



Affirming Church Authority

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As we consider how the church is a theater of the gospel, a topic often overlooked or misunderstood is *church authority*. I know from my own experience, and from speaking with many of you, that church authority is sometimes misused, misunderstood, and even marginalized. Because of this, you may have been hurt or disillusioned about church and for that I'm very sorry. Many others of you that I know are deeply grateful for the kind of church we have in City Life. *We are imperfect people, but cling to a perfect Christ, being perfected by the Spirit.* Today, I'd like talk to you about the important role of church authority. Three ways: Question Authority, Affirm Authority, Submit to Authority.

Questioning Authority

Years ago, Americans fell in line with authority. We didn't question those in charge; we *honored* them. Then in the 60s, with mistakes of Vietnam, political scandals, civil rights, there was a shift. We began to "question authority." Where leaders were out of step ethically, questioning authority was important and good. But then, our culture went a step further. We permanently relocated authority from God, government, and leaders to the privileged viewpoint of Self. Questioning authority became the default cultural position, but only for *certain authorities*. We still trust some authorities, like the authority of personal perspective, authority of the stoplight, the almighty dollar. Why? Because we have an underlying sense that authority *can actually be good for us*. We appeal to it all the time. My father-in-law recently had his fifth heart surgery. Before he had the surgery, the doctor told him that he may not live, and that after the surgery there's nothing else they can do for him. He went under, submitted to the surgeon's knife, and put his entire life in the doctor's hands. Why? *He trusted his authority. He put his life in the doctor's hands because he knew the surgeon was an authority over his life for his good.* If authority is good for your life, it's certainly good for your soul. We are made for authority. *When a person reaches the place where they want to Christ to inhabit their soul, what they're saying is that they've found a better, truer, more reliable authority.* **To be a Christian is to see the limitations of Self and accept, in every area of life, the unlimited wisdom of Christ.** His Word becomes the authority over all other words. Now, if you have trouble with this, you might consider how Christ uses his authority—He sacrifices himself for your good. He goes under the knife for you. You might consider Tim Keller's penetrating question: "*Do you really think that God wouldn't have any views that upset you or disagree with you? If your god never disagrees with you, you might just be worshipping an idealized version of yourself.*" God is kind enough to lay out his infallible views on leadership authority and how the church should respond. The first thing you should know is that church authority is not an authority rooted in personality or preference or power. *It is an authority mediated through the word of God.* Church leaders must not assume inherent authority, but recognize it is derived from the calling, character, and accountability clearly laid out in God's Word. Leaders are directly accountable to God, and will be judged more strictly for what they teach (James 3; 2 Tim 4). Two main offices are laid out: elders and deacons. *Elders* are responsible for overall theological instruction and general shepherding. *Deacons* are lead servants and exist to free the elders up by taking on any other necessary tasks. God puts these men and women in

place *for our good, safety, well being*. There are all kinds of equipping leaders: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, which are expressed in our City Group leaders. Now, just because a church has these leaders doesn't mean church will be all roses. It might, at times, be painful to follow your leaders, like major surgery, or a great joy, but either way godly church authority exists for your good. Now, we've questioned authority, let's turn to the Pastoral Letters: 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus to *affirming authority*.

Affirming Authority

There are numerous passages in the NT that affirm the authority of church leaders. St. Paul in 1 Timothy 5:17, "**Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.**" Here we're told that all elders, and especially those who preach and teach, are to receive **honor**. What's the honor? We think of honoring people with our words, which is true; leaders need encouragement. But he goes on to explain two specific ways to honor your elders. *First*, and especially those who preach and teach, they are to receive wages—financial and physical support. This provides for the elder and his family so that he can be freed to devote time to preaching, teaching, and leading. City Life pays staff elders but not non-staff elders. I'm grateful to receive this honor from you. *Second*, in verse 19, St. Paul says honoring leaders includes protecting their reputations: "**Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.**" This **is not a hunting license to launch accusations and gather witnesses, but a protective issue to honor and guard leaders.** The language of *not* admitting a charge literally means, "to not entertain an accusation" (BDAG). This means when someone starts accusing or gossiping about one of your leaders, you *should immediately be suspicious of them not your leader*. If the person has a problem with a leader they may need to: a) put aside pettiness and repent of gossip b) pray for their leader and not be hasty in judgment c) if it is a clear area of sin to humbly approach them being cautious to not "rebuke an elder sharply" (1 Tim 5:1). Not entertaining accusations should be your default response. Now, there are exceptions, but they are just that, exceptions. Why does the Apostle Paul focus on this way of honoring leaders? Because he understands, better than anyone, how the ministry is open to charges, criticisms, and complaints from outside and inside the church. He realizes that elders, especially those who teach and preach God's Word, *have a target on their chests*. Why? Because they stand for the **truth** of the gospel. The gospel threatens the authority of Self insisting on the authority of Christ. Ungodly criticism of leaders can be hard to detect because it usually comes in the form of "authenticity." When criticizing a preacher, a city group leader's methods, or a deacon's decisions, a person may say, "I'm just being honest about how I feel." In one fell swoop, subjective feelings trump God's truth. It's criticism *shrouded in authenticity*. A vaulted sense of Self that privileges "**honesty**" over the honest to God truth about honoring leaders. Austin singer-song writer, David Ramirez puts his finger on this issue: "*They love me for being honest. They love me for being myself. But the minute I mention Jesus they want me to go to hell. It's hard to find a balance when I don't believe in one...we love the broken not the forgiven.*" When a leader stands for Jesus he falls under the scorn of the world. We'll love the broken but not the forgiven. Why? Because we're the broken reinforce the authority of the broken Self, but the forgiven reinforce the

