are called to lead, teach, speak the truth, and discipline for the good of the body. In so doing, they set an example for how authority should be used. So, as a woman deeply thankful for the calling and care of elders, I'd like to offer four questions that may help you recognize if you are drifting into domineering.

##### 1. Do You Veer into Harshness?

When someone doesn't understand (or agree with) what you're saying, do you say it louder and with less kindness? When you're irritated with the direction of a conversation, do you “take the gloves off”?

How we say things matters, especially for the one in authority. Church leaders must speak truth for the good of the flock. But they must do so with gentleness, kindness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). When we slip into a domineering view of authority, it's easy to see gentleness as a requirement for *others*, not something required of you if your job is to “get stuff done.”

Yet that is not right. I've heard of techniques for pastors to “make someone submit.” But pastors should never force submis-

sion. A pastor's job is to work for Spirit-given fruit, not forced "fruit," which isn't really fruit.

More subtly, a pastor can respond to someone's confession with a rebuke or an additional accusation instead of grace. It's as if the shepherd wants further assurance that the confessor finally feels the weight of his or her sin. But in the process the pastor withholds the hope of forgiveness. This, too, is harshness.

A harsh manner may foster outward obedience, but it does not image the character of our Good Shepherd (Jn. 10:11). Nor does it result in the transformation of the sheep. When elders lead in gentleness, they teach the mercy of our God. When they don't, they tempt sheep to adopt the outward motions of a heartless obedience.

## 2. Do You Assume the Intentions of the Heart?

Have you ever been to a doctor who barely asks any questions before offering a diagnosis? It's frustrating, right? But you understand how a doctor can do this: when you've seen patterns many times, you begin to see them everywhere.

Elders—understandably and wrongly—can do this with the intentions of people's hearts: "If they're like me, then they must be thinking..." "When they said that, they must have sinned in their heart..." "They must have been motivated by sin when..." Assumptions begin. Questions are not asked. The testimony of others is taken at face value. And "leading" quickly turns to lord-ing it over.

It's tempting to play God and tell people why they did what they did. Yet when you judge and then indict a person's heart motivations, you throw them off balance. It's a power move. Suddenly the individual wonders if they even know themselves. Insisting a person has been proud, rebellious, people-pleasing, or cowardly, even when they don't recognize that in themselves, confuses them at best and terrifies them at worst. It subdues rather than serves.

I'm glad shepherds speak to the sin of the sheep. Shepherds must ask hard questions, even questions that helps a person to see their own motives: "Why do you think you did that?" But then shepherds should be quick to believe the person is telling the truth about his or her own heart, or, if they doubt it, to at least trust the Lord to bring to light what is hidden. Shepherds must walk alongside the sheep as they seek the Lord, trusting the Holy Spirit who speaks and fully knows every heart.

This approach leaves our triune God as Lo Lord, rather than any one person. A pastor cannot know it all, and should repent for trying, as Zach Eswine says in his book *The Imperfect Pastor*. When elders lead well, members like me are reminded to leave the god-playing behind and trust the Spirit.

### 3. Are You Concerned About Control?

Do you think you know better, so you don't need the input of others, especially those who aren't elders? Are you concerned about what ideas they may have that would oppose yours? Do you discourage the flock from reading other Bible teachers? Are you concerned with what the people in your congregation may think or decide? Are you threatened by disagreement? Is your way the only way? Are your spiritual discipline preferences ultimate? Do you consider journaling greater than fasting, or your prayer structure superior?

When someone's opinions and preferences become holy imperatives, even subtly, the leaders begin to look more like masters than shepherds.

I've seen elders give instruction on family plans, job choices, studies, children, and homes. Such pastoral instruction so easily goes beyond biblical directives, and their authority crosses lines of anything connected to biblical wisdom. Sentiments become teachings which become rules. And people suffer.

Jack Miller says it well when he writes, "For the irony of it all is that the more we try to control the work in our own name, the

more the work and its problems control us. We begin by trying to own the work of God and end up with the ministry owning us.”

As elders, your willingness to not control teaches me to do likewise. Your courageous leadership that trusts the Lord Jesus to work and lead bolsters my faith, so that I don’t use my authority to control those in my own spheres of influence. I’m encouraged to live in humility before God, you, and others, feeling safe in your care (1 Pet. 5:5).

#### 4. Do You Avoid Acknowledging Your Own Sin?

Is it hard to admit you’re tempted by sin, often the same sin as those in your church? Are you able to repent alongside those to whom you minister?

Sometimes churches can imply that elders are a status above. They’re beyond the level of the congregation, especially the “normal pew sheep.”

In contrast to this, some elders I’ve known publicly and privately admit their need to repent of pride and follow Paul’s example by acknowledging they may be the foremost of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). They speak of their temptation to selfishness and their deep need for grace. When they speak of temptations to impurity, they never do so in a way that shames women or pushes them out of relationships or conversations. They talk about sin as if they know they can also be tempted (see Gal. 6:1; Jude 23). They openly discuss their choice of obedience and repentance without needing to protect their reputation of perfection.

When there’s no confession from the highest in authority, it can be implied that the good deeds of the leader invalidate their need to confess. Horrifically, this example can subtly teach a false gospel that achievements and power cover sin.

“Be an example to the flock,” Peter says in the same breath as his charge not to domineer (1 Pet. 5:3). The alternative to lording over people is to live out the honest and secure lifestyle of one who

repents before those under one's care, before both men and women. When elders respond to criticism by asking for help in seeing their own sin and blind spots, we see the theology they teach lived out before our eyes.

When it's obvious grace is for you, too, we members are helped to repent of sin with joy. When leaders display their need for the work of Christ, it reveals our own great need as well (Rom. 7:24–25). The cross really did save you and me, and I as a member am blessed to see that in your life.

### THE GRACE FOR AUTHORITY

Brother-pastors, I'm immensely grateful for your leadership in the church. You shepherd us and lead us, pointing to the glorious grace of Jesus Christ. You speak the truth we need to hear. God has placed you in authority, and this is a good thing. In your place of authority, though, you must choose how you exercise your power.

By God's grace, you don't have to be harsh, more knowledgeable, in control, or perfect. The world's leaders may feel the need to hold on to their power like this. But you don't need to feel this way. Rather, the Chief Shepherd has given to his church under-shepherds who are freed from such methods. How? Through the power of the gospel. And so those shepherds faithfully wait for their crown of glory after their humble service to many (1 Pet. 5:4). That's the vision of Christian authority, and it is beautiful.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Taylor Turkington lives in the Portland area where she's worked for a church the last six years teaching, discipling, and training. Previously, she worked as a missionary in Eastern Europe. Currently, Taylor is a student at Western in the D.Min. program. She is also a co-founder and co-director of the Verity Fellowship.

# Don't Be a 9Marxist



Jonathan Leeman

In a “one-star” Amazon.com review of a 9Marks book, the reviewer shares her experience of being a part of what she calls a 9Marks church. Formally, there is no such thing as a 9Marks church. We are not a denomination. But I think I understand what she means—the pastors probably identify with our message.

Anyhow, the reviewer did not have a good experience at this church. She describes it as “insufferable, authoritarian, rigid, legalistic, abusive, controlling, [and] spiritually abusive.” Members were “infantilized.” Power was “concentrated at the top” and had no accountability. People with sincere questions were treated as “being factious, deceived, unsaved.” The reviewer himself, apparently, was excommunicated for bringing a registered sex-offender to the attention of the elders. All in all, the review promised to never have anything to do with a “9Marks church” again. It was like “the Salem Witch Trials.”

Wow. Okay. Beside THAT how do you feel? as my dad used to say in such moments.

I’ve been the editorial director of 9Marks for over a decade, and part of the church behind the ministry for two. I don’t often hear criticism with language this strong; maybe one or two other times. It causes me to feel several things at once:

- Sympathetic: “I’m so sorry you went through that.”

- Defensive: “What you’re describing, if it’s accurate, is certainly not what we’ve been teaching, but is a perversion of what 9Marks says.”
- Humbled: “I suspect we could do a better job of saying what we’re *not* saying, and guarding against abuses.” In other words, I hope we can learn from our critics.

Several years ago I was asked to speak at a church about cultivating a culture of discipling. The night before, a friend told me the church’s members had a reputation for being spiritually zealous, proud, and a bit judgmental. I realized I had prepared the wrong message. My applications aimed to stir up the complacent. But here was a church that possibly erred in the opposite direction. So beginning at 11:30 p.m., I radically redrafted my applications: disciple, yeah, sure, I suppose, but remember grace and Christian freedom. Anyone wanna go dancing?

9Marks talks a lot about authority in the church—authority in preaching, authority in membership and discipline practices, authority among the elders. The thing is, sinners like us easily abuse the authority that God gives. So even as 9Marks encourages churches to avoid the squishy complacency of nominal Christianity, we also don’t want churches to err in the direction of being doctrinaire and authoritarian.

Think of how God indicts Israel in Hosea 4:3: “Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away.” Adam and Eve were to rule over those three domains—land, sky, sea—so that all would flourish. But Israel’s rule led to mourning and languishing.

Abusive rule wilts the flower, starves the herd, crushes the soul.

Someone else, commenting on Amazon.com review above, characterized 9Marks as “9Marx.” Clever, right?

Let's run with it. Mark Dever helped me brainstorm fifteen marks for *not being a 9Marxist*, that is, not being a church leader who abuses authority. I'll explain each.

**Mark 1: Embrace the sufficiency of Scripture for leading churches and pastoring people. Meaning, don't require what Scripture doesn't require.**

We should be very reluctant to require anything not expressly set down in Scripture. For instance, the leaders of the Shepherding Movement of the 1970s were rightly concerned about the weak commitment, shallow community, and general worldliness characteristic of so many American churches. But they wrongly required things not required by Scripture, such as membership in a house-group or having life-decisions "covered" by their house-group leader, elder, or pastor. Decisions to be covered included where to live and work, whom to marry, or even whether to make a doctor's appointment. They also adopted other unbiblical authority structures.

Now, you and I might disagree about what Scripture requires. Fine. But let's agree that's the standard.

As someone who has written several books on church membership and discipline, I know how easily we can require too much here. One godly, well-meaning pastor asked me if we should hold onto members who have left our churches *until* their new pastor calls or emails to confirm that they have in fact joined the new church. I understand logically how he drew this conclusion, but at this point I would hope a little alarm bell would go off in his mind: "Wait a second, does the Bible require this?"

Admittedly, a church might require a *few* things unspecified by Scripture. Our church requires membership classes and interviews and signing a statement of faith to join the church, for instance. It's our judgment that these are prudential *forms* for implementing the biblical *element* of church membership. You have



to adopt some form, after all. The Bible doesn't quite say how to join a church. But beyond these few things, I cannot think of anything else we require not required in Scripture.

**Mark 2: Be a strong advocate for Christian freedom.**

We shouldn't bind the conscience where Scripture doesn't, but be strong advocates for Christian freedom. To put the Pharisaical impulse in the best possible light, the Pharisee doesn't want to break God's law or to even risk breaking God's law, but to play it safe. So he puts a hedge of protection around God's law, and binds the conscience there. That could be drinking or dancing. That could be how you vote.

One attribute of authoritarianism is that it turns prudential "mays" ("you may join a small group") into "musts" ("you must join a small group").

Something I appreciate about Mark Dever is that he's not short on strong opinions, but if you spend any time with him, you'll discover that he is one of the stronger advocates of Christian freedom I know. I'd even say he cultivates a sanctified irreverence toward so many evangelical false pieties. We'd do well to do the same.

