

What Does the Word Say?  
Session 32: Delegated Authority in the Church: Part III  
WhatDoesTheWordSay.org

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to look at delegated authority in the church and, more specifically, with the unpleasant and difficult topic of church discipline. Dr. Spencer, we closed last time by mentioning the passage in Matthew 18:15-20. Let me read Verses 15-17 from that passage to begin our discussion. This entire passage is spoken by Christ. He said, “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Spencer: There are a couple of very important principles that we learn from this passage. First, notice that my first response to a brother sinning against me is to talk to him by myself. There is no need to involve others if the issue is just between the two of us. If he responds favorably, repents and asks forgiveness, then the issue is over and there is no need to do anything more.

But, if he does not respond, I have no freedom to just drop the matter. I should now involve others, it isn't stated, but elders would probably be the best choice here, and then I go see him again. If there is still no favorable response, then it is time to take the matter to the church. Now, that does not mean that I make some kind of public announcement or that I go around behind the person's back telling everyone what he did. But, it does mean that the authority to adjudicate the matter is invested in the church as a whole. The elders however, are to function as representatives of the church as John Murray argues in Chapter 27 of Volume Two of his *Collected Works*, which is on *The Government of the Church*. He writes, “The church in this case need not be the whole congregation. According to the Old Testament pattern the whole congregation is represented as present and acting when the elders act on its behalf.”<sup>2</sup>

Marc Roby: Of course, having the elders deal with an issue also keeps matters confidential as far as possible, which goes along with the principle represented in the beginning of the passage, that I should deal with my brother by myself if possible.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. Even if the elders have to get involved, it is usually best to keep sin as private as possible. But, to get back to the authority of the church, notice that at the end of this passage Christ said that if the person who has sinned “refuses to listen even to the church”, then you are to “treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector”; in other words, you are to put him out of fellowship with the church body.

Marc Roby: We have an example of that kind of authority being used in the Corinthian church.

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<sup>2</sup> John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pg. 339

Dr. Spencer: That's right. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul wrote to the congregation about a man who was committing serious sexual immorality and, in Verses 4 and 5 he told them, "When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 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." (ESV)

**Marc Roby: The destruction of the flesh does not sound pleasant.**

Dr. Spencer: No, but the purpose of excommunication is very good indeed. It is "so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord." That is always the hope when church discipline is brought against someone. Our hope and prayer is not that the person will experience trouble, but that the trouble they experience will drive them to repentance and restoration.

**Marc Roby: And, in this particular example, that is what happened, as we learn in 2 Corinthians.**

Dr. Spencer: True, but we can't know for sure that it will happen. And, whether it does or not, the church is called by God to exercise discipline. Which, returning to the topic at hand, is a clear manifestation of the authority delegated to the church. In our day and age people don't think much of church discipline, but it is far *more* serious than the power of the sword wielded by the state.

**Marc Roby: Now wait a minute. The state has the power, ultimately, to put somebody to death. And you're saying that the church's power is greater?**

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus said "do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." When the church properly exercises the authority given to it, the judgments rendered by the church mirror those rendered in heaven. Let's go back to Matthew 18 and read the rest of the passage. You read Verses 15-17 before, but in 18-20 Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

Jesus is clearly speaking here about judgments made by an assembly of Christians, and to say that they are gathered in his name and he is present implies that they are acting in accord with his Word. The issue of binding and loosing is very serious. John Murray explains that this passage in Matthew 18 must be connected with John 20:23, where the resurrected Christ told his disciples "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." With respect to this verse Murray wrote that "No exercise of the power of the keys, no act of binding and loosing in terms of Matt. 16:18, 19, could be more basic or representative than the remission or non-remission of sins."<sup>3</sup>

**Marc Roby: I think we need to explain that a little bit more. Murray is certainly not saying that the church can refuse forgiveness to someone.**

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pg 338

Dr. Spencer: That depends. If the person has repented and asked for forgiveness, then of course we are commanded to forgive. But, if the church has confronted someone with terrible sin, as the church in Corinth did, and has properly exercised church discipline in excommunicating that person, then that person's sins are *not* forgiven unless and until such time as the person is brought to real repentance. And if that does not happen, then that person will go to hell in the final judgment.

So, let me be completely clear that the elders in a given church absolutely do *not* have the power to send someone to hell, or to save someone. That power belongs to God alone. But, when the elders in the church properly exercise church discipline, they are implementing on earth the sentence already carried out in heaven. And that is a very serious matter indeed. In fact, the Greek construction in Matthew 18:18, rather than saying "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" as our NIV renders it, would more accurately be translated by saying "whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven." In other words, the actions of the church are simply representative of what God has already done.

