

THE CHURCH, PART 2: AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH

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Community is a powerful thing isn't it. Community brings equality, community brings care, community brings identity and participation. Those are all things which we looked at last week as we discussed what the church is. The church is a group of Jesus confessing individuals bound to Christ and to each other.

And the community aspect of the church is a compelling motivation. However we must define community if we want to be safe. For instance this week I saw that there was a protest in Portland, Oregon. A group of like-minded individuals had found solidarity around something and they were moved to do something fantastic. This group of individuals had become indignant about the transfer of a state employee and so they decided to plan a walk-out protest.

However the employee who was transferred was a middle school teacher. And the people who protested were not fellow faculty members, but 7 & 8th graders. A group of individuals who can't even spell non-violent civil disobedience walked out of their school and marched their defiant mob down the middle of a street. For any sensible adult in here we know that not only was a very unhealthy event for all involved, but it was dangerous. And it shows us a valuable point, that community and relationships are only as good as the force which compels them.

Today we are going to talk about that force in the church. We get to talk about everyone's favorite word: authority. We are a people who are relationally connected to one another, we want the joy of community and the benefit of relationships, but we also want to operate in a safe and truly effective way.

Every movement, every community needs someone to lead them and I'm here to tell you, that as an elder at this church, it isn't me. And it isn't John. The leader of this church, the authority the head, and the compelling force for the church of God is Jesus Christ himself.

This means that all we do as a church needs to be done in awareness of two types of authority. First, we need to see that **Christ is a Creative Authority**. Jesus has authority over the church because he is the one who made the church. The creation of the church was a Trinitarian function, but Jesus plays a unique roll. Look at **Eph. 1:20-23**. Not only is Jesus authoritative because he made the church, but he is authoritative because God the Father gave him that authority: **Matthew 28:18-20**.

Now as we will see today, Jesus is "the" authority over the church, but Jesus has given us delegated authority inside the church. And those who have delegated authority inside the church must be aware both of Christ's Creative Authority, but also **Christ's Constraining Authority**.

In 1 Peter, Peter is writing to the churches in dispersion and look at how he describes them in **1 Peter 1:1-2**. These churches are elected according to the foreknowledge of God that they might obey Jesus. This call for obedience to Christ shapes everything we do as the church. We only have authority to do what Christ has commissioned us to do, and we have a responsibility to uphold what Jesus has called us to uphold. This idea of authority will shape not only how we act as leadership in the church, but also how we act as members.

This means that our church needs to have strong community and strong relationship, but it needs to be bound in obedience to Jesus. Without that, we are nothing. But with it we are the bride of Christ. In your relationship to each other, in your relationship to this church, we want to help you be obedient to Jesus.

So Jesus is the Authority over the church – Jesus is the head of the church

- we have to live out church in obedience to Jesus

But how does Jesus want his Authority exercised in the church?

- To put it another way, how are we to decide what the church is supposed to do?

- because we all have different ideas and opinions

 - you have your ideas – I have my ideas

- So how do we determine what Jesus wants us to do as a church?

- How do we discern what it means to be faithful to Jesus as a church?

Jesus exercises his authority in two primary ways in the church

- the Authority of the Congregation and the Authority of the Elders

- what I want to do is show you how both of these are biblical - teaching

- because in how we structure our church, we want to be faithful to what God has told us in the Bible

Part of the reason we are presenting this is because we are proposing a new Constitution for our church

- will be presenting it to the congregation for input and then approval at our Congregational Meetings

- we want to structure and live out our church in a biblical manner

The Authority of the Congregation

Matthew 16 tells us of a private conversation between Jesus and his disciples

- first Jesus asks his disciples who the people say he is

- then he asks them, “What about you, who do you say I am”

- Peter responds with the Great Confession: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Matt 18:16)

- at this point it is clear that the disciples rightly understand who Jesus is

- the Jesus begins to tell them of the authority of Jesus’ followers who hold to this confession

Matthew 16:18-19

Jesus uses some specific words here – “the keys of the kingdom” – keys means authority

- if a king of a country gives you the keys of the kingdom, he is giving you authority over his realm

- Jesus also uses the words binding and loosing

- binding and loosing are also authority words – when you bind or loose you are making determinations

- Jesus tells his followers that when they bind or loose, will be bound in heaven

- this means that Jesus’ authority is implemented by Jesus’ followers who confess him as Lord

- Jesus entrusts his authority to his followers

Two chapters later, in Matthew 18, we see Jesus say something very similar said by the local church

