

## **Authority in the Church**

### **OUTLINE**

Monarchy  
Democracy  
Aristocracy

### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the reasons why people don't join a church is because they are nervous about all the talk about authority and submission. Our age makes us allergic to institutions; we are trained by the media to distrust our leaders. On top of this there have been many instances of spiritual abuse where a church leader has damaged his church by being oppressive and self-willed. I know there are many here today who have seen this type of spiritual abuse where elders have assumed powers to themselves that have dictated who one should marry, what job they should do, how they should dress, wear their hair, and even think. This type of spiritual abuse has not only gone on in places like Gloriavale it is also prevalent in the Charismatic Church or wherever people claim that God has given them a revelation about what I ought to do with my life. It can go on wherever you have big ministries and personality cults, where a church develops around a single man and his ideas. I have also seen examples of it when a man has been a pastor in a single place for over 40 years and his opinions become law. For all of these reasons and more people are nervous to commit to becoming a member of a local church, in submitting themselves to a church, submitting to the members and the elders.

Today I would like to clarify what the Bible says about authority in the local church. There is no one verse we will be looking at but will be jumping around. I have chosen to structure this message around a sentiment expressed in a 1648 document called the Cambridge Platform. This was a document written by the American Congregationalists in response to the Westminster Confession of Faith. The WCF was a Presbyterian document, and the Congregationalist agreed with all of it except those parts which spoke about church government. In response they gave an excellent summary of biblical teaching. The church is first and foremost a monarchy, secondly a democracy, and thirdly an aristocracy. Jesus is the King of His church and He rules it first and foremost. Secondly, the church as a local congregation has authority to appoint its officers and exercise church discipline. Thirdly, the church has elders who have a real authority, but it is to lead and not to rule over the congregation. The order is important. Christ's will comes first to regulate and guide ours. The congregation comes next because a church can exist without elders, you will see in Acts 14:21-23 that Paul and Barnabas planted churches that only received elders later on upon their return visit. And it is able to appoint its own officers and is called on as a whole to engage in actions like discipline. The congregation also has the authority to defrock its officers. Thirdly, the congregation is not without guides, these are the elders who lead the congregation into their responsibilities according to the will and word of its King—Christ.

Here at CGBC we subscribe to this form of Congregational government. We understand this to be the biblical view of government as opposed to Episcopalian, Presbyterian, single elder Baptist church government, and spiritual government. Let me give a quick description of these before we dive into our three points, Monarchy, democracy and aristocracy.

Episcopalianism comes from the Greek word 'episkopos' which ordinarily translate as bishop/elder. This is any form of church government that has bishops as the authority. The

Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox church, the Anglican and Methodist church are all Episcopalian. The bishop is the authority over a number of churches and ordains and disciplines. The Anglicans who defend this view admit that it is not taught in scripture but that it was a very early form of government adopted by the early church.

Presbyterianism comes from the Greek word 'presbuteros' which we translate as elder. This form of church government sees authority abiding in the eldership. It is their job to administer discipline and although the agreement of the church is desirable it is not necessary. Presbyterian churches vote for their own ministers but this is subject to the approval of the presbytery.

Single elder Baptist churches are a model of Baptist church where the pastor is the only elder who is aided by a diaconate. They are usually congregational in government. We disagree with this model understanding the Bible to be teaching a plurality of eldership.

Spiritual government views believe that officers at all are unnecessary and that the Holy Spirit leads the congregation without elders. The Quakers, early Plymouth Brethren and some Emergent Church types would adopt this view.

## **Monarchy**

Col. 1:18, 'And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.' Matt. 28:18-20, 'And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>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, <sup>20</sup>teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'" It is the clear teaching of the Bible that the Church is a monarchy with Christ as its head. He is the one who has been given all authority by the Father to order the church. As a pastor I tremble when I think of this truth. The Church is the bride of Christ, with what care ought you to handle another man's fiancé? As an elder in the church the thing that presses itself upon me is the fact that this is Christ's church and I cannot throw my weight around and insist on my way, because it is His household not mine.

Here is the picture. Christ has bought us at the price of His own blood. He has paid the bride price, rescuing His bride from terrible enemies. He dies on the cross to pay for our sins that we might be released from the tyranny from self-rule, from being dominated by satan, from the tyranny of sin driving us into shame and self-destruction. He does not save us to put us back under the bondage of manmade laws, but He has saved us for liberty, the liberty of doing what we are made for, to walk in His ways. He pays and suffers and dies and secures our salvation not for me to come and subject you to my will, but to see you grow and mature and find the joy and liberty of being His children and walking in His ways. I am to fight to keep the enemies of legalism as well as antinomianism away. Paul puts this desire to see Christ's bride flourish this way in 2 Cor. 11:2, 'For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.'

