

THE MINISTRY OF CHURCH AUTHORITY, PART 1

Acts 15:1-12 (NASB)

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The doctrine of church authority has gotten wildly different interpretations over the centuries, ranging from groups where anything goes to groups which burn people at the stake over disagreements. We all have different experiences of church authority: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

It is supposed to be a loving ministry of leadership assigned to the elders in the local church, a sturdy and kind guidance based on Scripture which gives life to the church. Church authority should never be an opportunity either for domination or permissiveness. It is never supposed to be merely institutional, that is, disconnected from the care of Christ for his flock. Dan Wetzel, the Alliance Vice President for Church Ministries, likes to say it this way: “All church authority is pastoral.” True expressions of church authority are inseparably fused with love, truth, and the redemptive purposes of Christ at all times, even at the highest levels of denominational leadership.

A more specific question is what kind of authority is vested in the District Executive Committee, the Licensing, Ordination, and Consecration Council, and the District Superintendent. We make a grave mistake if we see it as purely institutional. All church authority is both pastoral and judicatory. The term judicatory refers to a span of authority and a responsibility to make definitive judgments on church matters. Pastors, together with their elders, have this function over the people of the local church, and the District has this function over the workers and churches in a geographic region. This leadership is, in fact, a gift of God to bring blessing and order to his church.

And who needs to know about this? We all do because we are all under authority, so we all need to know how it works. It is especially important that those who hold church authority understand God’s plan. I am reminded of the Scripture: **“Let not many of you become teachers”** because we will be judged with greater strictness. I cannot help but think that this is true of all those who hold formal church authority as well. It is a power tool which, when wielded rightly has great potential for good but which also can do great harm when wielded unwisely.

In pursuit of this wonderful gift of God to his church we are going to spend time in Acts 15, the account of the first great church council in Jerusalem. It is a model of how church authority should work.

1. The occasion for adjudication is twofold, wrong teaching or bad behavior. There was a big doctrinal problem brewing in the early church which came to a head at Antioch: **“Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’”** (Acts 15:1).

You can see that this teaching struck directly at the foundation of the gospel. I remember having discussions in a campus fellowship about whether the Bible is the word of God, about whether God was giving new, authoritative revelation to people today, whether certain seemingly smaller sexual sins are really sins at all, whether a Christian has the Holy Spirit if he or she does not speak in tongues, and a

long list of similar things. These kinds of questions deserve answers. The future of the church depends on good and true ones.

Recently we've heard very influential pastors questioning whether there is actually eternal punishment, whether the Bible teaches the substitutionary atonement, whether the Holy Trinity actually has three Persons at this very moment, and whether God blesses same-sex marriage. What about smoking pot? If a Christian can drink a small amount of an alcoholic drink without sin, is there an amount of marijuana indulgence which would also be OK? How many cigars a day? Add any sketchy thinking or behavior you wish to this list.

You can see that such clarification of truth is a perpetual need in the church. We may or may not be more wayward than any other era of church history. Every generation has needed the ministry of correction. One use of church authority which seems to have waned is the settling of disputes. There was a property dispute in Corinth which went to secular law courts, and Paul argued that the disputants should have appealed to church authority to settle the matter (1 Corinthians 6:1-16).

Those with formal church authority, including elders over a church and elders with judicatory authority over a region, are responsible under God to handle wrong teaching, bad behavior, and the disputes which arise from them.

2. The normal process in the church for fixing wrong teaching or bad behavior is admonishment. Paul and Barnabas collided directly with the erring teachers and sought to convince them of their mistake and the true teaching of the gospel: **“And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them...”** (Acts 15:2a).

Mutual admonishment is supposed to be a part of daily life in the body of Christ. As we all take responsibility to bump one another in the right direction, the whole body and all of us as individuals benefit. There is no time when we may say to ourselves: “That brother or sister is going off the beam but it is not my responsibility.” That would not be loving. Personal admonishment is specifically commanded by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 18. One of the most common reasons for not doing it is the false idea that we need to make a federal case out of everything. Most of the time, admonishment in the body sounds like little more than one sentence: “Oh, the Lord really doesn't want you to do that.” It is a loving appeal from the same side of the sin fence. On one side of the fence are all the sinners of the world, and other side is...nothing.