**Mark 3: Maintain a clear line in your mind between issues of biblical righteousness and issues of wisdom.**

This is another way of stating point two, but this language helps me pastorally. Perhaps a member wants to do something that I perceive to be foolish or a sign of immaturity: leave the church for another; pursue this woman; take this job; adopt such-and-such a fashion statement; watch such-and-such a television show. And suppose he or she asks my counsel. It's good for me to either say nothing, or to just to ask questions, or even to say, as I often do, "That's a wisdom question, not a biblical principle question," which is my way of reminding myself and them that my counsel is

not inerrant. It's not Bible. It might be wise, but it doesn't bind the conscience like the Bible does. Keeping these two categories explicit and clear puts things in right perspective for me and them. I dare say, the vast majority of the counsel pastors are asked to give requires them to reach into the wisdom bucket, not the absolute principle bucket.

Also, many of the programmatic decisions a church must make—should we have a Sunday evening service? A Sunday school program? Encourage *this* approach to evangelism or *that* approach to discipling?—depend on wisdom. Remember that. To be sure, 9Marks might have opinions about what's biblical that you don't share, e.g. about multi-services. The point is, keep both lists in your mind.

Can you give people strong counsel in matters of wisdom? Sometimes, yes. Can you bind the conscience? No. Even if you're 75 percent sure that your advice *might* be a matter of sin and righteousness, based on your deductive reasoning powers from Scripture, I hope that last 25 percent keeps you from pushing too hard. It's the path to the dark side of authoritarianism.

To be sure, we want to people to make wise and good and godly decisions. But good decisions come as we teach them slowly, over time, through the careful preaching of God's Word week after week—drip, drip, drip—as with raising children. You want their good decisions to grow (super)naturally out of changed hearts and love of Christ. Legalism and non-biblical rules are a short-cut that might produce good decisions today, but pride or resentment in the long run.

**Mark 4: Beware asceticism, or at least of imposing your asceticism.**

The Bible certainly warns against the love of money. It commends generosity and loving our neighbor with our money, even giving sacrificially. It condemns the rich man who keeps building

bigger barns and praises the faith of the woman who gives out of her poverty.

Still, I think there's a long tradition of Christian asceticism—going all the way back to St. Francis or the Benedictine Monks—that risks binding the conscience with a self-manufactured picture of what piety looks like. “If I'm *really* holy, I'll only buy old cars and previously owned-clothes.” Not only that, “I'll sort of look suspiciously at Christians who buy nice new cars and clothes.”

Friend, buy old clothes and cars so that, for love's sake, you can give more money away. Praise God. But make sure you're not grounding your sense of righteousness in some self-manufactured picture of the pious lifestyle. What's more, don't impose your own wisdom-based judgment on how other should spend their money. Doing otherwise creates self-righteous church, and self-righteousness is behind much abuse.

Notice how sensitively Paul puts it: “each should should put something aside as he may prosper” (1 Cor. 16:2) or “according to what he has” (2 Cor. 8:11).

How easy it is to assume that godliness and piety look and sound a certain way, and to question those whose prayers and lifestyles don't match our own. And the more charismatic and powerful a leader is, the more this is a risk. I remember when I was in seminary how, in many of our seminarian minds, the truly godly man looked and sounded like John Piper. That's no critique of John Piper. He's just being himself. It's just a witness to how easy sit is to impose our non-biblical ideas on others or ourselves.

**Mark 5: Beware being a slave to logic. Or rather, learn to be comfortable with unresolved tensions by practicing Christian forbearance.**

Theology, to a large extent, works by logical extension, by implications and applications from the biblical text. So those of us

given to theological thinking will be inclined to trace out these kinds of implications and applications.

But this produces a challenge: some logical implications or applications are spot on, like the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity. Others are problematic:

- Rock music is bad because the backbeat provokes a sexual response.
- Women wearing pants is bad because it blurs the line between biblical manhood and womanhood.

In general, so many of the decisions we must make pastorally, and so many of the situations we are asked to speak into, are in the realm of implication or application.

- Can women pray in the church's gathering?
- Can parents attend the wedding of their gay son?
- Can a church member vote for a pro-choice candidate?
- Can Christian men get vasectomies?

Sometimes, we have to make a decision by logical extension from the text. You either have women pray publicly or you don't. Other decisions, as in counseling situations, leave us more room to say, "I don't know."

But here is something that should belong to our pastoral instincts: except in those places where Christians have agreed for centuries that a doctrinal or ethical position is a legitimate implication or application from Scripture, as with the doctrine of the Trinity, I want something inside of you to feel nervous about binding people's consciences when you're out on the tree branch of a logical extension from Scripture.

Let me give an illustration (and the important thing here is not that you agree with my posture on the illustration itself): Suppose a church

member asks me, “Can I attend the wedding ceremony of my gay son?” I personally would not attend, since it seems to give approval to the sinful relationship. In fact, the assembly’s affirmation of a marriage is part of what makes the wedding a covenant-making ceremony.

That said, I have to combine a couple of logical steps to reach this conclusion. So I would warn the inquiring church member about the very real possibility of sin in attending this wedding, but there’s just enough reserve in me because we’re dealing in the realm of logical implication or application, that I would not move to excommunicate the parent who arrives at a different conclusion than me. Not only that, I’m also not going to informally separate myself from those parents, say, by adopting a scornful, condemning posture toward them.

Part of trusting God and his Word, and avoiding abusive pastoring, is learning to live with tensions. Sometimes living with a tension is a sign of unfaithfulness. Sometime it’s a sign of humility and the recognition that we are not God.

We definitely need to learn to live with tensions when it comes to assessing repentance in matters of admitting members or disciplining them from the church. There is a tension between correcting sin and forbearing with one another.

### **Mark 6: Be willing to say you don’t know.**

We want to cultivate the humility and freedom of honest uncertainty. The person who has difficulty saying, “I don’t know,” in the best case, will just come across as a know-it-all. In the worse case, they will give answers where Scripture doesn’t actually give them, and impose on people what should not be imposed.

Ironically, saying “I don’t know” can help a pastor earn trust. It helps people to listen when he does speak, because they know he won’t prattle on and discuss matters with which he is unfamiliar. Part of abusing authority, however, is claiming to know something you don’t.

### **Mark 7: Cultivate a willingness to be corrected.**

Part and parcel of saying you don't know is saying that you could also be wrong, which means that you should be willing to be corrected. A proud person thinks he always knows, and a proud person is unwilling to be corrected.

Not too long ago, my wife told me that I'm defensive. "No, I'm not...Let me explain why I'm not."

I told her! Won that argument!

Ah, how often we win the battle but lose the war, the marriage counselors tell us. So it is for us pastors. Have you ever found yourself backed into a corner, pastor, and basically pulled rank to get yourself out of it? You put on your best "Now I'm the pastor" tone, speak in a vague and ambiguous way with specialized theological vocabulary, and then bring the conversation to a close with the sigh of, "Oh, if you only understood." The member walks away having lost the argument on the surface of things, but inarticulately sensing that you won that argument by the force of erudition, or personality, or position. And trust has begun to erode.

Part of being willing to be corrected is being willing to lose elder votes, or being willing to submit to other church leaders. If a man cannot submit, he should not lead. And that includes the guy at "the top." Mark Dever is the "senior pastor," but I regularly see him losing votes and submitting to the other elders—once or twice a meeting in fact. I also see him building opportunities into his schedule to be corrected. He does this at the weekly service review, for instance.

The abusive use of authority, as much as anything, is about wanting control and respect. It roots in a kind of idolatry and godlessness. Which brings us to the next point...

### **Mark 8: Fear God more than man.**

The best defense against abusing authority is fearing God. When you know that the people under your authority are God's,

and that you will give an account for your stewardship, you are less likely to take advantage of them; less likely to prize your own wisdom over God's; less likely to demand respect and honor for yourself, because you know that, when you decrease, he will increase.

Here's something unexpected I've discovered by watching Dever. True humility, and the true fear of the Lord, doesn't necessarily mean what Christians often think it means: not having strong convictions, always being willing to shrug your shoulder and say, "Oh, I don't know," and always deferring to what the group thinks. Sometimes it means those things. But sometimes true humility and fear of the Lord also means standing strongly on God's Word, because humility knows that we humans know truly in no other way. It's easy to dismiss the "truth people" or the "people with convictions" as proud. And they might be. But they might also be very humble, and they don't fear *you* and your opinions like you want them to.

There's a balance to strike between standing courageously on God's Word, while also recognizing our imperfect grasp on God's Word. Which brings us to the next point...

### **Mark 9: Beware the easy potential to use God's truth and justice as weapons**

Something I've observed in those who would speak harshly or abusively to their wives or children is that they will justify their harshness by appealing to *true* truths. They'll point to the Bible... and say true things from it. Or they will say things like, "I have such a strong justice instinct, I couldn't stand seeing the injustice done!" And so with a sense of righteous fury and justice, they have attacked the injustice, sought to correct the untruth. But in the process they have destroyed and hurt.

Here's what's tricky. Sometimes that response to untruth or injustice might be in earnest, but there is a lack of faith in God's

power to change someone. So we push too hard. Very often, our best ambitions will be combined with other, less sanctified ambitions, such as the desire for control or honor or respect. Worse, the desire for control or respect may be the primary ambition, and the concern for truth or justice is just camouflage.

All that to say, those of us who are “truth people” or “justice people”—of which I consider myself one—must beware this potential to employ God’s truth to control or hurt others. Now, truth be told, “feelings people” can do this, too. You’ve heard the phrase, “Hurt people hurt people.”

**Mark 10: Beware of giving more authority to your heroes than to the Bible.**

This is easy to do when you’ve really been impacted by a man’s ministry. And praise God for those men or women he has used to save us, or build us up in the faith, or dramatically changed the way we think in a more biblical direction. I’ve been dramatically impacted by Mark Dever’s life and ministry, to be sure. But I’ve also been dramatically impacted by my dad and mom, Tom Schreiner, Bruce Ware, Chip Collins, a number of authors, certain fellow elders...I could keep going. Each of these men and women have given me a different glimpse of Jesus.

Keeping that perspective is helpful for not putting any one of them to highly on a pedestal.

But get this: when we are imbalanced in the reverence and honor we give to a human being over us, we will be imbalanced in what we demand of the human beings under us. After all, we will always invite people to worship what we worship, whether that’s God, a football team, or a pastoral hero. So if I’m putting my theological hero’s words in a place functionally higher than Scripture, I am going to teach that man’s theology in a way that’s imbalanced, overly-aggressive, even abusive.



**Mark 11: Don't lose sight of the person in front of you when implementing rules and procedures.**

Wrong approaches to church leadership can occur whenever we rely on regulated processes instead of personal pastoral care. And I do think this may be more of a temptation for large churches. The need for economies of scale is met with consistent and tidy procedures and precise codes of conduct. Treating each case uniquely and thoughtfully becomes difficult.

For churches large and small, however, remember the lesson of a wise parent. He or she treats each child individually. Wise discipline and discipleship treats each member individually. From personal experience, I can say that disciplining and training my children is slow, inefficient work that consumes hours. And so is the work of disciplining and training our fellow members.

**Mark 12: Love the church more than its health.**

There's a temptation young pastors and 9Marks-types are susceptible to: we can love our vision of what a church should be more than we love the people who comprise it. We can be like the unmarried man who loves *the idea* of a wife, but who marries a real woman and finds it harder to love *her* than the idea of her.

Your "ecclesial" goal is not to cross your membership "t"s and dot your programmatic "i"s. It is to shepherd real people toward life-giving, gospel-reminding relationships where they learn to trust God. And they will learn to trust him, in part, as they learn to trust you because you demonstrate that you are trustworthy.

