

Who Is the Boss at Your Church?

Matthew 23:11

When someone asks you, “Who governs your church?” the typical evangelical response is “Jesus Christ.” The scripture teaches every member of the church has *equal moral and spiritual authority*. The church is a democracy of equals, not an oligarchy of superiors. Congregationalism alone represents this equality.

The word congregation or “to congregate” means “*the act of assembling*.” By the very definition of the word church (*ekklesia*), **a church is a congregation or assembly of people with equal authority**. Let me prove it. In 510 BC, the city-state of Athens was ruled by a tyrant named Hippias. The people of Athens revolted, and with the help of soldiers from Sparta, Athenians expelled the dictator Hippias from the city. Cleisthenes, who followed Hippias as chief ruler of Athens, instituted amazing reforms in the city and he became known as “The Father of Democracy.” Cleisthenes established the Assembly (Ekklesia) of Athens. This *ekklesia* became the meeting place where ordinary citizens could speak their minds and try to influence one another in Athens’ affairs. The *ekklesia* assembled at the Pnyx, an open-air theatre with a retaining wall and orator’s stand west of the Acropolis of Athens. Each and every member of the Assembly could speak, but those who were over fifty years in age were allowed to go first in honor of their wisdom and maturity. Elders in the Assembly did not mean those with more authority, it meant those with greater wisdom. The Assembly believed no one person should have more authority or power. If an individual gained too much power in the Ekklesia, he would be voted out and exiled from Athens for ten years. In a world filled with despots and tyrants, Athenian congregationalism was a marvel

It is no accident that when the biblical writers chose a word to represent believers of Jesus Christ who congregate or assemble, they chose the word *ekklesia*. This word did not just drop from heaven.

ORDINATION: The unbiblical thinking in some quarters regarding church “authority,” “ordination,” and “women in ministry” is profound and dangerous in terms of the advancement of God’s Kingdom. Rather than acknowledging that authority flows from Christ, and that the power to transform lives for the Kingdom comes from Christ as His people minister and serve as the Spirit gifts us, many evangelical churches are looking more and more like institutions of authoritarian control and domination of others rather than a symmetrical body with healthy functions that bring life to others.

In Roman Catholic teaching, the church possesses spiritual authority on earth, the Pope decrees authoritative bulls, and a hierarchy of authority flows down from the Pope to the parish priests who are the sole authority on spiritual matters in the parish. Roman Catholic teaching on spiritual authority is absolutely contrary to the Bible. What’s amazing is the number of evangelicals who claim to hold to sola Scriptura, yet they claim to have spiritual authority over people like the Pope claims to have spiritual authority over the Roman Catholic Church. According to Scripture, there is only One head of the Church or local churches and all authority is His, given to Him by God the Father.

For a man or woman in the church to possess any kind of “authority,” it must come from Christ because He has “all authority.” Christ’s authority is not dispensed by the church’s bestowal of any office, but by the Spirit who dispenses spiritual gifts that empower believers to serve others in the power of Christ. In short, the authority of Christ in the world is always evidenced by service, for Jesus said, “*The greatest among you shall be your servant*” (Matthew 23:11).

When the church recognizes the gifts of the Spirit in a person that enables and compels him/her to serve the body of Christ or the world in general, then the church sets that person aside for particular service by the laying on of hands.

This setting aside for the purpose of service or ministry within the church (teaching, shepherding, serving), or sometimes in the world (evangelizing, missions, etc. . . .) is simply the Body's recognition that Christ's power has already been bestowed through the dispensing of unique spiritual gifts. Many in the evangelical church have succumbed to the error of the Roman Catholic Church by calling this setting aside of God's servants' "ordination" and assume that "ordination" bestows some magical power or authority.

This so-called power, according to those who hold to this belief, is always assigned to an "office" that has been reached via the ordination. Accordingly, only those set aside by the church to this office have the authority they need to minister or serve others. So, according to this very unbiblical and narrow ecclesiological thinking, only ordained pastors have the authority to do pastoral ministry.

The problem of those who push for the prohibition of women pastoring other people is the belief that the only people who have the "authority" to pastor are those who have been given that "office" of authority by the church.

Because of this unbiblical view of authority and an office of authority within the church, many conservative Bible-believing Christians wrongly believe:

- 1. No missionary has the "authority" to baptize but those who occupy the "office" of pastor or elder.**
- 2. No believer has the "authority" to dispense the Lord's Supper but those who occupy the "office" of pastor or elder.**
- 3. No student of Scripture, particularly female, has the "authority" to teach the Bible, but those who occupy the "office" of pastor or elder.**
- 4. No chaplain has the "authority" to minister to people but those who occupy the "office" of pastor or elder.**

Nowhere in Scripture is this idea of a mystical "office" of spiritual authority taught.

Let me repeat.

Nowhere in the inspired, infallible, sufficient Word of God is the idea taught that the power or authority to minister or serve is associated with an office that is received through ordination.

The ordinances (commands) to baptize and remember Him through the Lord's Supper are Christ's commands to all His followers, not the church's commands to "ordained" people.

Christian men and women should stop wondering who has "authority" in the church and start serving one another under the authority of Jesus Christ.