But beyond the normal function of body life there is the expression of official church authority to guide people back to health and wholeness in Christ. The vast majority of these cases are not dealt with by formal discipline but by loving admonishment and accountability. If a believer is repentant or the case is simply less serious, formal discipline is unnecessary and would be like swatting a fly with a cannon. This is not only a waste of time and energy, it can scar people for life and leave them feeling that church leaders are going to come crashing down on them at any moment. On the contrary, Biblical and loving admonishment activates the will, encourages faith, and releases the energy of the Holy Spirit to effect life change.

3. Formal adjudication is sought after the failure of admonishment. That is what the leaders of the church in Antioch did when even Paul and Barnabas failed to convince the Judaizers of their error:

“...the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue” (Acts 15:2b). There comes a time, after the personal phase of the application of Matthew 18, to seek help from church leaders. The core of the gospel was at stake in the early church, and the matter could not be solved on the local level.

The Alliance recognizes three major levels of authority to address issues: the pastor and elders in a local church, the Superintendent and DEXCOM in a district, and the elected officers and Board of Directors at the national level. Some matters are referred for group votes, which are done at congregational meetings in a church, District Conference, or General Council. Such votes represent the highest authority at their respective levels in the Alliance system.

When the time comes for formal discipline, the specific procedures are described in the *Uniform Policy for Discipline, Restoration, and Appeal* in the *Manual*. This is an exhausting, difficult, and distracting process. It should not be done unless absolutely necessary, but when necessary it is the right and definitive way to get a solution that will be embraced and that will endure. It can restore peace and set things on a path to restoration and spiritual health.

4. A full report of the facts is necessary for wisdom to emerge in the application of church authority. Paul and Barnabas were careful to give such a report of God’s activity in saving non-Jews: **“Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them”** (Acts 15:3-4).

No wise evaluation of a situation can be made until the substance is known. In the case of the Gentile converts, it was crucial for the early church to gather the facts of God’s activity among them. How could they make a wise decision without knowing what God was doing? So the missionaries gave a full report.

In a discipline case this is done by a Committee on Investigation which presents its findings to a Discipline Committee. I have been part of quite a few such cases. Data gathering has included extensive interviews, email dumps, forensic examination of computers, handwriting analysis, expert opinions, and whatever hard information is available. These cases cannot be resolved by opinion, assumptions, or guessing. Truth must be the basis of everything we do.

5. All parties deserve a hearing. There are some limitations on this, such as those who want to monopolize a conversation. But all things being equal, everyone should have a say. This is fair and it affirms the value of every person in God’s sight. So even the Judaizers got to speak their view at the Jerusalem council: **“But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses’”** (Acts 15:5).

Active listening is a skill for which we should all strive. When others talk we should be quiet, give them our full attention, and then reflect back to them what we thought we heard to see if we got it right. This is hardest to do when we are exercised about something or when the view we are hearing seems to us to be without merit.

By contrast, those who are seeking a power play or at least to control a conversation will often try to get others to shut up. It is likely that the Pharisees were accustomed in Jewish society to giving the final word on many things. That is why those who hold formal church authority must act as facilitators for Christ's church to prevent a dynamic where some lose their opportunity to speak.

6. Matters of doctrine and proper Christian behavior are adjudicated by elders, not a democratic vote by a congregation. The congregation is not excluded, but included as active participants as the entire context of Acts 15 reveals. But the principle of decision is elder oversight, not a popular vote, as the text reveals in several places: **“The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. After there had been much debate...”** (Acts 15:6-7a).

The affirmation that the whole church was represented by this process is revealed in verse 22: **“Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas...”** The advantage of this system of decision making is that it is not rigid. The congregation is involved in important decisions even when those decisions will finally be made by elders. The specific involvements can be adjusted according to the situation. So some decisions end up as congregational votes, and some are made by the elders alone. When the facts of a matter and the intention of the elders are abundantly clear, one with church authority may act alone.

An example of this is provided by the Apostle Paul in dealing with the church in Corinth, to whom he wrote: **“This is the third time I am coming to you. Every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses. I have previously said when present the second time, and though now absent I say in advance to those who have sinned in the past and to all the rest as well, that if I come again I will not spare anyone...”** (2 Corinthians 13:1-2).

Sometimes a pastor or superintendent has a responsibility to intervene before there is time for a full process to take place. As a pastor I have gone to a man's place of business to confront him with the evidence of flagrant adultery. When he confessed, since the eyewitness could not be denied, he became the second witness which is necessary for discipline to begin. I immediately removed him from leadership of the men's group which was scheduled to meet that very week. I also moved his membership to inactive status pending action of the elders.

