

What COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, and 'Woke' America is Revealing About the Church

The Church – From Authority to Preference

"Our modern world has shifted us from a stance under authority to one of preference. Or, expressed more carefully, our modern world tends to undermine all forms of authority other than its own and replaces them with the sense that all responses are merely a matter of preference ...

... When such autonomous, free-choice consumerism washes over society from the shopping mall to the bedroom, the office and the ballot box, the result is predictable. What will be the price of obedience to authority, and what will be the respect accorded to principled dissent? Choice – unbounded autonomous, subjective sovereign individual choice – is the playboy king of consumerland, and with comfort and convenience as his closest courtiers and cronies, he now rules much of life. Authority and obedience are therefore banished together. They are the unwelcome spoilsports whose entry might ruin the fantasy game of infinite choices. The result is no surprise – a grave crisis of authority within the church, and a rash of positions and interpretations that in any clearer thinking generation would be frankly seen as the rejection of the authority of Jesus and the Scriptures that they are."

- Os Guinness

"Why is it that today the implications of God's holiness often slide off the church like water off a duck's back? We have already noted how modernity lures us along an easier path, but there is also another fundamental factor at work: the general collapse of authority in the West. This is another cultural trend that has seeped into the church with tragic results. For one thing, it has led the church to abandon the transcendent Word, the means by which it understands God, and in so doing it has rendered itself unable to see through this world. And it has led the church to look to the self for a substitute Word. It has assigned the self all the tasks that biblical, churchly authority once exercised. Today, we count the self as our only authority. "While the signs of the crisis in the churches proliferate," writes Paul T. Stallworth, "the reason for the crisis remains constant: the sovereign self, understood apart from the Lordship of Jesus Christ, his Cross, his Church, and his Kingdom, is taken to be the maker and shaper of the self's nature and destiny."

- David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*

"The difference between what people call "community" and what the Bible calls the "church" finally comes down to the topic of authority. The assembly is not only a fellowship but an accountability fellowship, led by God's good gift of pastors and teachers. The Christian life will grow best, flower most beautifully, when nourished in this greenhouse."

- Jonathan Leeman, "Authority, God's Good and Dangerous Gift"

The Church functions under the direction of biblically prescribed leaders who are called to _____.

These leaders are not *infallible* but are *responsible* to God for the church. Members are responsible for following their leadership.

We teach that the biblically designated officers serving under Christ and over the assembly are elders (also called bishops, pastors, and pastor/teachers) (Acts 20:28; Ephesians 4:11) and deacons (Acts 6:1-6), both of whom must meet biblical qualifications (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-5). 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 to their leadership (Hebrews 13:7,17).

²⁸ *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, which he obtained with his own blood.*

- Acts 20:28

¹¹ *And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.*

¹⁵ *Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

- Ephesians 4:11-16

¹⁷ *Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. ¹⁸ For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages." ¹⁹ Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁰ As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. ²¹ In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. ²² Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.*

- 1 Timothy 5:17-22

⁷ *Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.*

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.*

- Hebrews 13:7, 17

What are the four primary responsibilities of elder/shepherds?

Elders continue the shepherding functions of _____,
_____, _____, and _____ the sheep.

These functions are to be carried out corporately on the congregational level (macro) and personally among the people (micro).

I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house ... (Acts 20:20)

Discussion Question 1:

Does my local church have authority to declare that I am not a Christian?

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

- Matthew 16:13-19

Who is a Christian? What is a church?

Thoughts on this text from Greg Gilbert: "Is There Such a Thing as Church Authority?"

1. Jesus gives the keys of the kingdom to actual _____
_____ – groups of them who regularly gather together.

2. Jesus gives the keys of the kingdom to the gathered congregation, not to _____.

¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.

¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

- Matthew 18:15-20

3. The power of the keys is the authority to _____ the church and its witness, and to _____ the reach of Jesus's kingdom.
4. The church exercises its kingly authority to extend the knowledge of and recognition of Jesus's kingdom through _____.
5. The church exercises its priestly authority to protect the integrity of Jesus's kingdom through church _____ and church _____.
6. The church is led in its exercise of the keys by _____.
7. The relationship between a church and its elders should be one of _____, not skepticism.

Discussion Question 2:

Does my local church have authority to remove me from the fellowship?

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

³ For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴ When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ 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.

- 1st Cor. 5:1-5

Church discipline is called for when sins are _____, _____, and _____.

- *Serious sins are those that are uncommon to Christians, those which, either by nature or repeated pattern, cause you to question whether a person really is a Christian who is at war against the flesh.*
- *A church shouldn't exercise discipline for things like pride, but only outward, visible sins.*
- *In every act of discipline, the goal is repentance, so a church should never excommunicate a professing Christian who professes repentance for a particular sin. Of course, repentance doesn't mean just saying sorry. There are situations where simple verbal professions of repentance aren't immediately believable, which leads the church to take time to determine if repentance is genuine (for example, after a season of habitual lying or a sin that's particularly scandalous).*

Church discipline is always an action ultimately born of love and aimed at the good of the person being disciplined. It's not to say "we hate you," but "we love you, and we want you to repent and be restored."

Discussion Question 3:

Does my local church have authority to direct me in matters that are not – strictly speaking – “spiritual”?

6 When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? ² Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? ³ Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! ⁴ So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? ⁵ I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, ⁶ but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? ⁷ To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? ⁸ But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers!

- 1st Cor. 6:1-8

14 As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. ² One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. ³ Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. ⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

⁵ One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. ⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; ¹¹ for it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.”

¹² So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

¹³ Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. ¹⁴ I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.

¹⁵ For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Whoever thus serves

Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹ So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

²⁰ Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. ²¹ It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. ²² The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. ²³ But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

- Romans 14

Implications:

Challenges:

Thoughts, observations, questions ...