I remember overhearing a church elder complain about a family who let their unbaptized children receive the Lord's Supper when the plate of communion crackers was passed down their pew. What struck me was the elder's tone. It was slightly contemptuous, as in, "How could they?! The fools!" But these people were untaught sheep. Of course they didn't know better. And God had given them this elder not to complain about them, but to

love them toward a better understanding. At that moment, it felt like this elder loved his vision of the biblical church more than he loved those individuals.

**Mark 13: Consider what Scripture says about the authority of the congregation.**

Anecdotally, most (or all?) of the unfortunate cases of church discipline I have heard about in recent years have occurred in non-congregational churches, where the elders are free to impose their will on the congregation. I'm sure congregational churches have failed in this area as well.

Frankly, the mere fact that a group of elders or pastors in a congregational church must sit in a small elders' meeting before the big congregational meeting, scratch their heads, and ask themselves, "How are we going to explain this to the church?" tends by itself to moderate their decision-making. It slows them down. A group of well-meaning but tired elders might get hijacked by a bad strain of thinking in their meeting at 10 p.m. on a Thursday night. But Sunday's congregational meeting will serve as a useful reality check.

**Mark 14: Rely on the Power of the Word and the Spirit to Change Minds and Hearts**

Pastoral authoritarianism *commands* the flesh and makes no appeal to the spiritual new man in the gospel. It *looms* heavily over the will, doing all it can to make the will choose rightly. It *requires* outward conformity rather than repentance of heart. Pastoral authoritarianism is impatient and forceful. Since it does not recognize that decisions have their ultimate foundation in the heart's desires, it feels successful whenever it produces a "right" decision, whether or not that decision was forced or manipulated.

Godly pastoral authority is by faith, and relies upon God to make change, knowing that it cannot raise the dead or change

the leopard's spots. It believes that God always has the power to change people and that he will if he so determines. Godly authority therefore relies exclusively on the power of God's gospel Word and God's Spirit. It doesn't rely on the power to persuade, or the power of ethnic similitude, or the power of personal charisma, or the power of intellectual prowess, or the power of good rhetoric, like the super apostles who criticized Paul. It relies upon an open statement of the truth, not manipulative or underhanded ways (2 Cor. 4:1–3). Therefore, godly authority is exceedingly patient and tender, knowing that only God can give growth (1 Cor. 3:5–9). An immature Christian may need to walk a hundred steps before he arrives at maturity, but a wise pastor seldom asks for more than one step or two.

Ironically, an emphasis on numbers and outcomes presumes upon the power of human wisdom, human will, human strength. Pragmatism, like authoritarianism, roots in a reliance on the powers of the flesh. Strong charming people, finally, is not that different than strong-arming them. That is to say, a church leader who thinks that rock music is necessary to make his church grow, ironically, is going beyond Scripture and relying on human wisdom just like the fundamentalist who says that all rock music is sin goes beyond Scripture and relies on human wisdom.

It's worth meditating on Paul's ministerial confidence:

But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has

shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor. 4:1–6)

Which brings me to...

### **Mark 15: Rely on the Sovereignty of God**

One of the best defenses against authoritarianism—perhaps unexpectedly to some people—is Reformed theology. We speak or preach the biblical word, but we know only God can do the new creation work of giving light to the eyes. So we don't force. We don't manipulate. Instead we pray, finally speaking more to God about the brother, than to the brother about God (borrowing from Dietrich Bonhoeffer). And then we rest.

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# Authority and Its Abuse



Shai Linne

**S**adly, it's not uncommon for those in authority to abuse their authority. For example, consider these various examples:

From an 2013 article about bad bosses in *The Washingtonian*:

A guy at my old company used to make his employees ask before they could use the restroom—and he would time them. If they were gone longer than five minutes, he would add the time up at the end of the week and make them use vacation time.”

He made anyone late to a meeting stand in the corner for the entire time, and he had others who said anything particularly ‘stupid’ stand on their chair or the table.”

From Randi Kreger’s book *Stop Walking On Eggshells: Taking Your Life Back When Someone You Care About Has Borderline Personality*:

My dad used fear, guilt, intimidation, blaming, and manipulation to control my whole family. He’s poisonous—the kind of person who has you doubting

your own perceptions and beliefs. Life with him was a rollercoaster—up and down, for years and years. He'd rage and snarl one minute, and then apologize the next, and expect you to forget all about it. The constant instability and insecurity eventually rendered me completely numb. He refuses to take responsibility for his behavior, and acts like any rift in our relationship is my fault. I am trying to forgive him.

Or this, from the *Department of Justice Report on Baltimore Police Department*:

We find reasonable cause to believe that BPD engages in a pattern or practice of discriminatory policing against African Americans. Statistical evidence shows that the Department intrudes disproportionately upon the lives of African Americans at every stage of its enforcement activities. BPD officers disproportionately stop African Americans; search them more frequently during these stops; and arrest them at rates that significantly exceed relevant benchmarks for criminal activity. African Americans are likewise subjected more often to false arrests. Indeed, for each misdemeanor street offense that we examined, local prosecutors and booking officials dismissed a higher proportion of African-American arrests upon initial review compared to arrests of people from other racial backgrounds. BPD officers also disproportionately use force—including constitutionally excessive force—against African-American subjects. Nearly 90 percent of the excessive force incidents identified by the Justice Department review involve force used against African Americans.

What these stories have in common is their consistent example of abusive authority. And when it happens, the results are often devastating. Devastating for a workplace, devastating for a family, devastating for an entire community of people. The greater the degree of authority, the greater the pain inflicted when it is abused.

If it's devastating in the world, how much more so in the church of Jesus Christ?

## DEFINING AUTHORITY

Human authority is a delegated power to make decisions and bring laws of some type to bear on the one under authority. And the Bible makes it clear that this is a good thing. Romans 13:1 says, “For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” In that context, it’s speaking about the governing authorities, but it’s true of all authority. There is no authority except from God.

Remember the conversation between Jesus and Pontius Pilate in John 19? So Pilate said to him, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” But Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.”

Authority is good, because when used properly, it is a reflection of the power, wisdom, and love of God.

## THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS

Abusive authority is the improper use of authority. Like all sin, it’s a distortion. It takes something good and God-ordained and uses it improperly. So, in order to understand the bad version, let’s think about what the good version is. And to see the good version, as one would predict, all we have to do is look at Jesus, because he is the epitome of everything good, and that includes authority.

This couldn’t be clearer when we arrive at a passage like John 10:1–11:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of stran-

gers.” This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

In this passage, which comes on the heels of Jesus healing the man born blind, the Lord Jesus describes himself as the “good shepherd.” The shepherd/sheep imagery is rich in its Old Testament background and is a picture of how God relates to his people.

In Jesus’s culture, it would have been an obvious picture of authority. The shepherd has authority over the sheep. The shepherd decides where the sheep goes, when it’s time for the sheep to come in from the field. He feeds the sheep, cares for the sheep, corrects the sheep when they’re off. He clearly calls the shots. He has authority over the sheep.

But here’s where it gets surprising. Jesus uses his authority, not to hurt the sheep or take advantage and abuse the sheep. He uses his authority to bless the sheep. In this way, the authority of Jesus is protective, loving, and sacrificial.

### *Protective*

Notice the end of verse 3: he “leads them out.” Notice also the middle of verse 4: “he goes before them.” The shepherd is in front so any predator, if they want to get to the sheep, have to get past him first. He uses his authority to protect.

### *Loving*

Jesus calls his own sheep by name (10:3). It’s personal. He’s not just taking care of a mass of worthless sheep, simply there to serve



his purposes and meet his needs. Instead, he knows them and calls them each individually by name.

### *Sacrificial*

In verse 11, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” This is shocking. While sheep certainly had value in that culture, the value of the sheep was nothing compared to the value of the shepherd. The shepherd would not be expected to endanger himself for the sheep, let alone die for them.

But that’s exactly what Jesus does. The purpose of authority is for the good, the blessedness, and the flourishing of the one under authority. And that’s exactly what Jesus says he uses his authority to accomplish in verse 9: “If anyone enters by me, he will be saved.”

Saved from what? Saved from the wrath of God. That’s what we deserve because of our sin. And we’re all guilty. We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. So Jesus, through his death and resurrection, secures our greatest good, our most significant blessedness, the highest possible degree of flourishing imaginable. He saved us. Jesus used his power and authority to save us.

Jesus is contrasting himself with both the leaders of his day *and* the bad shepherds from the past. As Jesus makes this contrast, it would have drawn the minds of his listeners back to texts like Ezekiel 34.

## ISRAEL’S ABUSIVE SHEPHERDS

Here’s what Ezekiel says in Ezekiel 34:1–10:

The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus

says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

“Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: As I live, declares the Lord God, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am against the shepherds, (I can’t imagine anything worse that can be said. But that is exactly what God says to those who abuse and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.

Jesus, as the good shepherd, is the fulfillment of what’s being prophesied here. But notice the specific critiques of Israel’s shepherds that all fit into what Jesus says about the thieves and robbers in John 10.

God’s critique of Israel’s shepherds is communicated in the following ten ways:

- They feed themselves and not the sheep. (34:2)
- They eat the fat. (34:3)
- They clothe themselves with wool. (34:3)

- They slaughter the fat ones. (34:3)

In other words, just like the thieves and robbers Jesus mentions in John 10, these shepherds are stealing from the sheep for their own shameful gain. But there's more:

- They have not strengthened the weak. (34:4)
- They have not healed the sick. (34:4)
- They have not bound up the injured. (34:4)
- They have not brought back the straying. (34:4)
- They have not sought the lost. (34:4)
- They have ruled with force and harshness. (34:4)

In other words, just like the thief and robber, these shepherds kill and destroy the sheep through their negligence.

Notice the abuse of authority in this passage isn't so much seen in how they treated the strong, but how they treated the weak, the sick, the injured, the straying, the lost (34:4). They saw the weak not as precious souls in God's sight in need of strengthening, but as annoyances. They saw the sick, not as chosen and beloved, but as an inconvenience. They saw the injured as in the way and slowing down the ministry. They saw the straying, as not worth the time to pursue. They saw the lost as hopeless. They abused the sheep because they didn't have eyes to see the sheep as God saw them.

## PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Unfortunately, this is far too often the case today. The apostle Peter, in giving instruction to under-shepherds, picks up on some of these themes in 1 Peter 5:1–5:

So 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 over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive

ve the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

My assumption is none of you want to abuse the authority given to you by God. And my guess is that those who have given in to the temptation to be abusive in their exercise of authority didn't go into ministry with the goal of being an abusive pastor. My guess is, like most sin, it happened gradually and subtly. Hebrews 3:13 talks about the “deceitfulness of sin” for a reason.

Looking at 1 Peter 5:2, do you notice whose flock it is? It's God's flock. Not your flock. It's God's. They're God's sheep. And notice where they are: “among you.” Not beneath you. What this verse most certainly does *not* say is, “Subdue your own flock that is under you.”

And yet, so much of pastoring today looks like that. But we must ask Peter, how do we do this? How do we shepherd the flock of God that's among us? He tells us how.

First, he says, “exercise oversight.” There's the authority—power delegated by God. The meaning of “authority” there is important: “to look intently with the aim of caring for the one looked upon.” That aim is also important: to care for the one under authority. Then he gives instructions in three pairs, each one stated negatively and then positively. Each of these is meant to help pastors, to help us avoid abusing authority.