- Jesus is teaching his followers what we are to do when a Christian brother or sister sins against us

 - the process we call church discipline

 - discipline may sound like a harsh word – but it is for our good

 - we need it – this is why Jesus teaches us how to conduct church discipline

 - it is a loving process – the ultimate goal of which is always restoration

- first step – go to your brother one on one

 - don’t tell others, don’t gossip, don’t bring others with you – first, one on one

 - if the brother acknowledges his sin and repents, the process has worked

- if not, step two – take one or two other believers with you

 - if the brother acknowledges his sin and repents, the process has worked

-if not, then it goes to step three – bring it to the church

Matthew 18:17-18

Once again, Jesus uses these same words of binding and loosing

-we see here that Jesus' authority is entrusted to the local church congregation

Now in the Bible the word church can be used in different ways

-sometimes it refers to all Jesus' followers all across the world from all time – universal church

-but other times it means a local church

-definition last week – Local Church - a group of baptized believers who have covenanted their lives together for the glory of God

-here in this authority passage it clearly means the local church because we can't gather the universal church

-we bring it to the local church in order to impress upon our brother the importance of repentance

-this call to repentance is not just my opinion or your opinion

-it is the authority of Jesus expressed through the local church

We see this type of church discipline happening in 1 Corinthians 5

-Paul tells the local church in Corinth to deal with an unrepentant sinner

-he tells them that this man must be removed from the church

1 Corinthians 5:4 - When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus . . .

-so for this church discipline case, Paul doesn't do it in his own authority

-and he doesn't just tell the elders to handle this behind closed doors

-instead he instructs the whole church (the letter written to the church) to do it when they are all assembled

We know that in this instance the church discipline worked

-in 2 Corinthians we see that the man repented of his sin

-so now, as the church removed him, now they are to forgive him and welcome him back in

2 Corinthians 2:6-8

In 1 Corinthians, the entire church was to remove him as a member

-and now that he has repented, they are to forgive him and welcome him back in as a member

We also see that the members of the local church are to determine and safeguard doctrine

Letter of Romans – written to the entire local church in Rome

Romans 16:17 - I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.

-it is not just the elders who have to guard true doctrine

-the whole church together has this responsibility

We see the same thing in Galatians (written to a number of local churches in region of Galatia)

-after Paul had shared the gospel with them and planted the churches, other false teachers came in

-they were distorting the gospel of Jesus

-preaching a different gospel, which in reality is no gospel at all (Galatians 1:6-7)

Galatians 1:8-9

Paul here says that even if he himself comes and preaches a false gospel, judge me

-he says, "Don't just accept it because I say it. You churches have a responsibility to protect the gospel"

Together the members of the local church have a responsibility to protect the doctrine & teaching of the church

-the church members have a responsibility to protect and defend the gospel of Jesus

So here is what this means for us as a local church – as Sovereign Hope Church

-for many years, we have been undervaluing the congregational role in church authority

-but this is something God has been correcting in me and the elders through his word

- we want to live out the teachings of the Bible in our church – reflected in our Constitution
- new Constitution (proposed, not yet adopted) – under Jesus, “the congregation as comprised of its members is the final authority within this local church”
- not the elders, not the pope, not any outside denominational officials
- “the congregation as comprised of its members is the final authority”

But this means that if you are a member, you have a very important responsibility

- you have to know the Bible, you have to know theology, you have to know the gospel
- you can’t simply let the elders take care of it – you have a responsibility
- the long-term health and mission of our church is dependent on us members being faithful to Jesus

The Authority of the Elders

But in the Bible, the congregational role doesn’t take away the elders role

- in fact, the way that the congregation exercises its authority is by choosing elders

Not going to spend much time on this because we are more familiar with it

In the NT, we see the same pattern every time a church is planted

- each local church is led by a group of elders – each one church has more than one elder– “plural elders”
- the elders are a group of men within the church who lead and govern and teach the church
- elders are within one local church – they do not have authority over any other local church
- these men are called several different names in the NT – overseers, elders, pastors (mean same thing)

Elders have authority given to them by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28) and recognized by congregation

1 Timothy 5:17 – Let the elder who rule well be considered worthy of double honor.

The members of the congregation are to submit to the elders

1 Peter 5:5 – Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders.

Hebrews 13:17 - Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.

