



“Authority in the Church”

Idea: Jesus is Lord over His local church, and He has authorized different offices to do different things.

Intro: It is human nature to fight and squabble. Usually, the dispute is over who has the authority to control something. This nature can be seen in toddlers at the daycare center all the way up to senior executives in the boardroom. We find it in the halls of Congress and the White House. It is equally prevalent in every home and relationship. Therefore, it should not surprise us to also see it at play in the local church. The reality is that if you a part of a church long enough, then you will witness disagreements, and unfortunately, they will at times lead to splits.

For this reason, it is important and constructive for us to know and recognize authority in the church. My wife loves to point people to a beautiful truth about God found throughout the Bible, which is that God is a God of Order. His Creation is orderly, and He has laid out an orderly pattern for the gathering and working of His people. Today, we are continuing in our summer sermon series entitled, “In the Church,” looking at the doctrine of ecclesiology. We have explored what the Bible has to say about mission, membership, attendance, and discipline in the church. Our next item is authority in the church. The Bible will remind us that Jesus is Lord over His local church, and He has authorized different offices to do different things.

Inquiry: The question of authority arises anytime God’s gathered people seek to decide on a matter. These questions can be as mundane as which color carpet should be in the worship center or as significant as calling the next senior pastor. There are all kinds of questions to answer and decisions to make. For this reason, the struggle is real as God’s people seek to live and work together in unity.

Two quick thoughts to note before looking at what the Bible says about authority. First, different denominations and theological traditions give different answers to the question, “Who is in charge at church?” The reason for this is because each of them have a different interpretation of the text. Therefore, it is important to know that what I am going to lay out is a uniquely Baptist answer to the question. Now, I am not presenting this particular answer because I am a Baptist and just following a tradition. Instead, I am articulating it because I believe it is the best interpretation of what we find in Scripture.

Second, every church, even the most mature and well-ordered, sometimes struggles with disunity and hurt feelings between members. Christians hurt one another not ultimately because of some disorder in church structure but because they are still sinners with a strong dose of selfishness yet bound up in their hearts. So, a biblically ordered church cannot prevent every divisive word, unchecked bitterness, or act of disunity. It can, however, deal with these sins in a healthy and redemptive way that preserves unity.

Now, let's address the "elephant in the room." Who is in charge in the church? Is it the senior pastor, the board of elders, the ministry staff, the deacons, or the membership? Well, the simple answer is Jesus. He is in charge of the local church. He is Lord of the church. It was Jesus who established it, and He rules over it by His Word. In the Bible, we see that He has given the church its mission (Matt 28:18-20), instructed how its members should relate to one another (John 13:34-35), explained how to keep the church pure (Matt 18:15-20), and ordered its instruction (1 Tim 2:12; 3:2; 2 Tim 4:1-2). Jesus sets the rules, and He orders our life together. This is the simple answer.

The complicated answer to the question is that while Jesus is Lord over His church, He has authorized different offices for different things. So, as we seek to answer the question of who is in charge, we first have to ask, "in charge of what?". As we read through the pages of the New Testament, we discover that sometimes the instruction given on authority in the church speaks to the whole church. Then, at other times, it speaks to a group of men referred to as elders and pastors. The answer we seek for the question depends on the situation, so we see a level of cooperation in authority.

2 Cooperating Levels of Authority

1. The Congregation

Read Jude 1-4, 17-23.

Jude, in verses 1-4, calls for the local church to contend for the faith and warns them of the danger coming from within their membership as certain people sought to pervert the gospel. Then in verses 5-16, he provides a history lesson of apostasy, showcasing rebellion among professing people and their subsequent judgment. Then, in verses 17-23, he reminds the church of the protections that come from guarding the gospel.

There are three main responsibilities of the church as the people of God seek to guard that great confession of faith found in Matt 16:16. After Peter made his confession, Jesus indicated that upon this great confession He would build His church. It would be given "*the keys of the kingdom of heaven,*" meaning the church would have the authority to be heaven's spokesmen like Jesus. Let's look at how the church guards the gospel.

3 Responsibilities:

1) Membership

The local church that Jude addressed had members who had "*crept in unnoticed.*" They perverted the grace of God into "*sensuality*" and denied Jesus Christ (vs. 4). Based on his description of these people, we are led to believe that they were not disciples of Christ. Their practice in life did not match their profession of faith. As we were reminded of a few weeks ago, the Bible presupposes regenerate church membership. In other words, a church member is a person who has turned from his or her sin and to Christ in faith and repentance for the forgiveness of sin and new life.

The church has the responsibility of guarding the gospel by defending the door into the church. It affirms one's profession of faith through baptism and membership. And then the congregation works together to care for and disciple its members.

2) Discipline

The discipline structure laid out by our Lord in Matthew 18 provides the church with a blueprint for guarding the gospel by not allowing sin to take root and spread. Jude's appeal to be built up in faith, prayer, and love for God (vs. 20-21) highlights discipline.

