

Real Authority In the Church

The scriptural model for authority in the church is one of gifted people, anointed by the Spirit and recognized by the people, functioning as a gift to the whole body, teaching and equipping ALL in the body to do the work of ministry as described in Ephesians 4:11- 13:

“So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip His people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

This kind of church ministry far different than a few office holders doing the work of ministry and all the people doing what they are told by those in office. The biblical model of the church moves one from viewing the church as *an organization or institution* to seeing her as *an organism or a body*.

Authority is to be experienced in the assembly because of the gifts and ministries of the Holy Spirit becoming obvious through people as they serve the whole of the body. In one sense, the entire body shares authority (Ephesians 5:21, 1 Peter 5:5). This means we recognize one another’s gifts, knowledge, or experience in the Lord and we choose to serve/ submit because the Holy Spirit has placed some as gifts and has anointed the ministries of those gifts.

That is the key to understanding Bishops/ Pastors/Elders/ Deacons and their function. No one has spiritual authority over anybody BECAUSE they hold an office. Authority certainly does not come because someone has a stronger personality, knows more Bible, or is held in high esteem.

Paul, the Apostle himself, had to defend his Apostleship by virtue of it being the work of the Spirit having set him aside for it. 1 Timothy 5:17 speaks of those elders that give oversight well...as being...worthy of double honor. It is “*that give oversight well*” that is the reason for authority. They defined it as the Holy Spirit’s anointing. In other words, the anointing of the Spirit makes clear the authority that rests on a ministry done well, not an office that is held by someone.

What about Elders in the Congregation?

Someone may ask, “But doesn’t Acts 20:28 indicate that the elders were **over** the congregation?”

“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, **over** [en] which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28).

This little Greek word “en” translated “over” in Acts 20:28 is used 2,700 times in the New Testament and is nowhere else translated “over.” It is a simple Greek preposition which means **in** or **among**.

Peter instructed the elders to be very careful that elders do not “lord it over” the flock (1 Peter 5:3).

So what we have in the text is an authority that is to be experienced in the assembly because the gifts and ministries of the Holy Spirit that are made obvious through people. As said before, in one sense, the entire body shares authority (Ephesians 5:21, 1 Peter 5:5).

This means we recognize one another's gifts, knowledge, or experience in the Lord and we choose to serve/submit to one another because the Holy Spirit has placed us all as gifts to the body in some fashion and anointed our ministries and gifts.

What a tragedy that we have accepted a hierarchy of rulers in the local Church, which ends up limiting the freedom of so many members of the Church. Then, to add insult to injury, the ruled ones have their spirituality measured by their submission to the authority of those rulers instead of measuring the authority of leaders by their submission to the Lord.

Principles to Remember

- 1) There is only one Head of the Church and all authority has been given to Him. If anyone ever assumes authority because of their person or position they are usurping the authority of the Head (Ephesians 4:5, 15).
- 2) The Head of the Body has given an authoritative Word to the members of the Body (universal or local). The Old and New Testaments are the inspired Word with the New Covenant people bound in a special way, as the Father said, "Hear ye Him," and what He says is in the New Covenant writings (Hebrews 1:2, Acts 18:28).
- 3) All believers are responsible to the Head (Christ) individually and have a responsibility to each other called the "one anothers" of the New Testament (Romans 14:4, Ephesians 5:21).
- 4) All believers are priests and are gifted. Therefore all must take their place among the body members to minister for the good of one another (1 Corinthians 12-14).
- 5) There are certain ones (without regard to gender) who are gifted, as all members are, and who become a gift to the body in a unique way. Whether they are pastor/elder/bishop/deacon, the purpose of these persons and their gifts are to serve the whole body by equipping all for ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12).
- 6) There is no emphasis in the New Testament on authority that is derived from an office. The KJV uses the word office but it is not in the text at all, and it would be better NOT to use it at all.
- 7) The state will recognize licensed ministers whom the church has set apart for this purpose, but all members are ministers of Christ.

The rule of church life is really to be seen as the Headship of Christ, the priesthood of all believers, with each member contributing his or her giftedness and edifying each other, under the Spirit's anointing, giving no regard to office, race, or gender. It is legitimate to set up any system that a local fellowship desires to carry out the state's business. However, real church ministry occurs under the anointing of the Spirit as we serve one another through body life, and then move into the community to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. This must not be simply theory, but practice if we are to reflect the reality of Christ to a lost world in need of the gospel. Check all churches and church leadership by this standard.