

**July 18, 2010**

## **Church Matters – Authority Matters**

Alright – good morning again. It is good that you are here today. Go ahead and get your Bible out and have it ready, get your message map out so you can take some notes today as we continue to watch the pieces come together. We are in a follow up series to our study of Titus. In Titus we saw God's blueprint for his church. Being Christians who believe the Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God, when He reveals His will in what we read, we move to line up with it as fast as we can.

So this follow up series to God's blueprint in Titus is called Church Matters. We've looked at how the local church matters to God – and how in that local church membership matters – last week we looked at how leadership matters. We saw how God's design for the leadership of his church looks nothing like the business model of our culture though that is what is very commonly found in the structure of churches today. Instead we saw God's design for a plurality of elders called to lead, to shepherd, to teach in each church – a group of men with Christ-like character recognized by the meaningful membership of a local church and called by the Spirit of God to lead God's people by teaching and applying God's Word to God's people in a way that benefits them spiritually and glorifies our Savior. If you missed that sermon, you really need to go and listen to it or read it online – there was just too much information to really recap today.

But we are going to see even more how the pieces God has shown us so far – about meaningful church membership and plural godly leadership – how those pieces go together even more today as we look at the truth that in God's blueprint for His church, **authority matters**.

In a nutshell, in the New Testament church model, Jesus Christ is the Chief Shepherd, Scripture is the final and sufficient guide, and the elders are Christ's undershepherds in the local church and the authority to govern and teach the local church resides in the plurality of elders.

The Bible does not tell us precisely how much authority the elders of the local congregation should have. We have to take relevant texts from the New Testament and attempt to synthesize the principles taught in each text. As a result, we must be cautious of conclusions that are too rigid or dogmatic. The principles we gather from the Word should be followed, but the outworking of these principles can be appropriated in different ways.

We will look at several passages today – many of which we looked at the previous three weeks. Most will be on the screen to avoid you having to turn back and forth in your Bibles too much. But if you want to go ahead and have them ready, you can turn to the book of Hebrews – we'll be there in a second.

When it comes to authority in God's design, **the Bible is clear that elders have AUTHORITY**. Paul writes in **1 Thessalonians 5:12-13**.

*“Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.”*

This text demonstrates that **in the earliest stage of the church, there were some who were set apart as LEADERS and were to be respected because of their important work in the church**. Paul makes a distinction here between the “brothers” he is addressing and those they are to respect. Apparently not every believer was to be honored and respected in the same way. Some, because of their gifts and functions in the community, were to be considered worthy of special recognition.

This ought to sound familiar to what we saw last week in **1 Timothy 5:17** where Paul writes: *“The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.”*

Another text that demonstrates the authority of the elders is found where you have your Bibles open in **Hebrews – turn to chapter 13 verse 17**.

Although elders are not mentioned here, since the New Testament gives no indication of any other officers in the church with this kind of authority, it is reasonable to conclude that the congregation is to submit to and obey its elders.

It is interesting here that the word “obey” in Greek is the word *peitho* that can also mean “to be persuaded.” The normal word for “obey” or “to subject oneself” is *hypotasso*, which is a stronger word. Although the word *peitho* demands obedience, it is more of the obedience that is won through persuasive conversation. The second word – “submit” – is only found here in the whole New Testament and means “to submit to one’s authority.” And notice in this command that **the author of Hebrews does not say that the leaders are to COMPEL the congregation to submit. He urges the congregation to submit voluntarily and GLADLY to leadership.** The congregation takes it upon itself to follow the leadership – so again we see the importance of the commitment that is a part of meaningful membership in the local church.

And as we think about it, the calling and very functions of the elders communicates that their office carries with it a certain amount of authority. **As teachers – as shepherds – as leaders – they are charged with the task of authoritatively proclaiming and following God’s Word. They are not typically offering their own OPINIONS.** They are declaring “thus sayeth the Lord” in real and practical ways. Consequently **the congregation has the DUTY to obey – not because they are the words of the elder, but the words of God inasmuch as the elder accurately and faithfully conveys the and follows the Word of God.**