The church has the responsibility of guarding the gospel through discipline. When a brother or sister refuses to repent of sin, the church is duty-bound to lovingly pursue him or her with a call to repent. If it is continually refused, then the church must discipline through removal from the fellowship, meaning a removal from the Lord's Supper and membership. The goal in this is to see the person repentant and restored.

3) Doctrine

The church is responsible for defining what it believes the Bible teaches and hold one another to that standard. It also carries the duty of appointing its pastors/elders who teach the Bible faithfully. Likewise, it is the church who removes elders and teachers who fail to uphold that doctrine and lead the church astray (Gal 1:8).

The church guards the gospel by overseeing its doctrine. As Jude asserts, they "*contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints*" (vs. 3).

The congregation is given authority over these three areas. The Bible has much to say about leadership in the local church. In every discussion of it, the Bible always assumes a congregational context. Most epistles (letters) in the New Testament were written to churches rather than to individual pastors, instructing the church on how to live and carry out the duties of the faith. Jesus also when giving instructions on how to deal with sin put the final judgment in the hands of the local church (Matt 18:15-17). It is interesting that He did not place it in the hands of a bishop, a pope, a presbytery, a convention, a synod, a conference, the deacons, or a committee. He placed the authority on the church. Therefore, the local congregation is the final authority. They bear the responsibility of affirming new members, selecting their leaders, maintaining church discipline, and upholding sound doctrine.

2. The Elders

Read Acts 20:17-18, 28-32.

The Apostle Paul, on the return from his third missionary journey, stopped in Miletus to encourage and strengthen the elders of the Ephesian church. He spoke of a very real danger to the church, one in which they were to guard the church against. Therefore, we see here, like the congregation, the elders are responsible for guarding the gospel. They do so by carrying out three responsibilities.

3 Responsibilities:

1) Teach the Word

The primary thing that distinguishes elders from the rest of the congregation and deacons is that elders are "*able to teach*" (1 Tim 3:2). Teaching is the primary role of elders.

Read 1 Tim 4:13-16.

In addition to teaching the Word to the church, elders are to protect the church from false teaching. This was Paul's point to the Ephesian elders. He warned them of the dangers of false doctrine (Acts 20:29-31).

Elders guard the gospel in the church by faithfully teaching the Word.

2) Model Obedience to the Word

Practice always follows one's principles. In other words, the "*wolves*" who would speak "*twisted things*" that Paul warned against would also have lives that modeled their twisted beliefs. In Jude's case, the ungodly people had "*perverted the grace of God into sensuality*" (Jude 4). Elders must be different. Their teaching must be affirmed by their practice. For this

reason, the list of qualifications for elders that Paul lays out for Timothy is strikingly ordinary (1 Tim 3:1-7). They are the things that ought to characterize every Christian, which is the point. Elders are supposed to be good examples for the church to look at and emulate.

Elders, then, guard the gospel in the church by modeling the Word.

3) Give Oversight to the Church

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God... – Acts 20:28

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. – 1 Tim 5:17

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. – Heb 13:17

These passages and others reveal that elders oversee the affairs of the church. They share in the authority over the church, largely carrying out the day-to-day operations and needs of the church. Elders guard the gospel by giving oversight to the church.

Conclusion: This authority is carried out in an orderly fashion as some of it is seated in the leadership of the church to shepherd the flock. Ultimately, however, it is the church body who possesses authority not the pastors/elders, deacons, ministry staff, committees, small group leaders, or ministry team leaders. Leadership and the body ought to work together. The church is not a completely democratic body, but neither is it an aristocracy. The church body follows the servant leadership of its pastors as they follow Christ. The pastors, likewise, listen and heed the wisdom of the body as they follow Christ. These two working in tandem create an environment whereby authority and trust are cultivated and carried out orderly and biblically. Theologically, we refer to this as “elder-led congregationalism.”

We have all heard the terrible stories of church splits. Some of you may have witnessed the atrocities that too often take place in members’ meetings. It is a sad stain on the reputation of Christ and His church within the community when the people of God fail to work together in an orderly and Godly manner. When, however, the church loves, edifies, and works together something beautiful and inviting takes place. The Lord is glorified, and the community sees a picture of heaven on earth. They witness what it means to be a disciple of Christ (John 13:35).

To disagree is to be human. Fights and squabbles are normal and natural, so we should never be surprised to see them take place in the church. Thankfully, God has ordered the church structurally to be able to deal with these in a healthy and redemptive manner. He has authorized the congregation and her elders to lead, preserve, and guard the gospel and its testimony. For this reason, we ought to honor, obey, and submit ourselves under the leadership of our elders. Likewise, we ought to take our membership seriously and participate in the responsibilities of the congregation to guard the gospel through membership, discipline, and doctrine.