

What Does the Word Say?  
Session 30: Delegated Authority in the Church: Part I  
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**Marc Roby:** We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to look at delegated authority. We have already examined delegated authority in the state and in the home. Dr. Spencer, is there anything else you want to say about those topics before we move on to discuss delegated authority in the church?

Dr. Spencer: There is. In looking over our last session I realized that there is a point I should have emphasized even more.

**Marc Roby:** What point is that?

Dr. Spencer: It has to do with the authority of a husband. The husband is clearly called to be the head of the family, and even though I noted that he is to rule for the good of those who are under him and must not be abusive in any way, I think I need to further emphasize how extremely rare it should be for a husband to overrule his wife. If a marriage is working properly, it should be possible to arrive at most, if not all, decisions jointly. The Holy Spirit speaks to and through our wives and it is a dangerous thing to proceed on a course of action with which your wife does not agree. I'm not saying it will never happen, but it certainly should be extremely rare.

If a husband and wife find themselves disagreeing about the proper course of action, they should pray together about it, ask God to reveal his will to them, and then talk it over. If this is done and both of them are sincerely seeking to know God's will, they will almost always be able to reach an agreement as to what that will is. And, in fact, unless there is some situation that absolutely *requires* action within a certain time frame, I would say that you should never do something if your wife disagrees. And, if you do need to act quickly for some reason, then the two of you should probably meet with the elders in your church to help determine God's will.

**Marc Roby:** Can you give an example of the type of thing you are talking about?

Dr. Spencer: Sure. Suppose you and your wife have been discussing the possibility of buying a smaller home. Maybe your children have all grown and you want to downsize. So, the two of you go out and look at homes and you see one that you're completely confident would be the right one to buy and you want to make an offer on it, but your wife doesn't agree. You might be tempted to tell yourself that a decision has to be made quickly or someone else will get the house, but in fact, you should *not* move without your wife's agreement. God may be speaking through her and it would be dangerous to overrule her. It may be true that you will lose that particular house, but there will be others. It's not a situation that absolutely *requires* you to act, and so acting when your wife disagrees would not be wise or godly leadership.

**Marc Roby:** We must remember that God does speak through our wives.

Dr. Spencer: And he can speak through an unbelieving boss or acquaintance, or even through our children as well. We need to be listening for God all the time, and he has given us the Bible as the standard by which we are to test everything we hear. If our wife tells us to curse God and die, as Job's wife did, then we should rebuke her rather than obeying her. But, there are things, like the example I just gave, where the Bible is silent. It says nothing about purchasing or not purchasing a particular house. Although it says much about the various motives you might have for wanting one house over another.

I should also point out that this goes the other way too. A wife should never act on something unless her husband is in agreement.

**Marc Roby: OK. Are we ready to move on and discuss delegated authority in the church?**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I think we are. And it is a very important topic. We live in a time and a culture in which authority in general is despised, as we've noted several times. And there is no sphere of activity in which it is more despised than the church. Most people see the need for the state to have some authority, and most people see the need for parents to have authority. And, even though the authority of a husband over a wife is not generally acknowledged, I would say that the authority of the church is acknowledged less often, even among professing Christians.

**Marc Roby: I'm sorry to say that, based on what I have observed, I have to agree.**

Dr. Spencer: It is common in modern churches to say that only the Word of God has authority and, thereby, to limit the authority of a pastor or elder to simply presenting the Word of God from the pulpit in a general way and then leaving it up to everyone in the congregation to apply it to their own lives. But, that is not what we see in the Bible, and it is not what is best for Christians. We have many examples in the New Testament, as well as the Old, where church leaders use their authority to give very specific counsel to people in the church.

**Marc Roby: Do you have a particular example that you'd like to look at?**

Dr. Spencer: Let's look at the example in Acts 15.

**Marc Roby: Alright. Let me set the stage for our discussion by reading Acts 15:1-2, which tell us about the issue that was dealt with. We read that "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.' This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question."**<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Spencer: This idea that Gentile believers should first become converts to Judaism by being circumcised and obeying the ceremonial laws was common in the early church. The first thing we should notice in this passage is that the believers in Antioch recognized the authority of the apostles and elders. It is especially important to notice that it was not just the apostles. Elders in the church have authority too, and that continues to this day even though we no longer have any of the apostles with us.

When we go on and read the rest of the chapter we learn a great deal. The elders and apostles met together and each side was allowed to present its case in an open discussion to determine

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God's will. Peter presented evidence based on the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the Gentile believers in Caesarea, with whom he had shared the gospel, and Paul and Barnabas also shared about the signs and wonders that God had performed among the Gentiles through them.

**Marc Roby: And then James, the Lord's brother, spoke last.**

Dr. Spencer: That's right. He appears to have been the head of the church in Jerusalem, even though he was not an apostle. In any event, he summarizes what has been said and points out that what Peter and Paul said is in agreement with the Scriptures. In other words, everything was being tested by the Word of God, which alone is our standard for truth.

**Marc Roby: Perhaps it would be good to note that it was an Old Testament prophet that he quoted!**

Dr. Spencer: That is important. As we have mentioned before, the Old Testament *is* still relevant to modern Christians. We see that fact clearly because it was quoted as the final authority in deciding issues in the New Testament church! They didn't restrict themselves to quoting the words of Jesus. In Verse 19, as James announces his decision, he says "It is my judgment, therefore ...". The word "therefore" harkens back to what he has just quoted from the Old Testament. So, the point he is making is that since the argument presented by Peter, Paul and others is in agreement with the Bible, it is the right position, in other words, it is in accord with the will of God. But, the specifics of the final conclusion they reached are illustrative of a couple of important points.