forgiving authority of Christ. So unless you're cultivating humility and eager to submit to Christ, it'll be tempting to respond critically, especially when God uses your leaders to challenge you. But humility is the way forward in the Christian life. Pastor and author Thabiti Anyabwile comments, "*A healthy church member helps shelter the shepherd from unwarranted slings and arrows. Rumors and backbitings die at the ears of a healthy church member who refuses to give consideration to unedifying and uncorroborated tales.*" God calls you to affirm elder authority by providing for their needs, defending their reputation, not entertaining accusation against them.

Submitting to Authority

We've questioned and affirmed authority, now onto submitting to authority: "*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you*" (Heb 13:17). This is true of leaders in general, but especially of elders. Notice the uncomfortable words, "obey and **submit**." These were cherished words for centuries, but now we struggle. We have to recognize cultural bias here and question cultural authority. Now, this doesn't mean if I say, "Go get me some Amy's ice-cream, Mexican vanilla with chocolate chips," that you should run off and do it (although I certainly wouldn't complain). In context, he's talking about obeying *biblical teachings*, which help us live in true authenticity, true to our identity as slaves, disciples, followers of Christ. So, when you obey and submit to your leaders, you're not really obeying them, but submitting to Christ who has appointed them. **Submission is intermediately to leaders but immediately to Christ.** We have earthly elders but there is one true Elder; we have shepherds but there is one Chief Shepherd (Heb 2:12; 1 Peter 5:4). Any leader worth his salt will continually point away from Self to Christ—teaching, exhorting, encouraging people to know Christ, love Christ, worship Christ, to submit to Christ. The godly leader is aware of his own imperfections, flaws, and sins and has no sense of Self-sufficiency but relies upon the Spirit and the Son. He will occasionally despair of his calling, but then look to Christ who commands what he will and wills what he commands (2 Cor 3). So as long as your leaders are in line with the Scriptures, your submission to them will line you up with Christ. Now, all church leaders should live **exemplary** lives lest they disqualify themselves:

- *Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers* (1 Tim 4:16). *Close watch means regular self-examination of your character and doctrine against the Word and in the presence of God. Leaders, you can't lead if you aren't being led, reading the Bible and praying regularly.*
- *Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity* (1 Tim 4:12) *Age is no indicator of wisdom; character proves wisdom. Church leaders should be exemplary in character, love, faith, and purity.*

Essentially, leaders in the church should: *Love God, Read their Bibles, Imitate Christ*. If you do, you're family, natural and spiritual, will flourish under good authority. Remember, your authority is mediated through the word of God; it does not come from your personality, your position, or your influence. ***This is Christ's church, and we should be Christ-dependent leaders.*** Now, this might all feel a bit wooden but its not meant to. It's actually

the stuff of a dynamic, healthy family. In a healthy family, there is an authority; a father who loves his children will say no, to give guidance, exercise discipline all for the good of his family. Your leaders are the fathers of the family. A good father uses his authority only when necessary. It's an expression of love, his love will come out in other ways. Playing with the kids, eating meals together, serving neighbors, going to events. So the relationship between leaders and the rest of the church is characterized by not just authority but an **affectionate authority**. It springs from compassionate concern for the church. A good father isn't authoritarian but open-hearted: "[We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also](#) (2 Cor. 6:11-13). There is an affectionate exchange between the spiritual father and his children. We are intended to live, serve, and grow together with hearts open to one another. Default trust, affection not distrust and coolness. Thabiti: "*A healthy church member does not "withhold" his affection from the pastor; rather, he or she gives it freely and liberally.*" **A church that practices affectionate authority and reciprocating love within a matrix of Christward submission will be a unique witness to the world.** It will showcase Christ by displaying the gospel—a *people in humble submission to an affectionate, forgiving authority*. Faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. So let's question authority but also question our questioning of authority. Let's affirm the authority of Christ, through his leaders, and submit to them as they submit to Christ as a witness to the world of an authority affirming, love reciprocating family of God.