

What Does the Word Say?
Session 33: The limits and abuses of authority in the church
WhatDoesTheWordSay.org

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine delegated authority in the church. Dr. Spencer, we finished last time with the topic of church discipline and made the case that, while unpleasant, it is a necessary function of a true church and it is for the benefit of God's people. But, you said we still need to discuss the limits and abuses of church authority. What do you want to say about that?

Dr. Spencer: I think it is very important to establish that authority in the church is not absolute. We already noted that is true of authority in the family and the state as well, but it is important to make this point clear. The Word of God is the *only* absolute authority for a Christian. We owe absolute unquestioning obedience to the Word of God, but we do not owe absolute unquestioning obedience to any delegated authority; not in the home, the state or the church. If any of these authorities tell us to sin, we must respectfully decline.

Marc Roby: And yet, we established last time that the elders in the church do have authority to interpret and apply the Word of God to the people who are under them, so how does this work in practice?

Dr. Spencer: In practice we must be very careful. The elders do have the responsibility and authority to interpret and apply the Word of God, but each Christian also has a personal responsibility to know what the Word of God says so that we won't follow heretical teaching or commands. We are commanded by Hebrews 13:17 to obey our leaders in the church and submit to their authority, but that command is null and void if they tell us to sin, as we learn from Acts 5:29.

Marc Roby: Now, telling us to sin is a fairly obvious extreme case, but what if they command something that the Bible does not give them warrant to command?

Dr. Spencer: We are treading on thin ice here, and I want to proceed very very carefully. By far the biggest danger is to undermine proper church authority. There are many things that are *not* in the Bible that are, nevertheless, within the scope of the proper use of delegated authority.

Marc Roby: Can you give me an example?

Dr. Spencer: Sure. Let me start with a few trivial ones. Just as a father clearly has the authority to decide what time his children need to go to bed, similarly, church leaders have authority to set the times for church meetings. They also have authority to decide a myriad of other things relating to the day-to-day operation of the church, although none of these are mentioned in the Bible.

Marc Roby: What about more important matters?

Dr. Spencer: We must distinguish here between commands and counsel. People in a church may get counsel on any number of issues and should, in general, obey that counsel. But counsel is not a command and it is not necessarily a sin to disregard it. The distinction between counsel and command is very important because church discipline shouldn't be brought against people who don't follow counsel. But, counsel is also not usually directive in specifics, it more often takes

the form of helping the person properly frame the issues that should be considered in order to make a wise decision that is consistent with biblical values and commands.

With that said however, I certainly can imagine situations where a leader could overstep his proper authority. For example, if a leader actually commanded a member of his congregation to marry a particular person, or purchase a particular car, or give a large sum of money to the church, I would say he has no biblical authority to issue such a command even though none of those actions is, in itself, sinful.

Marc Roby: How would you define what commands are outside of the authority of an elder?

Dr. Spencer: That is a difficult question to answer. It makes me think of the old line from a judge ruling on a pornography case, when he said, “It’s hard to define what pornography is, but you know it when you see it.” Perhaps one way to get at this would be to say the elder should be able to give you a good biblical rationale for his command; if he can’t do that, then his command is inappropriate even if what he said may be good counsel.

Marc Roby: It’s easy to see how this can get complicated.

Dr. Spencer: It can in theory, but I think it is not so difficult in practice. If an elder were to give you a command that seemed inappropriate, you should take it to the council of elders. I find it very hard to believe that a group of godly men will approve an obviously inappropriate command. This is why Christians need to be very careful to find and join a good church in the first place. Cults are generally obvious and you can avoid them by being in God’s Word, filled with His Spirit and prayerfully seeking to know and do his will.

If you are in a good church that truly has the Bible as its ultimate authority, then all problems – whether between individual members or between a member and elder – can be dealt with by following biblical procedures. The church is like a family. Authority is to be used for the good of those who are under that authority. And the authority is to be used in love and obeyed in love. In 1 Corinthians 12 the apostle Paul presents us with a great metaphor for the church as the body of Christ.

Marc Roby: And we are all to function as a part of the body of Christ, not as completely independent individuals.

Dr. Spencer: Precisely. That is a key issue. Just as a husband and wife should never think of themselves apart from their union, so members of a church should never think of themselves apart from their local body of believers. The modern church takes the issue of membership way too lightly.

Marc Roby: In fact, many modern churches don’t even have membership, they just have regular attendees.

Dr. Spencer: That’s true, and it is completely unbiblical and wrong. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul points out that a body needs eyes, ears, feet and hands. In Verse 27 he says “Now you are the

body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”¹ And he talks about the different gifts God has given to people in the church. Earlier in that chapter he was making the point that all gifts come from the Spirit of God and, in Verse 7 he wrote that “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”

The point is that we are to view ourselves as part of something greater, which is the body of Christ. Now the body of Christ has many different local congregations, but in each one the people are to view themselves as essential parts of that body and are to use their gifts, whatever they may be, for the common good. We need each other and we need to be involved in each other’s lives. In Verse 26 of that chapter Paul says that “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.” We are not simply individuals who come together on Sunday to worship God. We are part of the body of Christ, working together to build each other up, to honor God and to be his witnesses here on earth. So, church membership is very important and should be taken very seriously.