### ***Not under compulsion, but willingly — (Pride)***

This gets at our motives. It causes us to search our hearts and ask ourselves, *Why are we in ministry?* That's a good question to ask. *Why are you in ministry?* Or why do you *desire* to go into ministry? This is an important question, because we all know the right answers. For the glory of God. To spread the gospel. To help and serve people. Those are right, biblical answers. But having the right

answer isn't enough. I'm sure all those in our circles who have given into the sin of abusing their authority all had the right answer.

People enter the ministry for all kinds of reasons. Here are some bad ones.

1. *The desire for power*

Some people crave power. They like the idea of being the boss, of being in charge. They like people having to do what they say. It might be because they felt powerless as a child, and now they have an opportunity to exert the power they always desired but never had.

2. *The desire for affirmation*

Some people, more than anything else, just want to be affirmed. This is the person who craves compliments and lives on applause. It feels good to be affirmed, and for this person, they get an opportunity every week to be told they're doing a great job. Of course, for many, this backfires when they get called to a congregation that criticizes more than affirms; these brothers often get crushed under the burden of criticism.

3. *The desire for respect*

There's a respect that comes from the office. I once heard about a guy who insisted that the congregation not call him by his first name but call him by his title.

I can't help but wonder if that guy ever read Matthew 23: "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."

Nothing's wrong with being rabbi, teacher, or instructor. But there *is* something very wrong with glorying in it. Because glorying in it is a manifestation of pride. That's why Jesus immediately says: "The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

#### 4. *The desire for a “platform”*

This is why big conferences can be dangerous. Because no matter how careful the organizers are, it can reinforce the false notion that the most faithful pastors are the pastors with the biggest ministries and the most pronounced gifts. It’s sadly ironic, but the reality is that the bigger the “platform,” the more challenging it will become to be among the flock and shepherd well. For some reason we’ve separated preaching from shepherding. That was never meant to be because they go hand in hand. I love what Anthony Carter says about why he doesn’t speak at more conferences: “God hasn’t called me to shepherd the world, but the flock.”

#### ***Not for shameful gain, but eagerly — (Greed)***

This was explicitly stated in Ezekiel 34 and implied by Jesus in John 10 when he said thieves and robbers steal. The warning against greed is a constant warning in Scripture. There’s going to be a temptation to use the church’s money for our own sinful ends. This is why financial accountability is so important—two signers for every check.

#### ***Not domineering, but being examples to the flock – (Power)***

Here are a few ways to be domineering

- to not listen
- to retaliate when criticized. I know of one person, whenever he was criticized would sit people down from ministry.
- using the Word to make your point rather than making your points from the Word.
- by equating your suggestions with the Bible and binding people’s consciences.
- to command obedience where the Word does not command it.

That’s how to rule harshly.

## CONCLUSION

Brothers, we must realize pride is at the root of every abuse of authority—in the home, in the workplace, in the church, everywhere. We must also realize humility is the key to avoiding it. Surely this is Peter’s point in 1 Peter 5:5—“Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

To be sure, many will mistake the use of authority for its abuse. In those moments:

- pray
- show a deep and genuine humility by listening to how your actions might have been perceived, even wrongly perceived
- lean on your fellow elders
- teach congregationalism as an insurance against authoritarian leadership
- truly live *among* your people through regular visits and conversation that yield a general awareness of their spiritual well-being.

There’s more to say on this subject, but I’ll leave you with my own exhortation fueled by the words of Peter: “So 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 . . . use your authority to empower others.”

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## EDITOR’S NOTE:

This article is an edited version of Shai’s talk from First Five Years 2016.

# Redeeming Authority for Those Who've Only Known Its Abuse



Mez McConnell

**W**hen I was a young boy, the word “authority” was synonymous with the word “abuse.” My guardians, be they Foster-Carers or Children’s Home staff, abused their power and authority in so many different ways. As I grew older, the police became my authoritarian hate figures, many of whom abused their powers, too. Often I would be stopped on the streets and searched with no warrant other than a police officer’s shrugging admittance, “Because I can, son.”

School wasn’t any better. As soon as I felt able, I rebelled completely. I went from a A-student to an, “I couldn’t care less” student almost overnight. My rebellion wasn’t borne out of a frustrated inability to learn (I was bright) but out of a perverse delight in rebelling against any and all authority figures in my life.

As a child, I suffered bona fide torture at the hands of adults. In response I tried my best to behave—to be “good,” to toe the line. It didn’t work. Still I would be mercilessly assaulted. When I responded



by misbehaving and becoming uncooperative the abuse continued unabated. I soon realized it made no difference whether I behaved or not. Those who had authority over me abused it regardless.

As I now write these words as a pastor of an evangelical church in an inner city area of Edinburgh, Scotland, I know little has changed. Abuse is as commonplace here as buying milk from the local supermarket.

## ABUSIVE PASTORS AND ABUSED CHURCH MEMBERS

Yet as I read the Scripture, one thing is clear. Pastors are called to shepherd the sheep, not abuse them. That needs repeating constantly, particularly within the context of an evangelical grapevine (read: internet) awash with horror stories of abusive pastors and churches hanging poor, innocent members out to dry. There are bloggers and so-called discernment sites scanning the evangelical cyber world—CIA like—for keywords such as “authority” or “discipline” in an effort to protect the innocent masses from ecclesiastical terrorism.

And who can blame them? It’s not like the stories of mismanaged discipline issues in churches are a rarity. With the downfall of high-profile pastors in recent years for “abusive patterns” of behavior, they have plenty of ammunition with which to arm themselves.

But here’s the question: as a pastor who has also suffered abuse, how do I respond to the abused sufferers and anti-authoritarian people in my care in a way that’s biblical, loving, and true to God’s revealed Word?

Here are six ways:

### **1. My starting point has to be Scripture, not my personal experience.**

Deeply wounded as I may be, the Word is perfect, sure, and true. It’s the abuse of it by people that is at fault. The Word should

be trusted 100 percent. God, regardless of how I feel, has my best interests at heart.

**2. We must teach our people that submission to authority is a God-honoring act.**

In Romans 13:1–2, Paul tells us we’re all subject to authorities whether we like it or not. The context there is civil government. But in Hebrews 13:17, we read that church members should submit to those in leadership over them in. Therefore, the question for the Christian is not, ‘Should we submit to our leaders?’ but, ‘How do we submit to them in a way that is biblical and wise?’ I’ve checked and there’s not a pass on this for those of us who come from abused backgrounds.

**3. We must avoid the “pendulum effect.”**

The tendency of those of us who have suffered abuse is to respond in a completely opposite direction. So, for example, because I was badly beaten as a child, I make the decision not to effect any discipline in my own children’s lives. While a reasonable human response to my abuse, it’s not a biblical position when I read in Proverbs 13:24, “Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them.” Then there are churches that shrink back from authority so as to not be seen as abusive. This in itself is a form of abuse. People are allowed to behave and do what they like without any fear of reprimand. Picture a house of errant teenagers being allowed to behave as they please without any discipline. We have to be careful to avoid extremes. We should not avoid exercising loving authority any more than we should exercise it excessively.

**4. One of the best challenges to pastoral excess and abuse is a strong eldership.**

For those leaders who love to quote Hebrews 13:17, 1 Peter 5:3

reminds them of their responsibility in how they are to exercise authority. A strong eldership guards against the one-man band approach of so many churches. A dominant, unchecked personality leading the church can, and has been, a recipe for disaster. It leaves us open to abusive patterns of authority. In our small church, we have six elders, and the other five act as a good failsafe against my strong personality and sinful inclinations. I have lost many a vote on my eldership, which, while frustrating, is good for my humility. I've also been talked out of making many poor decisions! Without a plurality of leaders, it's far too easy for strong personalities such as mine to run roughshod over the local church. It also guards against personal animosity. We'd be lying if we said we absolutely love everyone in our churches. Some people frustrate the absolute life out of us and so having an eldership mitigates against treating them unfavorably. But, you, say aren't elders just as open to abusing their authority? Of course they are.

### **5. That's why the best challenge to an abusive eldership is healthy, biblical congregationalism.**

In our church we have the following process when it comes to matters of discipline:

- We expect 95% of problems between members to be settled in accordance with Matthew 18 principles, before any elder even hears about it.
- If it cannot be resolved one-on-one, then take a mature Christian with you.
- Serious cases come to the elders.
- If it cannot be resolved by us, then we take the fifth step of going to the church members.

These steps aren't a perfect failsafe against error, but they do seriously mitigate the chance of pastoral and leadership abuse in

the lives of our people. Above all, as pastors and elders we should admit our fallibilities. I know pastors who think it's a sign of weakness to admit our failings and uncertainty to the membership. On the contrary, I think it installs confidence in the leaders of a church. When we come to the congregation for serious cases of church discipline, we're holding ourselves and our decisions up to the wider scrutiny of the whole body. Again, at every point, this mitigates against either heavy-handedness or pastoral cowardice.

### **6. We must offer worthwhile examples to others.**

Those of us who have known abuse must now, in Christ, work to be good and faithful husbands, who love our wives and deal with our children well. Those of us from broken homes need good models of leadership and authority in every area of our lives, both inside and outside the church. In our home, we have an open-door policy, which sees guests at our table for every meal—sometimes even living in our home. We can teach many of the principles above from the Word but, more than that, those who have experienced abusive authority need to *see* living illustrations of how family members handle conflict in a way that's biblical, loving, *and* authoritative.

### **CONCLUSION**

Much of the abuse I see in the lives of the people among whom I minister is borne out of neglect—a neglect of parental responsibility and a failure to set clear rules and boundaries. The answer for the church is not to neglect our duty out of a misguided sense of love, but to ensure that when we do lead, we do so sensitively, lovingly, firmly, and well.

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# The Abuse of Authority in Prosperity Gospel Churches



DA Horton

**T**hroughout the duration of my service in the pastorate, I've regularly encountered believers bearing scars from wounds caused by church leaders. On a few occasions, these grievances occurred because the person ran to escape accountability for their sinful actions. But most of the time, these injuries happened because of their former leaders' abuse of authority.

In almost every story, I saw a common thread: this abuse of authority took place in prosperity gospel churches.

A few years ago, I wrote an article called "Nine Marks of a Prosperity Gospel Church." My comments on the last mark, biblical church leadership, struck a chord with more than a few readers who contacted me about their stories. These conversations—both in-person and online—grieved my heart deeply.

It became clear there's not been enough reflection on the abuse of authority in prosperity gospel churches. I hope this article will jumpstart a worthwhile discussion that will ultimately

recalibrate hearts toward a biblical understanding of authority as a good gift that God intends to be expressed in the context of a healthy local church.

In my assessment, there are three convictions in the hearts of abusive leaders that, in their minds, justify their abusive actions. These convictions are an over-realized eschatology, an improper interpretation and application of Scripture, and a prideful heart that desires self-worship.

After I unpack each of these convictions, I'll conclude with a biblical rationale that considers the role of authority in the life of the believer, focusing on three of its God-intended sources: our sovereign God, the Scriptures, and biblically qualified under-shepherds.

### OVER-REALIZED ESCHATOLOGY

Leaders of prosperity gospel churches proclaim an over-realized eschatology in their podcasts, sermons, and television programs. An over-realized eschatology is simply an insistence that God will answer fully in the present what he intends to fulfill fully in the future. For example, a pastor with an over-realized eschatology might teach God has *promised* the Christian—starting now—that he will put an end to all their financial, physical, or emotional difficulty.

Often, they'll mishandle texts such as Proverbs 18:21, Jeremiah 29:11, Isaiah 53:5, Malachi 3:10, 2 Corinthians 8:9, or James 4:2. They'll corral these passages together to form proof texts that allegedly support the idea of heaven's riches being received in the lives of Christians today. When leaders of prosperity gospel churches thrive financially, it's often attributed to their faithful walking in the promises of Abraham (Gal. 3:14) and used as a model for their followers who are then invited to share in similar blessings . . . but only if they serve their leader faithfully.