1 Tim. 3:14-15, 'I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, <sup>15</sup>if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.' Here is the apostle Paul writing to Timothy. He has given him instruction on how to run the church of God. He has spoken about prayer, dress, whether women can preach and the qualifications of elders and deacons. Here Paul tells Timothy why he has done so. Firstly, we see that the Church is

God's household. And secondly, this is a serious matter, so much so that one must know how they ought to behave. Because it is God's house, it must be God's will and rules. These verses alert us to the fact that there is in fact a proper way to do church. It is not left for us to make it up as we go along, or to allow culture to be the thing that determines what we do and don't do.

How do we ensure that Christ is the king of His church and not man? This is where Reformed Christians talk about the Regulative Principle. It means that Christ rules His church by His word, and we do not innovate but only what the Word authorizes. The reasons we do what we do is not because we love tradition or are oblivious to the trends which are swaying large amounts of people in our culture. It is because Christ is the Boss. Deut. 12:32, 'Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.' For this reason the Bible is our rule. It cuts out those who claim to be prophets, those who have great ideas, those new worldly ways which seem to be working to bring people in. The Bible points us to those things God commands and blesses to us as means of His grace. This means that we don't make up how we serve Jesus or how we order His household.

Another important verse in connection with this is 2 Tim. 3:16-17, 'All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.' The description 'man of God' is Paul's description of Timothy as an officer in the church. This was a title used in the OT to refer to David, Moses, and the prophets. Paul addresses Timothy as a 'man of God' again in 1 Tim. 6:11. The import of this description is that the Bible is said by Paul to equip Timothy as a minister of the gospel for every good work. In other words, the Bible is all that he needs to be able to order God's household aright. *Sola Scriptura*, is our guiding principle and how Christ rules His church through the word. To insist that the Bible order how we do and be the church is to protect the right of Christ to rule His people. Now this does not mean that the Bible is useful for all of us, it is, if it is able to equip ministers how much more the layman.

## **Democracy**

When I say the word democracy what comes to mind? It usually isn't anything pretty. Winston Churchill said that democracy was the worst form of government except for all the others. When we say democratic we do not mean that Jesus or the church is at the mercy of the whims of the people. Samuel Waldron explains it this way: 'Democracy in the present context is the right of the church to decide on the basis of the Bible what the will of the King is. It is not the right to vote as one pleases regardless of the will of the King.' We must not think in modern terms of democracy where you have two divided groups who tear one another to shreds in public shouting matches while two candidates publicly humiliate the other seeking to manipulate the masses to win votes. What we mean by democratic is the fulfilling of the biblical duties expected of the congregation. Practically speaking it would be a case of the elders teaching on matter and then bringing a recommendation to the church to vote yes or no. If the elders have fulfilled their teaching responsibility sufficiently so that the people are convinced that the will of the Lord is clear on the basis of a clear presentation of the truths of scripture, it should be a very peaceful and united process.

Lets look at the democratic or congregational principle. We see in the Bible that the whole church is to be involved in matters of church discipline. We have various verses that reflect on the important task of church discipline. You will see in each one that it is not given to a bishop/pope, nor even only to elders but to the whole church to perform the work of church

discipline. Matthew 18:17 shows us the final stage of church discipline where once the issue has been attempted to be sorted privately it must then be taken to the church, 'If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.'

We see that even the 'carnal' Corinthian church who were failing in many different areas where still entrusted with the responsibility of exercising discipline against one of its members. Paul as an apostle is able to initiate the proceedings but the discipline is to be exercised when they meet, and to be inflicted by the church. V4-5, 'When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.' V11-13, 'But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler---not even to eat with such a one. 12 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? 13 God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you." Paul reflects in 2 Cor. 2:6-8 how the church administered the punishment, 'For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, 7 so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8 So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.'

We see Paul urging the whole church to take action against the idle brother in Thessalonica as well, 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15, 'Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.' 'If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. 15 Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.'

In both instances where these young churches were unsure of their duties towards the sinners we see Paul instructing them as an apostle, as a church to engage in church discipline. It is the action of the whole church and not just the elders or a bishop as was the case in the OT, Numbers 15:35-6, 'And the LORD said to Moses, "The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp." 36 And all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death with stones, as the LORD commanded Moses.'

