

The Bible and Authority in the Church

A White Paper Prepared by
Wade Burleson and Paul Burleson

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is to biblically answer the
following question:
***Who has authority over believers
in the church?***

The Bible and Authority in the Church

This paper will address a common misconception about authority in the local church, a much talked about issue in our day, and give a biblical rationale for what authority in the church is and from where it comes. Authority in the church has often been misunderstood or misapplied by Christians due to cultural and personal biases, basing views on incorrect translations of the sacred text, or by wrongly assuming that religious traditions regarding authority are supported by the Word of God.

When we speak of the church, we must define what we mean. A legally incorporated business that the state calls a church is a business institution that has individuals who've

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been given legal authority by the state government to sign documents, buy and sell land, and enter into business contracts. The constitution of the local church identifies those individuals who have this legal authority in the eyes of the state. It is important for every member of a local church to know who bears legal responsibility for their particular church. However, if the state were to shut down the church's legal organization, the living organism that the Bible calls the church will continue.

The Bible defines the church of Jesus Christ as a living body of believers who are wed to Christ. The purpose of this paper is to biblically answer the following question: Who has authority over believers in the church? The biblical answer will be clear: Jesus Christ alone.

Tangentially, there are other questions that will be answered in this paper, questions like:

- ❖ Who can teach others within the church about Jesus Christ and assist people to grow stronger through faith in Him?
- ❖ Who can help others to deepen their satisfaction and joy in Jesus Christ? Who can lead church committees to conduct the work of Christ's kingdom?
- ❖ Who can evangelize, baptize, and disciple people in need of faith in Jesus Christ?
- ❖ Who can give counsel and guidance within the church to help others look to Jesus Christ as the Source of real life and as the one true Authority over all of life?

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The answer to these questions will be clear: Those whom God has gifted, Christ has called, and the Spirit has anointed – regardless of gender, race, socio-economic status, or any assumed title or position within the church – are those from whom Christ’s authority flows and God’s people are strengthened spiritually.

This paper is neither an exhaustive theological study on the concept of authority nor is it an exegesis of all the biblical texts that refer to authority. Rather, this paper will be an attempt to give a clear explanation of what the Bible says about authority in the church and attempt to correct mistaken ideas and practices within the church on the subject.

Authority in the church has often been misunderstood or misapplied by Christians due to cultural and personal biases, basing views on incorrect translations of the sacred text, or by wrongly assuming that religious traditions regarding authority are supported by the Word of God.

The Problem of Authority Within the Local Church

The problem faced by many local churches regarding authority is the traditional and non-biblical practice of giving, recognizing, or assuming authority because of one's gender, church title or position, and/or personal influence within a city or community at large.

Jesus said that the Gentiles bestow authority with positions of honor, but this is something that His followers should never do. The Greek word for authority is *exousia*. It comes from a verb that means (1) to do something without hindrance, and/or (2) the right to do something or the right to be over something. When someone has authority, it means that they wield influence and lead others in the accomplishment of a purpose.

Again, the world at large operates with titles and positions that have inherent authority and power with those titles and positions. Politics, law enforcement, military organizations, educational institutions, and corporations all bestow power and authority in a hierarchy of leadership positions. Christ's ways, however, are completely opposite of the world's ways. Listen to His words: "Those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them: and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not (to be) this way among you. Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be the slave of all. For even the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45)

An interesting side note is that the Greek word for authority (*exousia*) is used only one time in the entire New Testament in reference to Christian marriage (I Corinthians 7:4). The Scripture clearly states in this verse that the husband and the wife have mutual authority over one another in sexual intercourse. No Christian husband is ever to take authority over his wife sexually, and viceversa. The consummation of a Christian marriage is a mutually shared right or privilege between both the husband and the wife. Again, this is the only time the word *exousia* (authority) is used in reference to marriage in the Bible, and it is never used in reference to the local church at all. The belief that the husband has "authority" over his wife, by the way, is more pagan than biblical.

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One might ask, “But what about the passages that refer to the husband being the ‘head over the wife’?” The English word “head” (see Ephesians 5:23 & I Corinthians 11:3) comes from a Greek word that is not generally used to convey the concept of authority over. It is the Greek word *kephale* (pronounced kef-a-lay) and its most common usage in everyday Greek is that of source or beginnings. Our English word “head” can convey the meaning of source as well. For example, “the head waters of a river” means the source or the beginning of a river. Knowing that *kephale* has a different meaning than *exousia* is important to properly interpret texts like Ephesians 5:23 and I Corinthians 11:3 where the word *kephale* is used and translated into English as head. However, regardless of how one chooses to translate *kephale*, either as authority or source, scripturally there is only one Head over any person in the church and that Head is Jesus Christ.

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Exousia (Authority) in the Life of Jesus Christ and His Followers

The word *exousia* (authority) was used of Christ when He was executing judgment (see John 5:27), when He took authority over His own life in the resurrection (see John 10:18), when He gives eternal life (see John 17:2), when He forgives sins (see Mark 1:22; 9:6 and Luke 5:24), when He heals the sick (see Matthew 9:8), and when He casts out demons (see Mark 1:27). Jesus Christ is also said in Scripture to have all authority (see Matthew 28:18) and He is called the Head over all other authorities (see Colossians 2:10).