**Marc Roby: Let me read that conclusion now. In Acts 15:19-21 James says, "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."**

Dr. Spencer: The first important point that we can make about this conclusion is that the Jerusalem council had authority to consider the issue and determine how to properly apply the Word of God to the situation. This is a clear example of the authority of the church. Look at how the letter they wrote began. In Acts 15:28 we read that it began by saying, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:". Note two things here. First, they had consulted the Word of God, so that they could say the counsel they were sending seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and second, they were sending requirements, not suggestions. The Greek word used actually means things that are necessary.

**Marc Roby: And what you said earlier bears repeating; the council was *not* just composed of apostles. In fact, it was headed by James, who was not an apostle.**

Dr. Spencer: Right, that point is very important because it shows that we are not just talking about authority that was given to the apostles and no one else. The second thing we learn from this proclamation is also very important, and somewhat surprising.

**Marc Roby: What is that?**

Dr. Spencer: Let's first note that it is *not* at all surprising that they should tell the Gentile Christians to abstain from sexual immorality. That is, after all, everywhere and at all times, sin. But, what is very interesting is that they also decided to tell them to abstain from food polluted by idols, the meat of strangled animals and blood. None of these things are, in themselves, sins in the New Testament age.

**Marc Roby: Can you explain that statement? Certainly, worshiping an idol is sin.**

Dr. Spencer: It definitely is. But, at that time there was meat sold in the marketplace that had been sacrificed to some idol, but could be purchased by anyone. Just purchasing and eating the meat did not involve worshiping the idol in any way. Paul wrote about meat sacrificed to idols in 1 Corinthians 8:8, where we read that "food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do." But, he also goes on in the very next verse, Verse 9, to say, "Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak." And he then goes on to explain that a weaker brother, who does not understand that an idol is nothing, may see a more mature Christian eating the meat and may himself eat some even though he thinks that doing so is, or may in some way be, idolatry. And so, this weaker brother is led into sin. So, in this particular case, the Jerusalem Council decided to command these Gentile Christians to not eat this meat because it would likely be a stumbling block to their Jewish brothers, who were still very sensitive to the Jewish ceremonial laws.

**Marc Roby: But, the council did not have the writings of Paul to look at.**

Dr. Spencer: No, they didn't, those didn't exist yet. But they were interpreting the same Old Testament teachings that Paul had available, and they knew the teachings of Christ as well. In Leviticus 19:18 God commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves. And Christ told us that to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves are the two greatest commandments. Also, in Luke 17:1 Christ tells us that "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come." Putting these things together, we get the principle Paul gave us in 1 Corinthians 8:9 as we just read, "Be careful ... that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak."

**Marc Roby: OK, what about the other two things listed, eating the meat of strangled animals and eating blood?**

Dr. Spencer: Those are both things that are prohibited by the ceremonial law of the Old Testament, which was done away with when Christ fulfilled the law and gave himself as the final, perfect sacrifice. The entire Old Testament sacrificial system and ceremonial law pointed to the need for a sacrifice of atonement for our sins, and Christ was the final sacrifice. We are told in Hebrews Chapter 10 that the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament were not ultimately efficacious, but were an "annual reminder of sins". Then, in Hebrews 10:10 we are told that "we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

**Marc Roby: I'm reminded that Jesus Christ himself said from the cross that "it is finished."**

Dr. Spencer: And, praise God, it was finished. In Verse 14 of Hebrews 10 we are told that "by one sacrifice", which is speaking of Jesus Christ, "he has made perfect forever those who are

being made holy.” There is nothing left for us, or anyone else, to do to atone for our sins. But, we are, as the verse says, “being made holy”, so we are to live holy lives out of thanksgiving to God and because we *want* to. Anyone who has truly been born again has a desire to please God. If you have no desire to know and do the will of God, then you are not born again. But, even truly born-again people still have sin living in them and waging war against them, so we need each other and we need the church. And we need the church to have authority to speak into our lives.

The important thing to note about this example though, is that the answer the Jerusalem council gave included these commands, which we are told elsewhere in the New Testament are no longer things required of all believers. That clearly shows the authority possessed by the leaders of the church; they exercised their God-given authority to tell the believers how to apply a biblical principle to their specific situation.

But, we must be clear that they did not command anything that is contrary to the Word of God. Quite the opposite in fact, the principle they were upholding, that of not causing your brother to stumble, *is* a command of God and is an application of the principle to love your brother as yourself. So, the elders have clear authority to interpret that principle and apply it to this specific instance. The specific commands they gave in this letter having to do with food, meat, and blood are not binding on all Christians at all times; rather, these commands instructed the Gentile Christians of *that* time how to love their Jewish brothers in a specific context-- one in which many newly converted Jewish believers still thought of the Jewish ceremonial laws as being binding on God’s people.

Marc Roby: This episode reminds me of what Paul wrote the church in Ephesus. In Ephesians 4:11-13 he wrote that Christ “gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

Dr. Spencer: That’s a great passage. Pastors, teachers and elders are gifts God has given to us to help us understand and apply his Word. But we must be clear that they have authority to speak into our lives. In 1 Timothy 1:3 Paul told Timothy, “As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer”. So, Timothy, who again was not an apostle, but was an appointed leader in the church, was told to “command” people. You see this word command often in Paul’s writings. In fact, he uses the word seven times in first Timothy alone.

Marc Roby: I look forward to continuing with this topic next time, but I think this is a good place to end for today. I’d like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org).