So as we saw last week we can understand why the biblical role of the deacons in God’s design for the structure of his church is so crucial as they serve to free up the elders more and more to study and pray and preach and apply God’s Word. And Hebrews 13 reminds us that the elders are accountable to God for their role as shepherds and all that we talked about last week and in the same way, the sheep are accountable before God to obey and follow the shepherds so that they can fulfill their responsibilities with joy. Read that passage again with me (Hebrews 13:17 TEXT)

In the same way that the elders’ accountability is ultimately not to the congregation, but to Christ – the same is true of their authority. The office of elder does not derive its existence or authority from the congregation. **The elder’s authority comes from CHRIST and the congregation’s role is that of recognition and affirmation of God’s gifting and calling. In that is required a certain amount of TRUST.**

Now we’ve all heard it said that “trust must be earned.” And I understand what is meant by that and the wisdom at its root. But that attitude is at best only half true. The kind of trust that we are called to give our fellow imperfect human beings in this life – whether they be family or friends or employers or leaders in our church – can never finally be earned. It must be given as a gift – a gift of faith – more in trust of the God who gives, than of those whom we see as God’s gifts to us. It is a serious spiritual deficiency in a church either to have leaders who are untrustworthy or members who are incapable of trusting.

Now there will be all kinds of decisions and issues requiring leadership, fellowship, trust, movement in the church life. Some are really clear. Some are really serious. Some both. But **the issues and decisions and movements about which it is most important for the church to listen to the elders is when areas are SERIOUS, but UNCLEAR – crucial, but not obvious in terms of solution.** Should we acknowledge this person as an elder? Should we affirm this membership action? Should we allocate this major expenditure? Should we make this change in direction as a congregation?

These are the areas where the elders serve the church rather than the church attempting to act as a committee of the whole or the pastor or some committee chairman making the decision alone. **This is the crucial area where a church either enjoys the LEADERSHIP God gives it and prospers by it, or they reject it and pay the price. Listen – a church member’s basic attitude needs to be either to TRUST the leaders or replace them. But don’t say you acknowledge them and then not follow them.**

If you disagree with the elders on a recommendation, have a good reason. Go and talk to them about it. Other than the Bible, you are the elders' main source of information about you! **As Mark Dever writes:** *"Rather than distrusting your church leaders, let me encourage you to talk behind your elders' backs – meet in secret – and plot to encourage your leaders. Strategize to make the church leaders' work not burdensome, but a joy. This, the writer of Hebrews says, will make your leaders a blessing to you."*

Most of that was fairly obvious to any thoughtful person who takes the Word and seeks to apply it. But the a lot of the rest of our look at why authority matters in God's church may not be so well-known. First of all – it must be pointed out that **elders' authority is not ABSOLUTE**. They derive their authority from the Word of God and when they stray from that Word, they abandon their God-given authority.

What that means is that elders are not to be obeyed simply because they are elders. Rather, they are to be obeyed because they have the responsibility of shepherding and teaching the congregation. They shepherd because the Word calls elders to shepherd. They teach because the Word calls elders to teach. But when their shepherding and teaching strays from Scripture, their authority as shepherds and teachers is no longer binding on the congregation. That requirement we read to submit is not meant to suggest blind, mindless submission. Nor does it suggest that elders are above questioning or immune from public discipline (just read 1 Timothy chapter 5 again). The elders are most assuredly still answerable to the congregation and the congregation is responsible to hold its spiritual leaders accountable to faithful adherence to the truth of the Word. So there is a tightly knit and delicate and reciprocal relationship between elders and congregation. So we see **not only is an elder's authority limited by his faithful submission to and exercise of the Word of God, it is also limited by the authority of the CONGREGATION**.

Remember from earlier in this series – the church – God's church – is the regular assembly of people who profess and give evidence of having been saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Through the power of that gospel, every redeemed child of God is indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God, is placed in a living union with Jesus Christ, is made an heir with Christ, is gifted for ministry in the body of Christ which makes that gathering of such individuals in the local church a community of priests and kings – a family in which every member has a unique high standing and must share in the responsibilities, privileges, ownership, obligations, and building up of the local church. This is why the New Testament authors address the whole church – not just the elders – when they write to a local church.

**The New Testament gives a much higher status and role to the CONGREGATION at large than has often been accepted and practiced in the experience of the church.** When we get back to the Bible – to God's design – this is what we see. Though all members do not function as shepherds to the whole family, the council of elders does that, Christ's presence is with the whole congregation, not just the elders, and He ministers through all the members because all have the same Spirit.