Secondly, we see that the duty of appointing officers is not given to elders or bishops but the congregation is given the duty of choosing and appointing officers as elders and deacons.

We see in Acts 1 where the 'Brothers' were gathered together in the upper room that Peter stood up among them, they numbered about 120 at the time, and spoke about the need for a replacement for Judas and stated that it had to be someone who had been a witness from the beginning. We see that the group being addressed, the whole group in the upper room found two who fitted those qualification and put them forward to be elected. There are some peculiarities in that they cast lots which is never done again after Pentecost, but we should note that the congregation put the men forward for acceptance demonstrating the congregational principle (1:23-26)

We go next to Acts 6 where we see the appointment of deacons. Acts 6:1-6, once again the congregation is given the duty of picking out the men according to biblical principles of officers.

Thirdly, we see that representatives from the churches were also appointed by the church. Paul was spear heading a famine relief fund for the saints in Jerusalem but we see that the various churches appointed their own representatives in this cooperative work, 1 Cor. 16:1-4.

Our Presbyterian brothers and sisters would point to Acts 15 as a biblical model of eldership rule where the elders of the Jerusalem church sorted out the matter of what gospel should be preached to the Gentiles, and whether the Gentiles were to observe the law. In Acts 15 we have the peculiar situation of the apostles present at a church discussion to properly clarify the gospel message. In the foundation laying stage of the church when the message was being vocalised and cemented we should expect that the apostles would have the decisive say in this issue, and they did. We see in the conclusion to the issue that the apostles along with the elders and the whole church are satisfied with the situation, 15:22, 'Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers.' This chapter does not confirm the power of a presbytery firstly, because Paul and Barnabas as representative elders from Antioch were not participants in the final deciding. Secondly, it is not evident that any other churches elders were present to partake in this so called Presbytery. No rather we see a unique situation in the apostolic age of the gospel needing clarification. In fact if we remove the apostles from the picture we rather see a confirmation of congregationalism. Firstly, in Acts 15:2-3 Paul and Barnabas are not self-appointed, but appointed by the church in Antioch. Secondly, although the whole church was not privy to all the prolonged theological discussions 15:6; the church in Jerusalem did finally approve the proposed solution of the eldership 15:22.

This means that you cannot sit there and do nothing, but you have to grow up into your responsibilities. Think of it as raising teenagers. Teenagers have to one day grow up to support a family, to negotiate life's most difficult times like the death of a loved one or getting a terminal disease. They are to grow up to be socially functional, relationally able not crippled, and to have enough experience and savvy to negotiate whatever comes their way. It is the same in the church. We have some big things to do. In every generation we have to defend the gospel, all of us. We have to be prepared to put on our thinking caps, to study our bibles, to evaluate our culture and uphold the teachings of the Bible. We will have to think deeply about new things that the culture throws at us like gay marriage or euthanasia and be biblical in our responses. We will have to spend the Lord's money. Hire new pastors, plant churches, enter into partnerships with other churches, do church discipline, buy new properties, etc. You cannot be idle. You cannot eat and sleep in and not clean your room and not think about your future as you engage in hours of play while everyone else has to work. You must be preparing yourself. And be assured Christ has made provision in the means of grace, through elders who teach the word, through our fellowship with each other and the Holy Spirit that His grace is sufficient to enable you to fulfil these tasks.

### **Aristocracy**

Now when I say the word aristocracy what comes to mind? You think of entitled, unchallengeable, authoritarian, cold, controlling, power hungry suppressors of the little man. This is not the note that is being struck in saying the church has an aristocracy. We have spoken on this several times so I wont say much except to say that God has given the gift of leaders, elders to equip the congregation through declaring the truth in love. We believe in

the plurality of elders from verses like Acts 11:30, 13:1, 14:23, 20:17, and others. We believe in the parity of elders, in other words, equal authority. It is true that some who teach more will have more moral influence but they do not have more legal influence. We also believe in the diversity of elders, in other words, there is not only one mould, but qualified men who have varying gifts which equip them to fulfil the task. We prefer this point instead of other who have created a distinction between a teaching and ruling elder.

The elders have no innate authority. They can only implement in the church what is taught in the word, and what the congregation agrees is clearly taught in the word. This is your security and ours. The word stands between us to hold us both accountable.

So who has authority in the church? The church is first a monarchy, second a democracy, thirdly an aristocracy, and the order is important.