**Marc Roby: Perhaps it would be good to mention an example or two. What kinds of things come up that require church discipline?**

Dr. Spencer: Well, any true church is a mixture of people who are truly born again and people who are not. And even born-again people are still sinners, so just about everything you can think of shows up in the church. But, one of the most common things to occur is sexual sin, which is often mixed with other sins. Let me give a concrete example.

**Marc Roby: Please do.**

Dr. Spencer: This example is based on real experience, although I'm mixing details from a few different events so that no one person or situation can be identified. Our town, like many college towns, has some restaurants in town that have bars associated with them and they have in the past had trivia game nights. Now, if a group of young men and woman get together and go have some nachos, and maybe a glass of beer or wine and play trivia for an hour, that is certainly not a sin. But suppose that one of the young men starts to have a few more beers, and maybe something stronger, and ends up getting drunk and then even leaving the bar with different young women he meets there. Further suppose that one or more of his friends confronts him with this sin, but he tells them it's no big deal, he isn't really getting drunk and it isn't any of their business what he does with the young women they have seen him with.

**Marc Roby: That sounds like a serious problem. I suppose the friends would then need to bring this up with the elders.**

Dr. Spencer: That's exactly what should happen. Most modern churches however, operate with a sort of unstated "don't ask don't tell" policy. They don't want to know about this kind of behavior because then they might feel obligated to do something, and they don't have the structure or the fortitude to deal with it properly. What ought to happen though, is that the elders should come to that young man – I'm assuming here that he is a member of the church – and tell

him that his life is out of order and he needs to change. If he then refuses even when the leaders explain why his behavior is a disgrace to Christ and his church, he must be disciplined. Ultimately, by being excommunicated from the church.

**Marc Roby: Which means, as Paul wrote, that he has been handed over to Satan “for the destruction of the flesh”.**

Dr. Spencer: That’s exactly what it means. And, as we noted before, the hope is that he will find himself miserable and will be brought to repentance and be fully restored to fellowship and to walking with God. Just look at Psalm 51, where King David pours out his soul after being confronted by the prophet Nathan and convicted of his sin in committing adultery and murder. True godly repentance is a wonderful thing, and brings real restoration with God and with his people. Unfortunately, there are so many false churches in this day and age, that church discipline is often undermined. Going back to the example of the young man I just mentioned, if he can go down the street, start attending a different church and be welcomed with open arms, then the discipline is not as effective as it should be.

**Marc Roby: In a situation like that it is nice to know that God’s purposes cannot be thwarted.**

Dr. Spencer: I couldn’t agree more. If God wants to bring that young man to repentance, he will. But, there is still real harm that results. The young man may suffer more than would otherwise have been necessary, and other people’s lives may be adversely affected as well. When the church doesn’t function the way God has commanded it to function, there is a price to pay. Sin always has consequences.

**Marc Roby: And there is always the temptation for church leaders to take the easy road.**

Dr. Spencer: There certainly is. The proper use of authority takes hard work and it leads to unpleasant circumstances. For example, the parents of the young man in the example we just gave may become very unhappy with the church too, thinking that the discipline was too harsh in some way. So, now you have another problem to deal with. And these people may go and bad-mouth the church to others, causing even more harm. These things have a way of snowballing. And church leaders can avoid many of these headaches by simply not exercising any real authority or discipline.

**Marc Roby: But, they will still have to give an answer to God.**

Dr. Spencer: They cannot escape that. But, in the meantime, the church will suffer. When authority is not exercised, that is an abuse every bit as real as when someone misuses authority, and frankly, failure to exercise biblical authority is much more common. But, unfortunately, people don’t really see it that way, so the temptation to not exercise authority is very strong.

**Marc Roby: And recently that temptation caught up with a well-known evangelical leader.**

Dr. Spencer: I’m very sorry to have to say that it did. In our last podcast we quoted, approvingly, from John MacArthur’s commentary on Hebrews 13:17. He did a good job of explaining the delegated authority given to pastors in the church. He wrote that commentary in 1983. But, regrettably, some recent teaching of his on the subject is the exact opposite. On August 29, 2017,

the publishing arm of his ministry, Grace to You, published a YouTube video<sup>4</sup> of him answering the question, “How much authority does a pastor have in the lives of his congregants?” His answer is extremely disappointing, and dangerous.

He answered, and I quote, “None. No authority. I have no authority in this church, personally. My experience doesn’t give me any authority. My knowledge doesn’t give me any authority. My education doesn’t give me any authority. I have no authority. My position doesn’t give me any authority. My title doesn’t give me any authority. That’s why I don’t like titles. Only the Word of God has authority.”