That understanding is hugely lacking – and not just lacking in churches "out there" – but lacking here at Fairway – and it must be understood if we are to come to grips with where the authority lies in God's design for his church. Because we're going to see that **the last and final court of appeal in a matter of the life of the local church is – and should be – the meaningful MEMBERSHIP of the local church** – it is and should be you.

Let's look at the 4 such matters in the New Testament together.

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus lays out the principle of the final authority of the congregation. This is a fairly well known passage – Jesus talks about how to handle a dispute between Christians in a church together. And after the issue is addressed by the individuals – and following that by a small group of witnesses from the church family – if that still doesn't bring reconciliation, then **verse 17** Jesus says:

*“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”*

Notice to whom the final appeal falls to – not a pastor or a council of elders or any church committee, - he says tell the church – the whole local congregation whose action is the final appeal.

Now obviously because of their leadership in shepherding and teaching the church, the elders will be involved in the process – and we actually saw an example of this being played out last week in Acts chapter 6. **Look there with me – Acts 6:1-5 (TEXT)**

*In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.*

So there's the conflict – there's the dispute between church members. It had gotten to the point that the leaders of the church were now involved and look what happens:

*So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." This proposal pleased the whole group.*

We see the apostles handing over responsibility to the congregation – they were recognizing in the assembly the same kind of ultimate authority, under God, that Jesus spoke of in Matthew 18. **In matters of DISPUTE between Christians**, the meaningful membership as a whole is the final court held out in Scripture.

And not only in dispute, but in doctrine, we see the same principle. In Galatians chapter 1, Paul calls on a congregation of fairly young Christians to sit in judgment of those who preach the gospel.

**Verses 8 and 9 say:**

*“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!*

*As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!”*

He writes to the Christians who compose the churches and he makes it quite clear that not only are they competent to sit in judgment on what claims to be the gospel, but that they must! They have an inescapable duty to judge those who claim to be messengers of the gospel of Christ according to how what they claim measures up to what they already knew to be the gospel.

Paul makes the same point in **2 Timothy 4:3**. Look at that with me: *“For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.”*

God through Paul holds the church accountable – not just the actual false teacher – for the false word being taught in the church. Whether in selecting them or paying for them or approving their teaching or in simply consenting to listen to them repeatedly, the congregation here is culpable. They are held guilty for tolerating false teaching. **In matters of basic DOCTRINAL truth**, the meaningful membership is the final court held out in Scripture.

Dispute, doctrine – and now discipline falls in this area of authority as well. Again, we looked at these verses a few weeks ago at the importance of meaningful membership, but in **1 Corinthians 5** when a church member was unrepentantly continuing in sin, Paul appeals to the whole congregation – not just the elders – in **verses 5, 7, 11, and 13**. You can read those verses and you will find each time it is the congregation as a whole in context that is being urged or told or empowered to act and respond to the sinful situation. This was a matter for the whole congregation – they had accepted this one into their number and they were all now tolerating him. So they were all now implicated in his sin and they must all either turn loose of this man or turn loose of their claim to be followers of Christ. **In matters of church DISCIPLINE**, the meaningful membership is the final court of appeal.

Finally – this same principle of authority applies to that meaningful membership we’ve been talking about. Again – in most likely a followup to what we just referred to in 1 Corinthians, and a passage we looked at a couple of weeks ago, we find Paul writing in **2 Corinthians 2:6-8** *“The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.”*

They had acted as a whole to discipline this person. That discipline apparently had worked. Now Paul writes to the church as a whole urging them to readmit the repentant man into the church. But that’s all Paul can do – to exhort, to urge – because **in matters of church MEMBERSHIP**, the meaningful membership as a whole must be the final court of appeal. So in matters of dispute, of doctrine, of discipline, of membership, God has given the authority to be the final court of appeal to the meaningful membership of the church.

**God has clearly designed his church so that while authority is exercised and imbued in the ELDER leadership he calls out, that authority is limited by the final authority he invests in the CORPORATE body of believers in the local church.**

And just as the elders’ authority is also not infallible and is forfeited when they stray from the truth, just because the congregation has the authority we just discussed doesn’t mean they are always right.

