

What Does the Word Say?  
Session 28: Delegated Authority in the State and Family  
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**Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by looking at what the Bible says about delegated authority. Dr. Spencer, how do you to begin?**

Dr. Spencer: I want to begin with Jesus' statement in Matthew 28:18. He said "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."<sup>1</sup> Now this is a very interesting statement when you consider that it is made by Jesus Christ, who is the eternal second person of the Holy Trinity. In other words, he is God. Clearly all authority belonged to him, after all, he *is* the author of creation. So, we should ask why Jesus says that all authority has been *given* to him. Who can *give* to God? The answer is that God the Father gave all authority to the Son who, although he was eternally God, had become the unique God-man, our Redeemer. It was in this capacity as God-man that all authority was given to him. There is order within the godhead. While the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are equal in essence, there is nonetheless an agreed upon order in their relations.

**Marc Roby: What theologians call the economic Trinity.**

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And, of course, it has nothing to do with money. Nowadays the word economy is used almost exclusively in relation to money and the generation of goods and services, but it also used to refer to the management of affairs. That is why there used to be college degrees, for example, in Home Economics, which referred to managing the home. In the case of the economic Trinity, it refers to the roles taken by the three persons of the godhead in relation to creation.<sup>2</sup> We don't want to dwell on this now, although we'll get into it more in a later session, but theologians rightly distinguish between the ontological equality of the three persons of the godhead and their economic relations.

**Marc Roby: I think it would be good to define a term that you just used. The word ontology refers to a branch of metaphysics dealing with the fundamental nature of things. So, by ontological equality, you mean that the three persons of the godhead are equal in their being, or substance.**

Dr. Spencer: That's exactly what it means. And the economic Trinity refers to the fact that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit agreed in eternity past to take on different roles in relation to creation. So, while there is always cooperation among the persons of the godhead in every act, nonetheless, the Bible teaches that it is primarily the Father who planned our salvation, the Son who accomplished our salvation, and the Holy Spirit who applies salvation to individual believers. We will again get into this more in a later session, but it is important for our present discussion because it shows that having ordered relations does not necessarily imply any essential difference in being or honor. When Jesus says, for example, that "the Father is greater

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<sup>2</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 2002, pg. 683fn43

than I” in John 14:28, he is not in any way denying his own deity, he is speaking about his voluntarily assumed position of subordination in the plan of salvation.

**Marc Roby: That is a difficult concept for someone who has been raised in our present egalitarian culture to understand. We are immersed in a culture that virtually despises any notion that one person can be called greater than another unless that person actually *is* greater in some sense.**

Dr. Spencer: You’re absolutely right about that. And when we talk about authority, we specifically mean that someone is greater in the sense of being over me. In other words, that person has a right to expect obedience from me, at least in some limited sphere of activity.

**Marc Roby: There you go with that word obedience again – you are not going to make us popular.**

Dr. Spencer: Authority and obedience are not popular ideas in our culture, but they *should* be, because authority is given by God for the good of those who are under it. In some cases we can be forced to obey; for example, young children can be forced by their parents to obey, and police are given power by the state to force you to obey in some situations. But the proper position, as given to us by the Bible, is that we should voluntarily come under those in authority and should be thankful for it.

We should respect those who are over us, whether it be our parents, our boss, our pastor, a policeman or whoever. When I was young a boss or someone else in authority was sometimes called a “superior”.

**Marc Roby: That word would be very politically incorrect to use now.**

Dr. Spencer: I’m sure it would be. People don’t like to accept any notion that a father, a mother, a boss, a policeman, or anyone else should be thought of as superior in some way. But we impoverish ourselves when we think this way. Authority is necessary and it is good. This is true within a family, within the church, and within the state, all three of the spheres of society that the Bible delineates. Someone may be my superior because they truly are superior to me in some way, such as a parent, teacher, or boss who may know a lot more than I do, but even if I know more than they do, or am naturally superior in some other way, they are still my superior if they have delegated authority over me in some situation. To say they are superior to me is not a value judgment, it is simply saying that they have a right to expect my obedience and I should respect and obey them. Without authority you have chaos.

**Marc Roby: And I might argue that our society is in chaos even now.**

Dr. Spencer: I would agree with you. And I think a large part of the problem is a complete lack of respect for authority. A lack of respect for the authority of both individuals and institutions. But I will resist the temptation to dive into that topic further for now because I want to go back to what the Word of God tells us, and it tells us that we must submit to all delegated authorities.

**Marc Roby: You are, I suspect, referring to Romans 13:1, which says “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.”**

Dr. Spencer: That is the classic verse with regard to the civil authorities, but let’s go on and read Verse 2 as well, because it makes a very important point. It says, “Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.”

God is very clearly telling us that he has established all delegated authorities and that to disobey them is to disobey God and it will lead to judgment.

**Marc Roby: I’m sure that many people will bristle at that statement. What about when the commands we are given are unreasonable?**

Dr. Spencer: The Bible doesn’t tell me to obey only reasonable commands or to obey only reasonable rulers. Think about who the ruling authorities were when Paul wrote Romans. He probably wrote Romans around 57 AD, when Nero was the emperor of Rome. Now, admittedly, Nero was not as bad as he became later, but we are still talking about a wicked government, and yet, Paul says we must submit to its authority. There are, of course, limits. We see in many places in the Bible that if we are told to sin, we must refuse.

