

Do Not Confuse a 501(c)-3 Institutional Church with THE CHURCH

What you believe about “authority” in the church will touch every area of your life. Understanding spiritual authority, *what it is, where it comes from, and who has it*, is important. Authority in the church has often been misunderstood or misapplied by Christians due to cultural and personal biases, basing their views on poor translations of the sacred text, or by wrongly assuming that the Word of God supports religious traditions regarding authority.

We must define what we mean by “a church.” A legally incorporated business that the state calls “a church” is *“a business institution that has individuals who’ve been given legal authority by the state government to sign documents, buy and sell land, and enter into business contracts.”*

The constitution of the local church identifies those individuals who have this legal authority in the eyes of the state. It is important for every member of a local church to know who bears legal responsibility for their particular church. However, if the state were to shut down the church’s legal organization, the living organism that the Bible calls “the church” will continue.

The Bible defines the church of Jesus Christ as a living body of believers who are wed to Christ. The purpose of this study is to answer the following question biblically. Who has spiritual authority over believers in the church?

The biblical answer is clear: ***Jesus Christ alone has spiritual authority over His people.***

Tangentially, other questions need to be answered: Who can teach others within the church about Jesus Christ and assist people to grow stronger through faith in Him? Who can help others to deepen their satisfaction and joy in Jesus Christ? Who can lead church committees to conduct the work of Christ’s kingdom? Who can evangelize, baptize, and disciple people in need of faith in Jesus Christ? Who can give counsel and guidance in the church to help others look to Jesus Christ as the Source of real life and as the one true Authority over all of life?

The biblical answer to the above questions is clear: *Those whom God has gifted, Christ has called, and the Spirit has anointed – regardless of gender, race, or socio-economic status – are those from whom Christ’s authority flows and God’s people are strengthened spiritually.*

1. The mistake many churches make is spiritualizing the legal and legalizing the spiritual.

A 501C-3 non-profit is a legal corporation. It is not a spiritual entity. Every state requires a 501C-3 non-profit entity (like churches) to incorporate. On the legal incorporation papers, the “officers” of the non-profit are listed. These individuals-- and only these individuals--are those who have the legal authority and carry the fiduciary responsibility for that non-profit (according to the state). Never in Scripture is a woman forbidden from entering into a legal contract, engaging in a commercial activity, or obtaining any personal legal authority. Lydia sold purple dye. Phoebe sailed from Cenchrea to Rome on a commercial ship (carrying in the folds of her robe the letter to the Romans).

To say that “only men” can have legal authority (i.e., be officers of a non-profit, whether they are called elders, trustees) is illogical, impractical, and bordering on the absurd. What many pastors say is that “a woman” **cannot** have “spiritual authority.” They think that a woman cannot have spiritual authority “over a man.” Where he gets this view is an absolute mystery. The problem is not one’s view of gender, for there are differences between genders. The problem is his view that someone other than Jesus Christ can have spiritual or moral authority over another believer. The Bible teaches that men and women should be “servants of all” and nobody should seek or desire to have moral or spiritual “authority” over anyone. Evangelicals seem infatuated with authority.

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ is the Head, the sole authority over every single believer regarding spiritual life and moral well-being. Each believer in Jesus Christ (both male and female) is a priest unto God (i.e., “the priesthood of the believer”), modeling for the world what it means to walk with God. Christians serve one another, encourage one another, and help one another, but the moment somebody tries to take a position of spiritual authority over another person, he or she has crossed a line in terms of New Testament Christianity. The state mandates that certain people within a 501C-3 non-profit have legal authority. The true church of Jesus Christ is not a 501C-3 non-profit.

2. When a “group of men” select those who are to have so-called spiritual authority over the church, then positions of authority in the church are created--an action strictly forbidden by Christ.

Evangelical men should want to serve all and rule over none. It is my view that the #1 problem in the evangelical church does not revolve around gender issues, nor financial issues, nor doctrinal issues. The #1 problem in the evangelical church revolves around the desire of evangelical men to grab hold of spiritual authority in the church. Jesus Christ said the pagans “bestow titles and give positions of authority,” but He said to His followers “it shall not be so among you!” (Mark 10:43).

When there’s an attempt to grab authority and positions of spiritual power over people (e.g. re-electing boards of elders by elders choosing elders), then you are in a church where Ichabod may be written across the threshold. Nowhere in the New Testament does it say that a Christian, because of title or position, has moral authority over another Christian. For those who use the Hebrews 13 passages to support “moral and spiritual authority,” we will deal at length with this chapter in a future study.

3. A homosexual family is distinctly dysfunctional by having two men serve as mother/father to their children, a parental role designed by God to include both genders. In like manner, an evangelical church that allows only men in “leadership positions” is as dysfunctional as a homosexual marriage because gifted women have been excluded from leadership.

There is a distinct feel to a church that is infatuated with “male authority.” Power, control, a lack of freedom, pride, aggression, deceit, and spiritual abuse are usually present. Functioning in life in a manner that is opposite of the way God designed us is to bring all kinds of pain into the family of God. Churches that allow men to continue in the belief that they have some power or “inherent authority” over women is to continue in an anti-New Covenant and anti-Christ model. In the New Covenant, Jesus gave to His co-heirs in the Kingdom all the riches of grace, regardless of whether they are slaves or free, rich or poor, male or female, black or white. We’re equals in terms of spiritual authority. Jesus Christ is the Head of His church, and to go back to the forms and function of Old Covenant Judaism (e.g., male priests, sanctuary rituals) is contrary to the New Testament Scriptures.