The implications of this teaching damage people in at least three ways. First, the doctrine is believed to be biblically-based if the leader financially prospers. Second, members who aren't living prosperous and healthy lives are assumed to be lacking in faith or failing to pay the right amount of tithes/offerings or living in rebellion against leadership. Third, it provides warrant for leaders to pursue material gain through any means possible (legal or illegal) in order to prosper.

### MISINTERPRETATION AND APPLICATION OF SCRIPTURE

Fundamentally, an over-realized eschatology is built on misinterpretation—and it results in a collapse of faith when trials come. To better understand how an over-realized eschatology relates to an abuse of authority, it would do us well to work through the popular phrase, “touch not the Lord’s anointed” in 1 Chronicles 16:22 (cf. Psalm 105:13–15). When the sins or false teachings of leaders in prosperity gospel churches are in conflict with 1 Timothy 3:1–7 or Titus 1:6–16 and members question them or attempt to hold them accountable, *touch not the Lord’s anointed* is often the rebuke shared by leaders or their armor-bearers. The application of this passage offers church leadership an impregnable hedge of protection against accountability or discipline.

In context, the words of David are meant to praise to God for his sovereign protection of Israel’s patriarchs from physical harm in order to preserve his holy nation. This passage is most certainly *not* creating a special class of God’s “anointed” who are exempt from biblical and congregational accountability. David himself was not exempt, as 2 Samuel 12 makes clear. In addition, 2 Corinthians 1:20–22 and 1 John 2:20–27 identify the Lord’s anointed as every believer the Holy Spirit indwells, not church leaders alone. Lastly, the prosperity gospel idea of leaders being exempt from accountability and discipline is in direct conflict with 1 Timothy 5:19–21.

## A HEART THAT DESIRES SELF-WORSHIP

Since every human heart is attracted and often addicted to idolatry, it's foolish for church leaders to consider themselves immune to this struggle. However, I've found leaders in prosperity gospel churches uncover their desire for worship when they employ a savior's mentality toward their people. I've seen this in situations where they posture themselves as God's sole agent of distribution when it comes to blessing and direction. Members are then coaxed to seek out their leader, not Jesus, as their mediator in times of need.

This teaching gets woven into the tapestry of ministry through the creation and exploitation of the pseudo-office of armor-bearer. Prosperity gospel leaders build cohorts of disciples known as armor-bearers who are expected to submit to the demands of the pastor in order to be a blessing to the "man/woman of God." Demands for the purpose of ministry may range from personal massages, sharing meals, paying bills, or rendering words of praise after the leader has preached. As a reward for the armor bearers' "faithfulness," they often receive promises of sharing the pastors' mantle when he's promoted in the kingdom/denomination, greater ministry opportunities, or even an inheritance of the church.

If an armor-bearer refuses or is unable to complete a requested task, the leader may guilt-trip him or her, set them against a more "faithful" armor bearer, remove them from the cohort, or even question their allegiance to Jesus. So, out of guilt and a desire to be in a right standing with the leader, which implies a right standing with God, these armor-bearers either comply or leave the church. Sadly, this departure often means leaving the local church altogether.

## A PASTOR'S BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Too often, I've sat across a table from wounded hearts as they describe narratives similar to those above. Shortly after our initial



meeting, alongside my fellow elders, I'll begin walking these people through a process of biblical and theological rehabilitation. In most cases, I start with an introduction to a biblical understanding of authority—how its voiced by God, how it's communicated to us through his Word, and how biblically qualified leadership in the local church plays a role in all this. More than anything else, I want them to see the baseline, that God himself is our perfect model of authority.

Because many Christians have earthly father wounds due to absenteeism or abuse. It's wise to carefully shepherd hearts by presenting everyone with a gospel-saturated view of God's attributes. Teach them that Christ's finished work projects God the Father as being both just and the justifier (Rom. 3:26), who faithfully extends his perfect love of us (1 John 3:1–4), and therefore his sovereign authority over our lives can be trusted (Eph. 1:11) because it results in our good and his glory (Rom. 8:28).

Next, remind them that our perfect and loving heavenly Father is incapable of lying (Num. 23:19; Heb. 6:18) so we can fully trust what he's revealed in his Word (1 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Pet. 1:19–21), which provides the voice of authority about what we believe and how we live.

After this, walk them through particular authority structures God has placed in society for order and stewardship; parents/guardians (Eph. 6:1–4; Col. 3:20), society/government (Rom. 13; 1 Tim. 2:1–5; 1 Pet. 2:13–17), school/work (Rom 12:9–21; Col. 3:23), and the local church (1 Thess. 5:12–13; Heb. 13:7–19).

Then take time to show the submission of Jesus to the Father's good and right authority (Mk. 14:36; John 6:38); as in many things, he serves as the model for every believer. After this, show them how Jesus himself has received all authority from the Father and that he now calls his church to obedience (Mt. 28:16–20).

Lastly, patiently express the headship of Jesus over the church (Mt. 16:18; Eph. 1:22–23), highlighting the ways he gen-

erously distributes gifts to her (Eph. 4:11–16) in the form of leaders who are called to equip the saints for the work of ministry, while also living within the framework of qualification (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:6–16).

## CONCLUSION

At this point, Lord willing, the relationship between an under-shepherd and a church member will have been developed and deepened. This enables the leaders' nurture and care to more likely lead the people into a corrected and biblical understanding of authority. There's no greater evidence of trustworthy leadership than leaders who have a high view of the biblical qualifications and a low-view of self.

In closing, if you've been wounded by abusive church leadership, it's my prayer that you won't throw out the local church and all its God-intended benefits due to your previous abusive experience. Instead, I pray you'll seek out healthy churches with leaders who are biblically qualified to shepherd you into a place of spiritual health.

May the fruit of this process provide you with an enjoyment of God's grace; may you mature in your walk with Christ, as you link arms alongside fellow members and leaders of your healthy local church.

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# How Scripture's Authority Shapes What We Do On Sunday Morning



Brian Davis

**T**he most wonderful, important, and special day of the week is the day we gather with the Lord's people to worship God. We humbly and happily do not neglect to meet together and encourage one another, as it is our habit of doing, all the more as we see the Day drawing near (Heb. 10:25).

But how do we decide what to do on this day? How do we, as a church, decide what we should do when we gather together to worship on Sunday?<sup>9</sup>

Well, quite simply, *we* don't decide. *God* does—and God has. He has decided how we are to worship him and instructed us in his Word.

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<sup>9</sup> We know and understand that there are churches prevented from gathering regularly because of persecution. This is not intended to discourage them. This article is written from a context and to a context that assumes an unhindered freedom to living peaceful and quiet lives, godly and dignified in every way.

It's clear through a plain reading of the Bible there are wrong ways to worship God. Not every way is right, and not every offering is one God accepts. Cain, Achan, Nadab and Abihu, Ananias and Sapphira—all these accounts serve as loud reminders there are ways to worship that God rejects.

The book of Revelation begins with such conclusions, as the Lord Jesus walks through his churches and assesses them. He doesn't assess the churches by the hottest trend or the results of the latest Barna Group poll. No, Jesus judges his churches according to his own wisdom (Rev. 2–3).

What we consistently see is there are faithful ways to worship God and unfaithful ways to attempt to worship God. How are we to know the difference? How could we obey, unless we're told how? How could we abstain, unless we are warned?

We shouldn't search articles (even this one) before we search the Scriptures. God's ways are not our ways, and his thoughts are not our thoughts. God's Word offers God's wisdom concerning God's worship. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and for training in righteousness, that the people of God may be complete and equipped for every good work.(2 Tim. 3:16–17).

Is this not what we are seeking from the Lord during our gatherings? To know and hear from God, to be taught, to be reproofed, corrected, trained, built up, and equipped? To be a church the Lord looks favorably upon, we shouldn't be asking what do *we want* to do, but what has *God* said we *should do* in his Word? Hear the words of Isaiah: “But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” (Isa. 66:2).

If God has called us to pastor, he hasn't called us to implement our personal vision for the church, but to implement his revealed will for the church. Of course there will be differences in how these things happen based on the men who are leading their

congregations. However, all of those differences should be happily governed and subordinately positioned under the Word of God.

Recall the Great Commission: “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:18–20). It’s interesting that so many people overly personalize this text. Many act as if his aim here is merely addressed to a person, not to us as a people. Many seem to think this only applies to personal holiness (the way we are to live as individuals) and not to our corporate holiness (how we ought to live as a church). But this is not so. The primary audience of the Bible is not a single person but God’s gathered people. We express his final authority when we express allegiance to what he has commanded in his Word.

This is why we shouldn’t do things on Sunday the Bible hasn’t called us to do. To do so suggests we can improve on what God has spoken. We should be reading the Bible publicly because the Word of God says so (1 Tim. 4:13). We should be preaching and teaching the Bible because the Word of God says so (2 Tim. 4:1–2). We should be singing the truths of the Bible because the Word of God says so (Col. 3:16). We should be partaking of the Lord’s Supper and when appropriate baptizing people because the Word of God says so (1 Cor. 11:18–26; Matt 28:19). We should be praying what God would have us to pray because the Word of God says so (Matt. 6:9–13, 1 Tim. 2:1–8). We should be giving, encouraging, serving, and gathering together physically—all because the Word of God says so (Heb. 10:25; 1 Pet. 4:10–11).

As people come to our churches, we can have confidence we are worshipping the true God in a true way—in spirit and in *truth*. This confidence cannot rest in the wisdom of man or the bright

ideas of the pastor. This confidence is necessarily tethered to our ability to worship God according to the Word of God.

“How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word” (Ps. 119:9). If this is true for us as individuals, does it not also apply to us as a gathering of individuals on Sunday?

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# The Sword and the Shepherd's Staff: Reporting Sexual Abuse to the Authorities



Travis Wussow

Let's get the easy part out of the way up front: In almost every American state, you do not have a choice whether to report information about abuse or neglect of a child; you *must* report. To take the Texas formulation (I happen to be licensed to practice law there), if you have “cause to believe” that “a child’s physical or mental health or welfare has been adversely affected by abuse or neglect,” you must immediately make a report. And this is true for every “person,” from friends to childcare workers to pastors.

What is a “cause to believe”? What does “adversely affected” mean? Why are both “health” and “welfare” mentioned?

The Texas law doesn’t provide these answers. Why? The short answer is to encourage reporting with broad statutory language. When in doubt, report. Reporting requirements vary somewhat from state to state, but this general rule mostly holds true across the United States. Indeed, many states, including Texas, have even

higher reporting requirements for professionals working with children. If nothing else, you should consult with a local lawyer or government official to determine what your reporting requirements are in your jurisdiction.

But reporting may ruin a family's reputation within the community if Child Protective Services pays a visit to the home. Reporting may cause a fragile family situation to come crumbling down. Reporting will ruin the life of a repentant person who made a "very minor" mistake "just once." Or reporting seems like an extreme response if you aren't sure how credible the information you possess is.

These are important considerations, to be sure, but in answering them, pastors need to understand where their role begins and ends. In situations of abuse of children, there are two issues at play: pastoral care and justice. Pastors must be able to separate the two and let the church carry out its function while stepping aside to let the state to carry out its own role.

### THE SWORD OF THE STATE AND THE STAFF OF THE SHEPHERD

God's purpose in establishing government over us is to rule and govern societies and nations—and, in a fallen sense, at least on this side of the eschaton, reward good behavior and punish bad.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he



is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. (Romans 13:1–5 ESV)

Notice that Paul describes the government as an “avenger who carries out God's wrath.” When the government prosecutes criminal behavior, this is part of God's design in setting forth punishments for wrong.