**Marc Roby: I think it would be good to go through some examples. The one that comes to my mind immediately is Acts 4 where the apostles Peter and John were commanded by the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, to stop preaching in the name of Christ. In verses 19-20 they replied, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”**

Dr. Spencer: That is the first verse that comes to mind. But there are other examples as well. We can go all the way back to the Israelites time of bondage in Egypt. We are told in Exodus 1 that a new ruler came to power in Egypt who didn’t know Joseph, who our listeners may remember had risen to be second in command under Pharaoh. In any event, this new ruler looked at the Jews and was worried that they were becoming too numerous, so he commanded that all Jewish baby boys should be killed. In Exodus 1:17 we are told that “The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live.” We are also told that Moses’ parents did not obey this edict. There are a number of other biblical examples of refusing to obey a command to sin, including Daniel’s three companions refusing to worship King Nebuchadnezzar’s image and the wise men not going back to Herod to tell him where the infant Jesus was. The excellent commentary on Romans by Pastor Mathew lists nine such examples.<sup>3</sup>

**Marc Roby: Alright, we’ve established that a Christian is duty-bound to disobey if he or she is commanded to sin. But, is that the only circumstance in which we can or should disobey?**

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<sup>3</sup> P.G. Mathew, *Romans: The Gospel Life* (Volume 2), Grace and Glory Ministries, pp 373-375

Dr. Spencer: In general, yes. We could also add, I suppose, that we may disobey when someone gives us a command but has no standing to do so. For example, if some stranger on the street demands to see my ID, I don't think it would be at all wise to obey. But, if a police officer asks to see my ID, I should comply. At some point it gets pretty silly though looking for exceptions to the rule, so let's not bother.

**Marc Roby: That sounds like a good idea. So, the basic principle is that we should obey all proper delegated authorities unless they tell us to sin. But, earlier you said that authority is good. Do you want to say more about that?**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I want to say a great deal more about that. God gives authority to people for the good of those who are under their authority. Sticking to the civil authorities as a first example, let's continue in Romans 13 and look at Verses 3 and 4, where Paul tells us that "rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer."

We see three very important points in these two verses. First, we see that civil leaders, whether they are Christians or not, are God's servants, which implies that they will have to give an account to him for how they do their jobs and that he can sovereignly overrule them at any time.

**Marc Roby: I'm confident that very few civil authorities believe that.**

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure you're right about that. But, whether they know it or not does not change the reality. The second important point we see in that passage is that civil authorities are to do good to those who do what is right. In other words, they are to rule for the benefit of those who are under their authority. And, thirdly, we see that the state is given the power of the sword, which can be taken in two ways. First, the state has the sword to defend its citizens from foreign powers who seek to harm them, and secondly, the state has the power of the sword to punish wrongdoers.

Note that this power to punish wrongdoers is part of how the state does good to those who do what is right. It's for our benefit that we have laws that punish people who murder, rape, rob and so on. As Pastor Mathew put it in his commentary on Romans, "Government exists to ensure order and peace, not tyranny or anarchy."<sup>4</sup>

**Marc Roby: Order and peace are certainly good, and it is hard to imagine how you obtain them without the state having authority.**

Dr. Spencer: In fact, I would say it is impossible to imagine maintaining them without authority. The simple fact is that we are all sinners. Because of that, we need locks on our doors, passwords on our accounts, laws, police, jails and so on. We can, of course, have legitimate and fruitful discussions about the best way to implement all of these things, but if the state has no authority,

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<sup>4</sup> Mathew, op. cit. pg. 375

you would have anarchy. And that would not be conducive to a productive, safe or enjoyable life for anyone.

**Marc Roby: Nor would it be conducive to our coming to know Jesus as Lord and Savior and to tell others about him.**

Dr. Spencer: Which is certainly a good part of the reason God provides civil governments. But, authority is not limited to the civil government. As we noted earlier, there are three spheres of society, and the most fundamental of these is the family. So, there must be authority in a family as well. The classic passage about this is in Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus.

**Marc Roby: I'm sure that you are talking about Ephesians 5:22-33, right?**

Dr. Spencer: Right. This is a passage that is much despised outside and even inside the church today. Paul writes, "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband."

**Marc Roby: I'm sure some of our listeners are again bristling. I've noticed the looks on the faces of guests in the audience when we read a portion of this passage during a wedding service at our church.**

Dr. Spencer: I've seen the same looks. The idea that a husband would have any authority in the home is almost completely foreign to our society and sounds very chauvinistic, if not downright abusive.

**Marc Roby: And yet, it is the *man* who is commanded to love his wife "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her", which is a pretty high calling.**

Dr. Spencer: You make a very important point. If authority is used in the way it is supposed to be used, it isn't just *not* abusive, it is a great blessing to those who come under that authority. And the husband who does not discuss things with his wife and carefully take her thoughts and desires into account when making decisions is a fool and is not governing properly. And his decisions are always to be what he thinks best for the whole family, not just for himself.

**Marc Roby: When people think that Bible-believing Christians want to keep their wives ignorant and dependent, I always think it is good for them to read Proverbs 31.**

Dr. Spencer: That is a great passage to show the ideal Christian wife. Starting in Verse 10 that chapter says, in part, “A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. ... She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls. She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard. ... She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night.” That is not the picture of a person who is subjugated and treated as some kind of slave.

Marc Roby: No, it isn't. But I think we'll need to continue to look at authority in the home next time, because we are just about out of time. I'd like to remind our listeners to email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org).