**Marc Roby: Now, that is an amazing statement. He says the Word of God has authority, but he completely undercuts that authority by then contradicting what the Word says about the delegated authority of church leaders, such as himself.**

Dr. Spencer: That’s true. His answer is contradictory. If the Word of God has authority, then it has authority to say that he, as the senior pastor in his church, has authority. I also think it is sad that he is sending out this video precisely *because* he has a position of authority. So, paradoxically, he is making an authoritative statement that he has no authority.

But, I don’t want to make light of this in any way because it is a seriously dangerous teaching and it absolutely contradicts the Word of God and the bulk of John MacArthur’s own teaching on the Word of God. If this teaching is followed by people, it can bring great harm to God’s church by causing people to despise perfectly proper church discipline. I won’t speculate on why he has changed his tune, but this is an example of just how strong the temptation can be to compromise on the Word of God. And it shows how thankful people should be if they are in a church where their leaders stand firmly on the Word of God and use their authority properly.

**Marc Roby: I think it is important to note that you did try to bring this issue up with MacArthur before we decided to say anything about it on the podcast.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I did. I wanted to follow the procedure we have seen from Matthew 18. So, I wrote a letter to John MacArthur, and sent it by registered mail with return receipt requested so that I would know for sure he got it and so that it might come to him with a flag indicating it was more important than just everyday correspondence.

**Marc Roby: And did he respond to that letter?**

Dr. Spencer: Not in any way. I also sent a letter to Phil Johnson, who is the executive director of Grace to You, and I sent a second letter to MacArthur himself. I have not received any response from either of them. It is interesting to note however, that if you go to the website for MacArthur’s church, under the headings “About/Distinctives/What we Teach/The Church”, you find the following statement: “We teach that these leaders lead or rule as servants of Christ (1 Timothy 5:17-22) and have His authority in directing the church. The congregation is to submit

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<sup>4</sup> Here is the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X65vspiZLLA&feature=youtu.be>

to their leadership (Hebrews 13:7, 17).”<sup>5</sup> So, at least on paper his church still supports the authority of church leaders, even though he completely denounces that authority in his most recent public teaching.

**Marc Roby: We can only hope that people will pay more attention to his statement that the Word of God has authority and will reject his statements that contradict the Word of God. Do you have anything more to say on this topic for now?**

Dr. Spencer: Yes. We noted in Session 30 that it should be extremely rare for a husband to overrule a wife, and the same thing can be said about church authority. Although any real Christian is corrected and challenged by the Word of God and their leaders on a regular basis, it should be extremely rare for the leaders of the church to have to bring a serious word of correction or rebuke. I would say that the majority of the time that leaders have to deal with serious problems in the church it is because the people aren't truly born again. So, if you are a born-again Christian, you have a desire to know and do the will of God, and even though you may initially be bothered by something a leader says to you, when you go home and pray about it and look into it, you should find yourself in agreement. I'm assuming, of course, that the leader is properly interpreting and applying the Word of God.

**Marc Roby: That leads nicely into a question I would like to ask you. We have argued that the authority of church leaders includes the authority to interpret and apply the Word of God, so what is the responsibility of an individual member of the church in that regard?**

Dr. Spencer: We each have a very serious responsibility. We are to know the Word of God so that we can recognize when someone is teaching heresy. That is why all true God-called ministers of the gospel will tell their congregations, as our Pastor does, to read and study the Word of God seriously and to know it for themselves. And they will stick to those things that are clear in the Word when it comes to personal counsel.

**Marc Roby: I have one more question I'd like to ask. Why is church discipline so important for the health of the church?**

Dr. Spencer: That's a very important question. We've already mentioned that discipline is always meant to be redemptive, that is to bring about the repentance and restoration of the sinner. But, in addition, it protects God's glory. The church is to represent God to the world and when the church has open sin in it, it is a disgrace to Christ our Lord, the head of the church. It also impacts the church's witness. As just one example, when the divorce rate in the church is about the same as the rest of society, as is true in most evangelical churches today, what kind of witness is that? Why would anyone be interested in such a powerless Christianity as that? Also, when sin is not dealt with it tends to fester and grow and infect other members of the church. Sin is never stagnant.

**Marc Roby: Well, are we finished with this topic?**

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gracechurch.org/about/distinctives/what-we-teach>

Dr. Spencer: Not quite. We need to discuss the limits and abuses of delegated authority in the church.

Marc Roby: Very well, but we're out of time for today, so we'll have to take this up in our next session. I'd like to remind our listeners to send their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org).