When a child is abused, ultimate trust is broken; power is abused for evil ends. There is forgiveness for this sin, just as there is forgiveness for all sin by the blood of Jesus Christ.

But justice is still demanded on behalf of the victim. God himself demands this justice, and he has given the power to administer this justice to the state, not to the church. The role of the church is to shepherd the flock through the trauma; the role of the state is to bring justice.

When reporting sexual abuse, pastors must, as a function of their role in shepherding the flock, consider the impact of the report on their congregation as a whole. But it is not the pastor's role to adjudicate the dispute; the pastor's function is to walk with his people through the implications created by the state's justice system.

And so part of what we need to recognize in this is that if the church decides to treat abuse as an internal matter and not report the abuse to the authorities, the church has effectively picked up the sword given to the state. They have hidden the wrong and delayed justice. Determining guilt and innocence before the law is not a matter God has entrusted to the church.

One quick caveat: There will be times when the state interferes with the parent-child relationship, or even the pastor-member relationship with the sword in a way that is unjust or contrary to Scripture. Certain northern European states seem to have an agenda

aimed at preventing parents from raising godly children. Of course, in those cases, there is a place for civil disobedience, as we must obey God, not man. Whether we have arrived at such a situation is not a decision a pastor should make alone, but rather very carefully and with the wisdom of many counselors. These issues are well beyond the scope of this article, and especially to the extent this article is focused on sexual and physical abuse, a situation where civil disobedience would be warranted is difficult to imagine.

### WIELDING THE STAFF AS THE STATE WIELDS THE SWORD

Reporting abuse always creates complex pastoral situations that require careful, wise care by church leaders and elders. Actually reporting information of abuse and neglect is only the beginning of a long and messy process. But in reporting sexual abuse, pastors should recognize which tool they possess, the shepherd's staff.

First, remember the pastor's role is not to adjudicate right and wrong but simply to report what he knows. This may mean phrasing things as "he said that such-and-such happened" rather than "such-and-such happened." This may seem a minor distinction, but this careful phrasing may help you remember that you are not deciding guilt or innocence but simply reporting what you know.

Second, let the individuals involved know that you are obligated to report and advise them to the best of your ability of the implications of the report. Your report may set off a chain of events over which you will have little control. If you're not concerned the abuser will flee, this notice may give the abuser the opportunity to turn him- or herself in to the authorities. Your communication to them may be a means of grace, allowing the abuser to come to terms with the consequences of his or her actions.

### WIELDING THE STAFF FAITHFULLY

Above all, the call to the pastor is to be faithful. Sexual abuse creates among the deepest kinds of brokenness. The situation you're

presented with may not turn out the way it should. But yet again, it is *not* your responsibility to adjudicate guilt or innocence; that responsibility belongs to the state. It's also not your responsibility to redeem the broken situation; that's the work of God. The call on your life is simply to faithfully care for the families entrusted to you.

Sexual abuse cases, particularly when both the abuser and the victim are from the same church, have a way of dividing the flock against each other. When the abuser is repentant, when should grace be extended? What does grace even look like? What does supporting the family of the victim look like? How should grace and forgiveness be extended?

It's possible the way you handle the situation leaves few in your flock fully satisfied. But remember the outcome is the purview of the Lord; your call is to be faithful.

As pastors, we don't have the authority to determine guilt or innocence or prison sentences. But the role of the pastor is in many ways much more difficult, much more dependent on the facts, and will require a greater measure of wisdom and grace. Dedicate yourself to these issues faithfully, and allow the state to serve its God-given role.

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# A Pastoral Response to Millennial Autonomy



Kevin McKay

A few weeks ago I was sitting down with a church member who owns a start-up. He shares a common challenge for many businesses today: retaining millennials. Millennials value autonomy in the workplace. It's not that they don't want to work with a team, but they want autonomy when it comes to doing what they do, when they want to, and who they do it with. They want a place where work and play aren't separated, where their weekly toiling also offers a sense of meaning and purpose. And most of all, they want work to be a place centered around relationships—where the boss isn't just a boss, but a friend. If that's not happening, then millennials probably aren't sticking around.

This demand for autonomy might create problems for others. But more than that, it creates a tension within the individual, namely, an often unfulfilled longing to be a part of something bigger than oneself. As David Wells says, "The self was never intended to carry this weight."

So, how does the church care for this generation of people? After all, the church is well-equipped to meet this challenge without

needing to learn a new strategy. We simply must lean on biblical practices that serve every human being in every generation.

### MAKE MEMBERSHIP MEANINGFUL

Entrepreneur Kevin O'Rourke says that millennials view their workplace as more of a passion than an obligation. Money isn't as important as meaning. They want their work and their consumerism tied to a good cause. Well, is there a greater cause than what Jesus himself is doing in this world? Of course there isn't. Yet too often, Christians don't know that membership in the church is tied to the kingdom of God, to Jesus' work in the world. Sadly, too often membership looks like nothing more than a name in a defunct database. Whether they're a church member or not, it doesn't make a difference in their life as a Christian.

Who wants to be a part of an organization like that? What's even the point?

But Jesus makes membership in the church a much bigger deal. He's given the gathered church his authority to preach the gospel and live as the people of the gospel. It's a call to action that can't be done alone. For example, if a brother or sister falls into sin, a member feels a sense of responsibility to begin the steps of church discipline (Matt. 18:15) by going to them and speaking the truth in love. Church members should feel a desire—and even an *obligation*—to give of their finances, to gather together, to share the gospel, and to do good works in the world together. This is often the stuff of church covenants, because by doing these things local churches not only testify to the truth of the saving gospel to the world, they also preserve and strengthen the church as she waits for the return of Christ. Churches help Christians, including and perhaps especially millennials, by giving them the responsibility of church membership—a responsibility to which many will respond wonderfully. So . . .

## DON'T MAKE MEMBERSHIP OPTIONAL

Millennials have grown up with an unbelievable array of options for every part of their life. But as psychologist Barry Schwartz has argued, the more options we have the more likely we are to do nothing. It's why a couple ends up staying home when they can't decide on a place to eat.

I wonder if this is why so many people remain consistent attendees rather than committed members. We design our churches for the consumer rather than the committed Christ follower. Come when you want. Get what you want.

This philosophy of ministry might attract millennials and some of them might even stay for a while. But the Bible is clear that it's a contradiction in terms to say you follow Jesus while remaining an autonomous (and often anonymous) Christian. If we can't commit ourselves to God's people and love those who are different than us, even when it's inconvenient, then perhaps we aren't following Jesus at the most basic level (John 13:35).

In other words, offering a lot of options for connecting with the church without committing to the church won't help people spiritually—and it certainly won't help them respond well to godly authority. If someone can't submit themselves to the rest of the body in a local church, then we shouldn't give them the illusion that they belong to the body of Christ. They should feel like they're outside the body and that the way to obey many of Christ's commands is to join a church and submit to its authority. So . . .

## MAKE BEING A MEMBER EXCLUSIVE

When trying to discern the pastoral responses to millennial autonomy, this sounds counterintuitive. Don't millennials value tolerance and inclusiveness? But part of what makes it possible to commit yourself to a church in a meaningful way is by being able to clearly identify who's *in* and who's *out*. It's to know that being

inside the church comes with unique privileges and responsibilities that are not for those outside the church.

We must make this distinction clear. Churches can do this by faithfully practicing church discipline, that is, by withholding the Lord's Supper from church members who are given to a particular unrepentant sin. In 1 Corinthians 5:2–8, Paul tells the Corinthians to put an immoral brother out of their fellowship. He implies they are to do this by barring him from the Lord's Supper.

There are still other ways to make these inside-outside distinctions. For example, we can hold meetings for members only or have a directory that includes only members. Whatever we decide, exclusivity is part of what makes membership meaningful to those who are part of it. And making the distinction clear helps Christians know who they're committing to live out their faith with, according to his commands. So . . .

### **PREACH THE GOODNESS OF CHRIST'S AUTHORITY**

Millennials have a different view of authority figures. They'll sometimes describe their parents as their biggest cheerleaders and friends, but not as their authority. But in the gospel of Christ, it's not one or the other. The gospel of Jesus is about the King who is deserving of our worship. Every knee will bow to him as Lord. He has the authority to lay down his life and take it up again (John 10:18). He's a friend of sinners. He's coming back to rule over his kingdom, and all those who are in it will enjoy everlasting peace and joy under his Lordship. That's a message that should resonate with both millennials and every human heart.

Jesus' humble authority should be experienced in the church. Pastors should watch over the church for the spiritual good of every member, because they're men who are themselves under authority. And members should humbly submit to this authority for their own personal good (Hebrews 13:17). The authority of Jesus makes the authority of a good church a great source of joy

and blessing. We shouldn't be afraid to embrace it in the church's ministry, especially in our preaching.

## CONCLUSION

There is, of course, the potential to abuse each of the above points. We must remember that the church herself is under the authority of Christ, and we can't bind the conscience where Scripture doesn't. Some people will respond to this call to submission differently depending on where they are on their spiritual journey. So even if they choose not to stick around for what we think are immature reasons, it's our responsibility to bear with them in patience and love. By God's grace, perhaps they'll stay—or perhaps they'll flourish elsewhere.

Ultimately, the church gives millennials the joys of intimate relationship and meaning, but not in ways most might naturally think. It comes to them through commitment, exclusivity, and even authority used well.

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# A Healthy Church Member Is a Humble Follower



Thabiti Anyabwile

**T**he health of a local church may ride exclusively on the membership's response to the church's leadership. How the congregation receives or rejects its leaders has a direct effect on the possibilities of faithful ministry and church health. Does a congregation appreciate and accept sound preaching? Will they trust and follow a leader in difficult or unclear situations? Do they rally behind or tear apart the leadership when plans and ideas fail?

In the final analysis, church members are the people who generally make or break a local church. And making or breaking a church has a lot to do with the membership's attitudes and actions toward its leaders.

So no serious attempt to define a healthy church member can neglect reflecting on the interaction between church members and church leaders. And not surprisingly, the inspired Word of God provides ample instruction regarding the *attitudes* and *actions* of church members who wish to contribute to the health of their local congregations by following the leadership of the church.

## A HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBERS' ATTITUDE TOWARD LEADERSHIP

At least three attitudes characterize healthy church members when it comes to following a local church's leaders.

1. *Honors the elders.* Several passages of Scripture instruct church members to honor the elders and leaders of the congregation. For example, 1 Timothy 5:17 tells us, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching." What does such double honor include? The apostle Paul brings attention to two things in the following verses. In verse 18, honoring the elders includes caring for their financial and physical needs. A congregation and a member that honor its leadership provide appropriate and sufficient wages for its leaders, particularly those whose full-time labor is ministry to the body.

In verse 19, the apostle indicates that honoring our leaders includes protecting their reputations. We are not to "admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses." The apostle understands better than anyone how the ministry is open to charges, criticisms, and complaints from outside and inside the church. A healthy church member will help to shelter the shepherd from unwarranted slings and arrows. Rumors and backbitings die at the ears of a healthy church member who refuses to give consideration to unedifying and uncorroborated tales.

A healthy church member honors the elder's office. He or she esteems it highly, is thankful for it, and respects those who serve the Lord's people as elders. We honor our pastors because on the day of the Lord they shall be our boast (2 Cor. 1:14).