Marc Roby: It is interesting to note that if we look at churches 150 years ago, most of them had membership covenants and the elders carefully examined people who wanted to become members.

Dr. Spencer: That’s true. And if you had to move from one place to another and it was too far away to keep attending the same church, your home church stayed in contact with you and exercised spiritual oversight until you found a new church and transferred your membership.

Marc Roby: And the new church would ask for a letter of transfer from your previous church indicating that you are a member in good standing.

Dr. Spencer: Yes they would. This all sounds very intrusive and over-the-top to most people today, especially people in the western world, even if they profess to be Christians. But the reality is that this kind of serious accountability is extremely beneficial. I *need* help to maintain a serious walk with God. I should be grateful for others taking enough interest in me to help me by confronting me if my life gets out of line in some way. That kind of help is simply a manifestation of love, not an abuse of authority.

Marc Roby: Similar to the love parents show for their children when they carefully monitor their activities, friends and so on.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. We wouldn’t want to push that analogy too far obviously, since we are talking about adults. But the Bible makes it clear that we never outgrow our need for pastoral care and counseling. Accountability is not just good, but essential to proper Christian living.

¹ All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

Marc Roby: Perhaps a concrete example would be good.

Dr. Spencer: Alright. Suppose my elder knows that I don't make a lot of money, so just paying my rent, putting food on the table and clothing my family takes most of what I earn. Which, by the way, is something my elder *should* know. And then he sees me driving a very expensive new car. If he loves me, he should be, quite reasonably, concerned. And it would be perfectly reasonable of him to ask how much the car cost and how I'm paying for it.

Now, if I've received an inheritance that he didn't know about or something else had changed my financial situation, then perhaps he should let it drop. But, if I have put myself in debt and made an already difficult financial situation much worse, it would be appropriate for him to rebuke me and point out that the purchase was not at all wise stewardship of the resources God has given to me, nor was it wise leadership in my family, and the Bible says that we should not be in debt.

Marc Roby: I'm sure that suggestion is not going to sit well with most modern Christians.

Dr. Spencer: No it isn't, because we live in a time and place where personal autonomy is prized above almost everything else. And I'm not suggesting that serious church discipline would be brought against me in such a situation, but it is true love to help me see that I made a selfish, unwise and ungodly decision that was not in the best interests of my family. My elder would definitely not be abusing his authority by speaking to me.

Marc Roby: Alright, we have established that spiritual oversight is a good thing, not an abuse of authority, and that churches, and their members, should take church membership seriously. What else needs to be said?

Dr. Spencer: I think we should repeat and emphasize something we briefly mentioned last time. The most common abuse of authority in the church, by far, is in *not* exercising any authority. It is the "don't ask don't tell" mentality that many churches have. This is done in the name of personal Christian freedom of course. But the reality is, that while it makes life much easier for the leaders of the church, that comes at the terrible expense of the people in the church, who are not given the help they need to walk in holiness with God.

In the example I gave a moment ago about an elder confronting me over purchasing a car I can't afford, it would be an abuse of authority for him to *not* say something. It would be like a parent seeing their child doing something potentially dangerous and not caring enough to do something about it. We have laws that protect our children from that kind of negligence.

Marc Roby: And we should point out that real harm results when people don't strive for personal holiness.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does. Returning to our example again, if I am living in debt, I am not honoring and obeying God, so he is not going to bless me and my family. And that may manifest in different ways, but as one example, if a couple is in debt, that is frequently a source of serious friction. Such friction then causes problems in the marriage. And, even if there aren't open fights between the husband and the wife, the children pick up on all the small signals of discord, so the

children are adversely affected as well. If the church steps in and helps this couple deal with the problem, their entire family benefits. That isn't abuse, that's love.

Marc Roby: And, of course, there are also interpersonal problems not just in families, but also in the church at large, which can be between members, or an individual member and an elder, and these often lead to people leaving a church, or even, in extreme cases, to splits in a church.

Dr. Spencer: That is a common problem. If I get offended by someone in church, don't deal with it, and let that problem fester and grow, I am harming the whole body. If I then leave the church because of this issue, rather than dealing with it biblically, I am sinning against that church and hurting every other member of that local body.

That is also why I need to be exceedingly careful if I think a delegated authority in the church has overstepped his bounds in some way. I can't simply get up and walk out, I need to deal with the problem biblically. An analogy to marriage is appropriate. Our society says that you can dissolve a marriage for virtually any reason, usually stated as "irreconcilable differences". But, if we are talking about born-again people, there are no irreconcilable differences; *every* problem can be dealt with in Christ, not only in a marriage, but in the church. If we all lived that way, we would do away with an awful lot of people moving from one church to another, and churches splitting, all of which is a disgrace to Jesus Christ our Lord.