Thinking back to the verse we looked at in **2 Timothy 4:3** where Paul suggests that the congregation is responsible for keeping watch over the church’s doctrine, it is also clear in that very example that they can and will at times exercise that responsibility badly. So we are back to the careful and intricate relationship between elders and congregation in God’s design for his church.

**In that it is important to distinguish between elder LEADERSHIP within a congregational context from an elder RULE position that does not recognize the biblical role of the congregation.** [For those of you who know of other elder type systems, let me be clear for you here. A biblical elder led congregationalism is distinct from Presbyterianism because it does not appeal outside of the congregation to another final backstop against sin and wrong. And it is distinct from the kind of elder rule practiced in many independent and Bible churches because it recognizes that the final responsibility does indeed rest with the congregation.]

The point isn’t just semantics between elder led and elder rule. The distinction is between congregations that do and do not recognize their biblical responsibility and authority not only to obey the elders (as we saw in Hebrews 13) but also on occasion to disobey the elders (as we saw in Galatians 1).

God holds teachers accountable for what they teach – we know that from James 3:1. But that does not absolve the congregations who sit idly by. Listen – **churches that teach (or just act as if) they have no such responsibility and instead assign all authority of discerning truth solely to the elders, have abdicated a biblical RESPONSIBILITY.** Passive, uninvolved, irresponsible membership is as unbiblical as business-model CEO pastor leadership – and in my opinion, both are equally widespread and usually go together in destroying the glory God designed into His church.

What we see today is that not only does membership matter – not only does leadership matter – but within both, authority matters in the church that matters to God. **The New Testament does not prescribe DETAILED rules and regulations for the elder-congregation relationship or decision making process. What is clear though is that Christ-like love, humility, and prayer are to guide ALL the decisions and uses of authority in God’s church.**

Back in **Acts 6:4** – the church leaders *confess “we will devote ourselves to prayer.”* In **Acts 1:14** as Luke describes the first New Testament congregation, he *says “they all joined constantly together in prayer.”* And in the context of this study – in the mindset of the leadership and followship and mutual

authority of the church of God, hopefully the words we studied through several years ago in Philippians chapter 2 will take on a deeper meaning. If you want to turn there, I'm talking about **Philippians 2:2-8 (TEXT)**.

This morning I hope you are challenged in two ways - both by your responsibility to submit, follow, obey, encourage, support, and help the elders God calls out from among you as much as your responsibility as a Holy Spirit indwelt child of God and member of his family to exercise wisdom and the authority God has placed in you together for his church.

That's what we have must learn to balance – the dual notions that elders have authority and the congregation as a whole has the final authority on critical issues. Paul Schreiner explains:

*“Too much focus on leaders could obscure the equality of all believers in Christ. Paul maintained a delicate balance between the role of leadership and the contribution of each member in the church. Leaders were important but they did not operate in such a way that individual members' contributions were quashed; they led mainly by example and persuasion, not coercion.”*

For such a system to work – it goes back to everything we have looked at:

- that the church matters because it is made of people who are filled with the Holy Spirit – who profess and give evidence of having been saved by the grace of God through faith in Christ
- that membership matters because meaningful membership is defined by the commitment of life and practice of loving humility in relationship from family member to family member
- that leadership matters because God calls Christ-like men to lead, to shepherd, and to teach God's people through God's Word so that Jesus is clearly the head of his church
- and now, that authority matters as each of those pieces works together to create the structure that God designed to give him the most glory and the world the best chance of seeing that glory through us.

To fit God's blueprint for the structure of his church, not only must we move to line up with elder leadership, you must understand and own the responsibility of exercising the authority together that God has given you. **What is clear in God's design of authority is that the elders will give an account to God for how they LEAD – but the membership will give an account to God for the condition and success of the CHURCH in displaying the glory of God and thereby reaching the lost with the truth of our Savior.**

God will hold me and the other elders – whoever they end up being – accountable for how we lead, but God will hold each of you accountable for the condition and success of Fairway at displaying the glory of God.

Maybe more than ever, we are beginning to see the reality of the vision that God has given us – doing life in Christ one step at a time together. I hope each of you and I leave today with a new awareness of the unique position we each have in God's blueprint.

Let's pray.