2. *"Opens heart" to the leaders.* The honor and respect a church member gives an elder is not the distant and official honor a soldier gives a commanding officer. Coupled with the honor due a shepherd is an open hearted love. Repeatedly, Paul called the Co-

rinthian church to open their hearts to him as one who cared for them spiritually.

We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also (2 Cor. 6:11-13).

There should be a sweet exchange of affection between pastor and congregation. As they live, grow, and labor together, their hearts are to open increasingly wide to each other. A healthy church member does not “withhold” his affection from the pastor; rather, he gives it freely and liberally.

A healthy church member doesn’t want to hear his or her faithful pastor plead like the apostle did with the Corinthians,

Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to love together (2 Cor. 7:2-3).

A healthy member first gives himself to the Lord and then to the minister of the Lord, knowing that this is God’s will (2 Cor. 8:5). Such a member sees how the faithful pastor will spend himself for the body in love. And he would be ashamed to hear the pastor ask, “If I love you more, will you love me less?” (2 Cor. 12:15). Unrequited love is fit for Shakespearean tragedy, not the local church. Our rejoicing in and love for our pastors should “refresh their hearts in the Lord” (Philemon 20).

3. *Is teachable.* A healthy church member should also have a teachable spirit. A teachable spirit evidences humility of heart and a desire to grow in Christ. Without it, a people grow stiff-necked and incorrigible.

The leader's job may be boiled down to one task: teaching. If a member or any significant portion of the membership proves unteachable, the shepherd's task becomes a burden, even undoable, since it's opposing him at this most essential point. Writing to Timothy, Paul provides wonderful instruction for pastors which contains within it good instruction for members as well. Speaking of the elder, Paul writes,

The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will (2 Tim. 2:24-26).

Several things from this passage are useful for church members to observe. First, the pastor's instruction is meant to be gentle, kind, and for our good. We should not take sinful advantage of that God-ordained disposition. Rather, we should accept that kind instruction as a rebuke and a call to repentance. A healthy church member doesn't mistake godly kindness for weakness in a pastor, but uses the occasion to examine his or her own heart for areas needing repentance. Second, we should recognize how easy it is to "oppose" the pastor as he instructs us. As a regular part of our spiritual life, we should ask ourselves, "Am I in any way opposing the teaching of the pastor?" Third, we should pray for knowledge of the truth, clear-mindedness, and protection from the devil's schemes whenever we discover even a kernel of opposition to pastoral instruction. The pastor watches over our soul as a man who must give an account to God; we should then trust and accept his leadership joyfully as a gift from God for our everlasting benefit. Be teachable.

## A HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBER'S ACTIONS TOWARD LEADERSHIP

In addition to these basic attitudes or dispositions, there are some specific actions a healthy church member will take in order to effectively follow the leadership of a local church.

1. *Patiently participates in the selection of leaders.* Perhaps the most important decision a congregation makes—assuming a congregational polity—is the selection of its leaders. By choosing leaders, a congregation sets the spiritual tone and direction of the church, sometimes for generations. Perhaps this is why the apostles instructed the early church to look for spiritual qualities and maturity in its leaders (Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim. 3). Selecting a leader is to be done with patience and prayerful deliberation. “Lay hands on no man hastily” is the apostle’s instruction to Timothy (1 Tim. 5:22a). The first deacons were to be “full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3). Discerning these qualities requires prayer, observation, and patience. And if the Lord’s church is to be healthy, church members must call and ordain leaders who are spiritually minded and mature in Christ.

Healthy church members do not overlook the importance of this essential task. They may invite the prospective leader and his family to lunch or dinner in order to know him better. They will want to hear more about the man’s testimony, about his desire to serve in a leadership capacity, and about his previous ministry in churches. Some churches allow two months between a man’s nomination for leadership and the actual vote in order for members to participate in precisely this way.

2. *Obeys and submits to leaders.* Here’s a good reason to prayerfully and patiently participate in the recognition of church leaders: a healthy church member must obey and submit to her or his leaders. “Obey” and “submit” are not only “bad words” at wed-

dings, they're "bad words" to many church members. Yet the Bible couldn't be clearer: "Obey your leaders and submit to them" (Heb. 13:17). Our obedience is to make their work "a joy, not a burden." And our obedience redounds to our benefit, since it would "be of no advantage" for us to call men as leaders and then disobey them. A healthy church member orders himself under the leaders of the congregation as a soldier orders himself in the rank and file beneath a military general. We are to joyfully, eagerly, and completely submit to our leaders for our good, their good, and the good of the entire body.

3. *Follows the leaders' example.* One reason the Lord appoints men to leadership in the church is to provide a flesh and blood example of faithful, godly living to the congregation. Our leaders are the "motion picture" of following Jesus. They are called to be an example in everything (1 Tim. 4:12; 1 Pet. 5:3). That's why the apostle Paul says, "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us" (Phil. 3:17). A healthy church member patterns his or her life after the godly lifestyle of the elders of the church. We are to follow our leaders' example with the expectation of conformity to Christ.

For many in our day, this very idea of imitation sounds cultish. There are too many personality cults where people parrot all that the celebrity pastor says or does. We're correct to be concerned with such an unbiblical notion of example setting and mentorship. Yet the Bible's picture of following the pastor's example points to genuine godliness in "speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity" (1 Tim. 4:12) by doing what is good (Titus 2:7). Pastors are called to be such models, and healthy church members wisely follow their pattern of holiness.

4. *Prays for leaders.* Given all that church leaders must do and contend with, can you think of a more important thing to do than

to pray for them? Even the apostle Paul understood his need for the saints' faithful prayer:

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak (Col. 4:2-4; see also Eph. 6:19-20).

We should pray for our leaders' boldness, clarity, and consistency with the gospel message, and opportunity for them to proclaim Christ. Healthy church members are devoted to prayer on behalf of their leaders. They heed Jesus' exhortation to pray and not give up (Luke 18:1), and they do that on behalf of their shepherds.

In our local church, a faithful band of members meets every Tuesday night for the purpose of praying for leadership. Weekly they solicit prayer requests and updates on previous requests. When they meet, they lift up all kinds of prayers for the personal, public, and ministry lives of the elders. God has produced great fruit in our body through their prayers.

5. *Supports outside ministry and interaction of leaders.* This is perhaps the least obvious of the actions that a healthy church member takes in following leadership. There is a great tendency among church members to be fairly possessive of their pastors—"he's *our* pastor." There are positive aspects to this possessiveness. It shows, for example, an open hearted attachment to the shepherds.

However, this possessiveness can become selfishness if the congregation refuses to support a pastor's involvement in ministry outside the local congregation. The persons most often hurt in such selfishness is the pastor himself, who, without outside stim-

ulation and refreshment from fellow pastors and leaders, tends to dry and shrivel on the vine. A healthy church member contributes to the leaders' ongoing health and vigor in the ministry by encouraging participation in outside conferences, speaking opportunities, and fellowship with other church leaders.

The Bible provides ample illustration of one congregation's support of another. A local church's generosity to other churches is commended in 2 Corinthians 9:13. And such generosity, when it takes the form of "loaning" a shepherd in ministry to others, hopefully expands the regions in which the gospel is proclaimed (2 Cor. 10:15-16). A healthy church member wants to see the gospel advanced and wants to contribute to the health of other congregations if possible. Supporting a leader's outside ministry is one way to fulfill this desire.

## CONCLUSION

Leadership in the local church is established by God for the blessing of his people. However, for leadership to be effective, it needs to be encouraged and supported by the members of the church. Many faithful men have shipwrecked on the rocky shoals of incorrigible and resistant members. It ought not to be so among God's people. Rather, healthy members of a local church should strive and encourage others to strive to follow their leaders with wide open hearts, eager obedience, and joyful submission.

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## EDITOR'S NOTE:

This is an adapted excerpt from Thabiti Anyabwile's book *What Is a Healthy Church Member?* (Crossway, 2008). Reprinted by permission.



# Church Membership: A Single Woman's Perspective



Chelsea Patterson

**W**hen I moved to Washington D.C. over three years ago, one of my biggest fears was that I wouldn't be able to find a good church. Little did I know what the Lord had in store. It's been over three years since I first entered the doors of my church, and I wanted to share some reflections on my experience as a church member in a local church, particularly as a single women.

When I first joined, many of the things I experienced were brand new. I grew up in a Christian home and have attended church my entire life, but joining my current church was the first time in my adult life I've ever sought out a church, gone through membership classes, and been intentional about being a part of a local church community. Being part of this community has come with an even longer list of "firsts": my first church membership interview, my first intentional conversation with an elder, my first time truly praying for the church where I've chosen to invest myself, and my first time being disciplined by older women.

At this point, I should probably confess: when I first began attending my church, I'd never given much thought to church membership. And if I'm honest, it all sounded a bit dull to me. I didn't seek to understand why the Bible placed so much emphasis on the church. However, as I attended my church week after week I learned—yet another first—why it was important to be a member of a local church. The Lord had a lot to teach me and my prideful heart needed to stop asking, “What can I get from my church?” Instead, I needed to ask, “What can I give?” I've learned how to serve my brothers and sisters, instead of expecting to constantly be on the receiving end.

The local church is one of the primary tools the Lord uses to help believers walk together toward heaven. It's in the church where we're able to allow people to truly know us. When I first joined, I was shocked at the amount of people who asked how I was doing, and stuck around long enough to hear an answer and even follow up in the following weeks and months.

One thing our church regularly prays for is for church members to ask one another vulnerable and awkward questions. I've seen this modeled for me and begun to put it into practice.

### **YOU CAN'T PROPERLY CARE FOR SOMEONE YOU DON'T SEEK TO KNOW.**

Being a single woman can feel lonely. Even if you're attending a solid church, simply attending once a week isn't enough to truly get to know the community. That's where discipling relationships have made a world of difference. There are several ladies with whom I regularly meet who pour into me, guide me, ask me difficult questions, and rebuke me when the situation requires.

To my fellow sisters, especially those who are single: Don't be afraid to seek out those relationships. Ask women if they'll regularly meet with you. Wives and moms are incredibly busy, so be willing to be extra-flexible with their schedules. Hang out in their

kitchen while they cook dinner, go for a walk with their little ones and have a conversation, offer to bring over dessert. You might have to get creative with discipleship—it doesn't have to be once a week at a coffee shop—but the important thing is that you're actively investing in others, and being disciplined.

Before my time at my current church, I'd never had a conversation with an elder. Over the past three years, the elders at my church have shepherded my heart through some incredibly difficult seasons of suffering. In fact, my church's elders have been one of God's greatest kindnesses to me. These men are trusted, wise, tender, and above all else, godly. Without a doubt, being able to seek counsel from an elder has been one of the biggest surprises and delights of being a member at my local church.

#### **A FEW NOTES TO PASTORS, ELDERS AND CONGREGATIONS AS THEY SEEK TO CARE WELL FOR SINGLE WOMEN.**

Many single women in your congregations are away from their families. Because of this, one way to care for us is to invite us into your homes and allow us to be a part of your lives. It's truly a sweet gift to be able to get to know you and your families. In fact, by going into the homes of fellow church members, I've gotten to see Christian marriages, Christian parenting, and even Christian conflict resolution—all on full display.

Would you also ask us how we're doing in our singleness? There are seasons where I'm struggling quite a lot with it. Maybe I haven't been asked out in a long time. Maybe I'm being tempted to covet someone else's relationship or marriage. Maybe I'm frustrated at the Lord by my singleness, and need to be reminded of God's promises. Not every woman faces the same struggles in their singleness, so get to know different single women and ask what their specific struggles are with singleness.

And then pray with and for us. I've been greatly encouraged by the fact that our pastors regularly pray for the single sisters on

Sunday evenings. It's encouraging to know we're being intentionally lifted up in prayer before our Father.