But again, I want you to see that this is for your good

- all of God’s commands are for our good – they are not to take away life but to bring us life

1 Peter 5:1-3 (a command for elders)

“Shepherd the flock of God that is among you”

- one of the central responsibilities God entrusts to elders is to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you”
- in this beautiful picture of the shepherd the Bible so often uses, the elders are to be shepherds
- Jesus is the chief Shepherd, but the elders are to shepherd the local church

This is another reason that church membership is so important

- because anyone can come to the church
- and as elders, we will talk to anyone and pray with anyone
- but we have a special responsibility under God to care for our members
- when you become a member, you are joining into a covenant relationship with the other church members and with the elders
- rather than trying to follow Jesus all alone, rather than simply clinging onto our independence, we are joining our lives together with a covenant

The members are “the flock of God that is among us”

- they are the ones for whom we as elders will have to give an account before God
- this is what the elders want to do well
- Church Membership Directory – praying through this at every meeting for past year and a half
- so if you are a member, the elders regularly pray for you
- as elders we want to intentionally care for you and your faith
- we have not done this well in the past, but by God’s grace, we want to do this well

This is one of the reasons I am so blessed to be on the elder board

- a group of men, godly men, who have devoted themselves to this church
- who see that we have a great responsibility to care for and shepherd this body
- men who want to be wholeheartedly and happily faithful to Jesus

What does this system of authority have to do with your life? And why is it so important that we are taking a church service to discuss it.

Because if we really believe that Jesus is the head of the church, then everything we do as the church points back to Jesus. Discussing issues of church governance isn't a neighborhood council meeting, it is a divine study session built to imitate the gospel of Jesus Christ in physical ways.

You see outside of repenting the church isn't called to do anything Jesus didn't already do in the gospel. In calling us to order ourselves as a more biblically-faithful church, Jesus is calling us to order, live and operate as a gospel-saturated church. Church structure matters because church life matters.

What I want to do in closing is to show us three ways in which our church structure and authority calls us to model and give away the gospel.

First, **In the gospel salvation was accomplished. In the church salvation is preserved and promoted.**

As we talk about voting as a congregation, serving as a congregation and living as a congregation we need to define what we are for as a congregation. There are a lot of things which a church can do. And most likely you will not find two churches which are alike, but there is something which above all else the church should be in the business of.

There are things the church needs to prioritize. We have picked a hill to die on, and this hill is the saving message of Jesus Christ. The church offers something unique to this world and that thing is salvation. This needs to shape your vote, your actions and your ability to endure when culture says we are foolish.

This salvation accomplished in Christ is what we dedicate ourselves to preserving. What is the relationship of members to members in this church? **Heb. 3:12-14**. We don't have the ability to actually preserve anything, but we do have a responsibility above other things to plead with each other in the gospel.

And on the flip side, **2 Cor. 5:11a**. We want to preserve the gospel among those who believe and we want to share the gospel with those who are unsaved. Other things can be cut from our budget and our ministry portfolio, but to lose these two actions is to lose what makes us a church. Because to lose an obsession with salvation is to lose the power which creates and controls this community.

Secondly, **In the gospel Christ laid down his life for the church. In the church we lay down our rights for others.**

I was very intentional here to say rights instead of lives, because honestly it's often easier to give up our lives. I would lay down my life for my wife in a second, but to turn off a football game for her takes some mental effort. One of the biggest dangers to the health of a church isn't false doctrine or even government opposition, it's personal preference over corporate benevolence.

One author has said, “Christianity is far more about servanthood than personal rights.” We weren’t saved by personal preference, we were saved by glory compelled sacrifice, and that is what matters in the church as well. Be prepared to die for your doctrine in a vote, but be willing to sacrifice your preference for the good of the whole body.

Because our greatest problem in life is already solved in our salvation, we can lay aside personal preference in our congregational life because we know greater things are at stake. Being congregational is a call to being political, but it’s a call to be political in regards to obedience to Christ and faithfulness as a church, not in regards to what we would be best for ourselves.

And all of this only makes sense because of the last point. **In the gospel eternity was shaped. In the church eternity is prioritized.**

Why do we do what we do? Why do we find it important enough to talk about church government at a Sunday service? Because eternity matters and we will be held responsible for it. **1 Peter 1:22-23.**

We care about how we do church because the church is the steward of the life and death message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We care about how you understand the church because we will be the church in eternity. You will not always be married, you will not always be American, you will not always be middle class, you will not always be a student, but you will always be a church member.

We want to prepare you for that eternity where we gather locally and physically before God as his eternal bride and congregation. As the book of Revelations closes: **Revelation 22:16-17.** May we be an obedient church and a faithful people.