Furthermore, I made this commitment to him at the same time: “If you want to dig yourself out of this, I will do everything in my power to help.” I soon sent him a letter describing the steps in the path to restoration. This all may have seemed a slap in the face to the man, but this is one of the few cases where restoration actually happened. He was, after a long process, welcomed back into full membership. The crucial thing which motivated him to work it out was that he knew that we loved him. I kept saying: “Why should you stick with this church and complete this difficult process of restoration? Because we already love you.”

Even when a leader must act alone, the whole thing must come under the review and approval of the elders. That is the form of church oversight established by the Lord.

And sometimes a higher level of church authority must step in when a lower level fails, as happened in Corinth. Paul wrote: **“It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and**

immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst. For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Corinthians 5:1-5).

Under any circumstances this would be a Bad Day in Bedrock. But it would be far worse if Paul did not embrace the undeniable reality that sometimes you have to cause a lesser sorrow to head off a greater one. We would all love to have surgery without any cutting, but then it would not be surgery, would it? There is a pronounced tendency in church to let bad situations go unaddressed. Avoiding the immediate sorrow causes the situation to fester and grow worse. We must believe that every problem we have can be solved in Jesus.

7. Peter accepted his leadership role in the church by giving his opinion, and so must we. **"After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are'"** (Acts 15:7-11).

Refusing to give our opinion when important matters are at stake in the church is a failure of leadership. And we must understand that Peter was participating in a process of deliberation. He was not here giving the final word, though it eventually came out that way.

Peter reviewed the indisputable facts of redemptive history. This is a gigantic pointer to the will of God. Peter's argument was theological, and based on the question: What is the gospel? Peter did something which we must do at times. In the middle of a muddle of debate, he stated an obvious fact, that the only hope of every sinner, Jewish or not, is salvation by grace through faith, and not of works.

I remember a lengthy debate at General Council where I was starting to wonder about our form of church government. Every argument under the sun was spoken into the giant PA system on Council floor. It is, in fact, intoxicating to hear your own voice amplified by 20,000 watts of power. I started to wonder: Why do our leaders not speak? And then President Peter Nanfelt came to the podium and did so. He explained that in *Roberts Rules of Order* the Chairman of the assembly does not participate in debate, but we have a higher set of rules found in the word of God. He clarified that he was not settling the debate, but that he was accepting his responsibility as a leader of the church to state his understanding of the question. You could almost hear a gigantic sigh of relief: Finally! And his remarks were a tremendous help to the process.

Those bearing church authority do not only guide the process, but they are themselves contributors. How could we ever exclude the views of our best people? So show up and participate.

8. Church authority must consider corroborative testimony: **“All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles”** (Acts 15:12). Why? The Old Testament Scriptures demanded it, and Jesus commanded it: **“But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed”** Matthew 18:16).

Why is this so important? Because baseless accusations are one of the weapons of the Enemy to destroy the church. It is possible for uncorroborated accusations, if accepted, to so undermine the trust of God’s people that a church can no longer function. I remember a man in a church I was assisting with a conflict situation came to me in the parking lot after a long meeting simply to ask this question: What are we supposed to do if we have lost all trust? Some of that was lost by the damaging work of unsubstantiated accusations.

Our willingness to refuse to believe uncorroborated accusations is a key tactic of spiritual warfare. And unless you are completely ineffective in ministry, the Evil One will eventually float a filthy accusation against you also. The Apostle John warned us in Revelation 12:10: **“Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, ‘Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night.’”**

So we must strive to support every action of church authority with a foundation of truth, even if it requires a lot of work. I have been on both fruitful and fruitless Committees on Investigation. I once postponed a surgery in order to gather truth about a situation which had the potential to destroy a church. And failed to find it! But we must strive for it, because our God is a God of truth.

Every level of church authority is derivative. None of us is ever vested with authority on our own account to use our own way. It is all from Jesus Christ, and the only way to know that we are doing what he wants is to base everything we do explicitly on the word of God.

In the middle of the biggest, hottest church issues I have faced, I have taken to stating this over and over again: “Our entire goal is a win for Jesus. When Jesus wins, we win.” This has helped me tremendously in the fog of spiritual battle. Let us never forget the One whom all this is for. **“Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen”** (1 Peter 4:11).