While there are specific ways to care for different groups of people at the church, it often boils down to putting the “one another” into practice with every church member:

- “Be at peace with one another.” (Mk. 9:50)
- “Bear with one another in love.” (Eph. 4:2)
- “Love one another.” (1 Pet. 1:22)
- “Serve one another.” (Gal. 5:13)
- “Bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2)
- “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” (Eph. 4:32)

I’m called to singleness in this particular season, because I’m not married. My relational status might change one day and it might not—the Lord doesn’t guarantee me a husband. All this means I need the church to remind me my true identity isn’t in how desirable men might find me or if I’m pursued for marriage, but that I’ve already been ultimately pursued and my greatest needs are met in God.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Chelsea Patterson lives and works in Washington D.C. where she works on issues related to child welfare. Her interest in child welfare stems from the fact that she was adopted from Romania as a baby. In addition to her policy work, her writings can be found on multiple outlets. You can follow her on Twitter [here](#).

# How New Elders Earn Authority



Clint Humfrey

**W**hen new elders are installed in a church, everyone becomes extra watchful. It's sort of like seeing your kid's first trip on a bicycle without training wheels. It's a big change, and there might be a couple of spills. But you anticipate the good things to come.

New elders ought to meet the biblical qualifications set out in 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, and 1 Peter 5. Elders must come into the role with a track record of faithfulness where those biblical qualities have been on display. If they didn't have these qualifications, then there wouldn't have been grounds to recognize and install them in the first place. Plus, once an elder is installed, he possess a *formal* authority to teach, lead, and oversee the flock.

But how does a new elder earn that *informal* authority or trust that is crucial to leading a congregation? Other pastors can help new elders to grow in their publicly recognized leadership in a number of ways. Below I've listed five.

## IN THE PULPIT

The most important way for a new elder to gain authority in a church is through teaching. Since the qualification to teach is the

primary thing that distinguishes the overseer from an exemplary Christian man (1 Tim 3:2), teaching needs to be the primary place where a new elder accrues authority.

Churches can give a new elder opportunities to teach in settings such as Bible studies, small groups, Sunday School classes, or even the pulpit. This public teaching and preaching may only be occasional, but it must be frequent enough so that the congregation can feed on the Word of God at the hands of this particular shepherd.

No one expects the new elder to teach or preach as well as the senior pastor. But if the new elder is “apt to teach,” he’ll be able to offer Scriptural truth for hungry sheep. Some new elder sermons might need some polish. Other might surprise the church with how well they can speak. But ultimately, as a new elder feeds the sheep, they will continually entrust themselves to that new elder.

### AT THE MIC

If you’re looking for a more frequent opportunity to help a new elder earn authority, have them lead the public liturgy or order of service on Sunday morning. However your church does things, if the new elder is opening with the call to worship, leading people in public prayer, and reading Scripture, he will slowly gain authority as people benefit from his public leadership. People will trust the new elder when they hear him pray on behalf of the church. They’ll appreciate his wisdom and devotional intelligence. Frequent service leading helps new elders to gain authority.

### SIDE BY SIDE

Serving alongside the other pastors and elders can be another way new elders earn authority. For example, when your church celebrates the Lord’s Supper, perhaps you can have a new elder up front, standing beside the other pastors and elders. Let him lead in prayer as part of the Supper. This applies to baptisms, as well.

Another idea would be to let them lead members' meetings or various Q&A sessions. These provide opportunities to show how a new elder contributes to the overall leadership of the board.

### IN THE INTERVIEW

It isn't only in public that a new elder earns authority, but also in the regular work of less visible pastoral care. This work involves the different tasks of counseling, discipling, and mentoring. It also includes the more specific pastoral task of conducting membership interviews. A new elder exercises his responsibility to guard the integrity of the church (Acts 20:28) by interviewing potential members. When a member has been interviewed by a new elder, he or she is seeing the man's shepherding care in action.

### AT THE MEETING

A new elder needs to earn authority in the congregation. But he also needs to earn authority among the other elders and staff. That can happen as the new elder is given opportunity to lead in various aspects of elders' meetings. This may be through leading a discussion or simply leading in prayer. It could even mean chairing a part or all of the meeting. Being able to lead among other strong leaders is a rapid way to earn authority among your pastoral peers.

From the pulpit to the boardroom, pastors can help new elders grow in their publicly recognized leadership in a number of ways—and the more they're exposed, the more the church will trust them.

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# On the Authority of a Sending Church

Ken Caruthers

**R**yan and Julie Jones recently promised God in prayer that they'll do whatever he wants them to do—even leave their home city, church, family, and jobs to proclaim the gospel wherever God leads them. After telling their friends at church, everyone's excited. A pastor is assigned to help them determine where they should serve, and he helps them prepare to go. He even counsels them to develop their character and gives them a plan to do so, as well as helps them learn about life overseas.

A year later, their departure approaches. Everyone is both excited and saddened. The Joneses are excited to finally move, but they've never experienced the love and support of a family of Christians like this. This church has loved and supported them, but many in the congregation and church staff silently wonder what this relationship will—or should—look like for members who move so far away.

The pastors and members steel their resolve: “We’ll never forget them. We’ll continue to care for them just like this even if they’re far away! After all, we *are* the ones sending them, so it’s our responsibility to continue this same care for them until they return to us. Just like the first missionaries from Antioch!”

There’s much to commend in this sentiment—and yet, I can’t help but wonder: how wise is this? Is such a view consistent with what the Bible teaches about church membership? How should we think about our responsibilities to missionaries we send out?



## THREE THOUGHTS ON THE AUTHORITY OF A “SENDING” CHURCH

### 1. A thousand miles away is not local.

Christians need the authority of a church—a *local* church. By “local” I don’t mean “one that exists in a location” but, rather “one that’s near the Christian.”

In the Bible, the church’s authority over its members means a community of Christians provides ongoing affirmation that each Christian’s life agrees with their confession to follow Jesus Christ as Lord. In other words, church membership is a covenant of love and union that includes a Christian community’s ongoing assessment of a Christian’s way of life. Membership also includes a mutual promise of oversight on the part of the community and submissive involvement on the part of the Christian.<sup>10</sup> For a community to fulfill this kind of oversight there needs to be meaningful, regular, and easy access to the life of the Christian. Likewise, for the Christian to fulfill this kind of covenant, they must have meaningful, regular, and easy access to the activity of the church and to the lives of others in the community.

To remain meaningful, such a covenant cannot be fulfilled at great distance.

But much more is at stake than simply fulfilling our covenant to one another: we actually *need* each other. The Bible says mutual involvement of Christians in one another’s lives is nourishing (Eph. 4:16, Col. 2:19). We know good things don’t result when humans are deprived of physical nourishment—and spiritual nourishment is even more important. Christians need to worship Christ in groups, they need to be served by others, they need an outlet for the gifts of service given them for the growth of others,

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<sup>10</sup> See Jonathan Leeman’s definition of church membership in *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Crossway, 2010), 217.

they need to demonstrate the gospel in words, and they need a mutual ministry of the Word brought to bear on areas of their lives in discipleship. Without meaningful involvement in a local church, Christians are literally holding their spiritual breath.

This may explain why, in Acts 13:1–4, the Antioch church “set apart” and “sent away” (a very strong term that was sometimes used for “divorce”) Paul and Barnabas – thus “commending them into the grace of God” (Acts 14:26).<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the Christian community in Antioch knew it could not fulfill its authoritative duty of oversight while the apostles were away.

## **2. It’s good and right and wise and loving for a church to support in every way possible those who go out for the sake of the gospel.**

While my family lived overseas, we regularly received packages from home. These would be filled with as much of our favorite goodies as could be crammed into a small box and shipped around the world. We loved receiving these packages and they were great encouragement to us. But we didn’t try to live off of them.

Similarly, we maintained all the relationships God had given us, but only as much as we could. We’re so thankful for the churches that supported us and for every phone call, email, letter, and gift that we received, no matter how big or small. Each one reminded us we were supported and not forgotten, which was most important to us.

Yet, we still needed the local body in our city.

Do sending churches have any biblical authority over missionaries they send? I think the answer is a qualified “yes.” It just can’t be the authority of church over church member. Instead, I

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<sup>11</sup> On this term in 14:26, see H. Beck, “παραδίδωμι,” ed. L. Coenen, E. Beyreuther, and H. Bietenhard, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 3:368.

think the authority of the sending church comes from wisdom and providence and love—not membership.

It's wise for churches to expend energy supporting those they affirmed and disciplined and who are now laboring for the gospel. Support is a good response to God's wise providence. He began a work in these missionaries through the sending church, and therefore we should understand these circumstances as a calling to our church to responsibly support them as they go. It's loving for churches to pray for those who labor in hard places, as well as for those they serve.

When churches pay the financial support of missionaries, there's an additional authority that comes from being an "employer" over the missionary – but even this should not be confused with church membership. And when missionary support comes from a parachurch organization, how much less we should confuse employer authority with church membership!

Like parents who continue to relate—though differently—to their children long after they leave home, it's wise for churches to maintain loving connections to those whose lives they've helped shape.

Even though we cannot continue our relationships exactly as they were, we should still maintain involvement in one another's lives however we can. Let's help missionaries—even from far away. However . . .

### **3. "Support" can harm the missionary when it is confused with the role of church member.**

We don't want missionaries to become so dependent upon good and wise help from a church far away that they neglect necessary church membership where they are. Since Christians need a nearby church, anything that might hinder that involvement can become unwise or even harmful in the long term.

Some missionaries are convinced that their ministry, life, and

church involvement should be modeled after the apostle Paul's, especially from the narrative sections in Acts. But we should be really cautious here. Some biblical narratives are simply telling us what happened – not giving us a model to follow – and they can be vague, missing the kind of detail we need for prescriptive application.

Thankfully, the Bible includes large amounts of clear data handed down by the Holy Spirit about how all Christians, Paul included, should be actively involved in a local church for the sake of their ongoing maturity and spiritual health. When missionaries base their church involvement on a few obscure passages—that may or may not have been intended to model church involvement for Christians—they've not discovered an “out” to the many authoritative passages in the rest of Scripture that clearly prescribe active involvement in the activities and oversight of a local church.

At the very least, missionaries should obey both sections of Scripture in order to faithfully fall under its authority.

What about “pioneer” missions? Does church membership understood this way mean we should never send Christians where there is no church? Definitely not. Instead, it seriously compels us to find creative solutions other than sending lone families to the hardest places on earth. Let's at least resolve to never send families alone to places where there is no church. (Missionaries in church history were perhaps better at this than we are, and we can learn from the examples of Moravian or early monastic missions.) Let's coach teams of missionaries to pour themselves into one another, even constituting themselves as a local church if necessary.

## IN CONCLUSION

Healthy churches can care for their members by recognizing the limitations of any church, however healthy, in fulfilling its covenant with its members. They can perform the three-fold action

modeled in Antioch: set them apart, release them, and commend them to God's grace.

But keep caring for them! Let's ensure that missionaries who leave quickly fall under the authority of a Christ-governed healthy church wherever they are. This is not only good for the missionary; it is good shepherding.

Then, commit church resources to what's good and right and loving and wise: let's care for those missionaries in every way possible. Pray for them! Call them frequently. Write them and video conference with them. Ask about their spiritual welfare and, above all, make sure they are involved in a local church.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

More than a decade ago, Ken and his family moved to Turkey where they served on a church planting team to Muslims. Since that time he has served in various leadership roles while continuing to multiply disciples among Turkish Muslims. Currently, he lives in Virginia with hopes to return overseas.