Marc Roby: But, of course, there are rare situations where it would be appropriate to leave a church.

Dr. Spencer: There certainly are, but I wanted to go through the importance of personal commitment to the local church and to working out problems that arise biblically first. And I want to emphasize that situations where it would be appropriate to leave a church are extremely rare. So, in the first place a Christian has to be very serious about picking a church to join—it must be a church that displays the three marks of a proper church—the preaching of the word, the proper administration of the sacraments, and the biblical exercise of discipline. The leadership of such a church will be committed to the Bible as the ultimate authority, and every problem that arises can be dealt with in a God-honoring way. Then, even if one elder should go bad in some way, the others will step in and take care of it.

But, with that said, let me give one concrete example of a so-called church that you should absolutely get away from. Some of our listeners may remember Jim Jones. He was the founder of the Peoples Temple of the Disciples of Christ in Indiana in 1955. At one point he is reported to have thrown his Bible on the floor and yelled at the people, "Too many people are looking at this instead of looking at me!"²

Let me tell you plainly, at that point, if not well before, the people should have gotten up and walked out; in fact, they should have run out. That was not a true church, it was a synagogue of

² See https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Jim_Jones

Satan. And it did not end well, it ended with a mass murder and suicide in Jonestown, Guyana in November 1978.

Marc Roby: I suppose David Koresh would be another extreme example.

Dr. Spencer: Of course. He died, along with 79 others, at the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Texas in 1993 when the buildings caught fire as the FBI was moving in on them. I don't want to waste much time with his story, but his original name was not David Koresh. He had it legally changed in 1990.³ He chose Koresh because that is the biblical name of King Cyrus, whom we mentioned in Session 20 was the only non-Jew ever said to be called "Yahweh's anointed" in the Bible.⁴ Suffice it to say that anytime someone has these kinds of delusions of grandeur and uses his position to glorify himself and obtain sexual favors as Koresh did, or any other kind of personal gain, that person is not a God-called minister of the gospel and you should run away.

Marc Roby: Jones and Koresh are both, as you noted, extreme examples. What about more common situations?

Dr. Spencer: Well, there are many churches out there that are false, and you should certainly leave if the church steadfastly refuses to preach and practice the true gospel. If, however, you belong to a church that does preach the Bible as the ultimate authority you should take your commitment very seriously. If you think there is a problem in the church, you need to deal with it biblically as we discussed earlier.

Marc Roby: OK, but what if the elders do not respond biblically?

Dr. Spencer: If you think the elders themselves are in some way violating Scripture, you have a duty to tell them and be very specific. If they disagree with you, you should listen to what they say very carefully and pray seriously about the issue, I would say with fasting – and remember that we all have deceitful hearts as we are told in Jeremiah 17:9.

If however, after serious prayer and consideration, you are certain that the church is simply unbiblical and unwilling to reform, then you would be duty-bound to leave. But, and I cannot possibly emphasize this point enough, you will be held accountable by God on the Day of Judgement for that decision. And if you leave without proper warrant, that is a sin against God and his church. So, you had better be absolutely certain that you are right. Churches certainly can and do go bad, there are examples of that, but it takes time, and it usually follows a change in leadership.

Marc Roby: Alright. So, as individual members of a church, all Christians are, ultimately, personally responsible before God. And, therefore, we have a responsibility to know the Word of God so that we can detect unbiblical teaching or practice.

³ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Koresh

⁴ Lisbeth S. Fried, *Cyrus the Messiah*, Bible Review 19:5, October 2003

Dr. Spencer: That's right. If you believe heresy, it is not going to help you on the last day to tell God that you were just believing what some so-called minister was telling you. You have God's Word, so you have no excuse. But, this is an extremely serious issue. We are all prone to self-deception and self-justification, and we need to be exceedingly careful. You can't leave a church because the elders didn't agree to show some movie you thought would be good, or because the youth group doesn't provide some opportunity you think your children should have, or because the pastor said something you thought was a bit too harsh from the pulpit, or any of a myriad of other reasons people convince themselves are serious issues.

Marc Roby: As you said, church membership is a little bit like marriage, you are making a serious commitment that you may not unilaterally break for just any reason.

Dr. Spencer: That's absolutely right. God values unity in his church very highly. And he has given us his way of dealing with the problems that are guaranteed to come up. But, unity cannot be purchased at the expense of holiness, so the church must also exercise discipline, which we have noted is for the good of the members as well as the honor of Christ. As members of a church, we need to come under and support the church's discipline. And, in the extremely rare situation where delegated authority is truly abused, we need to work hard to solve the problem biblically. Only if and when we are completely convinced that the church is operating unbiblically and is unwilling to change are we free to leave; and we *will* be held accountable by God for that decision, so we had better be very certain we are right.

Marc Roby: I think we have we are finished with this topic, so I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org.