The word *exousia* (authority) is used of believers in becoming the sons of God (see John 1:12), when casting out demons (see Matthew 10:1), when ruling with Christ over cities

after His return (see Luke 19:17), and when having access to the tree of life in Heaven (see Revelation 22:14). The word is also used in owning property (see Acts 5:4), the right to eat food offered to idols (see I Corinthians 8:9-11; translated liberty), and several other places in Scripture.

However, what is missing in the Bible is any place where *exousia* (authority) is used in relationship to someone having authority over a believer in the context of the church. Nor is *exousia* (authority) ever used in relationship to any alleged office of pastor or deacon. As we will see, the Bible never speaks of offices of power and authority within the church.

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The Church Does Have Authority, But It Is All Christ's

The church does have authority, but it is derived from our Lord. He has given each of us who comprise His church freedom and liberty (see I Corinthians 8:9). We are free in Christ to follow His leadership and commands in our lives, for He is our authority. In Christ's church, no other human being is to lord over other people. So, the freedom we have in Christ is to be used for the welfare and good of other people, and there is no Christian who is to rule over any other Christian.

Jesus possesses ALL authority. When we exercise the gifts He has given us, fulfill the calling He has placed on us as we live our lives anointed by the Spirit (i.e., the fruit of the Spirit), we will exercise His authority in the church. Christ's authority

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is always based on sacrificial giving. Likewise, authority in the church is seen as we love, serve, teach, and admonish one another, but authority in the church never resides in anyone's position in the church.

While it is true that historically the concept of authority in the church has emphasized the idea of being over others, this idea is a cultural concept and is not a biblical mandate at all. Jesus made that crystal clear with His rather stark statement that while the Gentiles exercise rule over others, it is NOT to be that way among believers (Mark 10:43).

The False Practices of the Church Resulting from Misinterpretations of Authority

There are two false practices in the church that continue to foster the mistaken notion that church authority is being over other people instead of being the greatest servant of all people.

One false practice is the unfortunate division between clergy and laity where the former does the work of ministry and the latter pays the salary of the former as a kind of professional minister. We are not saying that paying someone on a church staff is wrong. What we are saying is that the division between clergy and laity is not biblical. All believers are called to be ministers and there are to be no elevated positions of authority and power in the church. Sometimes people will be paid to do

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the work of the ministry because he or she is devoting full-time attention to the ministry.

The other false practice is for pastors, elders, or deacons to rule over the church because the office of pastor or deacon has an inherent authority within the office. For this reason, some within the church grant authority to the pastor because they believe God has given the pastor greater authority because of his position.

Neither of these concepts is a biblical viewpoint for authority in local church life.

The constitution of an institutional church may grant legal authority to a group of elders or deacons but this is a cultural practice of preference, not a biblical model at all. Again, legal authority is required by the state, but legal authority has nothing to do with spiritual authority in the church.

The Mistaken Notion of the Office of Deacon

Many churches see the word deacon as conveying the idea of an office that those ordained to that office have authority for the leading of the church. We will use this phrase office of deacon to illustrate the unbiblical nature of this concept which we have, unfortunately accepted as scriptural.

We don't deny that there were those who were set aside to serve the saints in the first century church. Acts 6 shows this as well as other passages. However, when New Testament believers used the Greek word *diakonia* (we use the English word deacon) to describe what was being done within that early congregation, they had in mind what had been seen in Jesus

who had “made Himself of no reputation and took upon Him the form of a servant...” (Philippians 2:7).

What they had observed in Him was a washing of human feet, feeding the multitudes, healing the sick, always as one serving, and thus, He left us an example that can only be explained with the Greek word *diakonia*, (remember, we say deacon) which means ministering or serving. But there was no hint in their minds of any authority inherent in that word or office implied.

In fact, the general sense of the word is to assist, which indicates not just to work in general, but a work that benefits someone else. This is true whether it was a ministry of waiting on tables or a ministry of the word. It was a serving ministry (Acts 6:2-4).

Paul used the word *diakonos* to describe himself as a servant of the Lord (1 Corinthians 3:5), a servant of God (2 Corinthians 6:4), a servant of the new covenant (2 Corinthians 3:6), a servant of the gospel (Ephesians 3:7, Colossians 1:23) and a servant of the church (Colossians 1:25).

Paul noted that many of his co-workers were also servants: the woman Phoebe, although when the KJV reads the word *diakonos* linked to a woman, it is for some strange reason translated helper (see Romans 16:1). Other men like Tychicus, (Ephesians 6:21, Colossians 4:7) Timothy, (1 Timothy 4:6) and Epaphras, were called *diakonos*, just like Phoebe (Colossians 1:7). Jesus said that all of his followers should be *diakonos* (Matthew 20:26, 23:11 and John 12:26), which means that a servant’s spirit should characterize all of us. So, with all

Christians doing the work of a deacon (*diakonos*) as deacons of Christ, deacons of His message, and deacons of one another, one is hard-pressed to find authority over in that word.

You can see there is no hint in the New Testament of anyone holding an office called deacon which gives one authority over other Christians. Since that is the case, where did the idea of the office of deacon come from in our churches?

There are a couple of places where the King James Version translates the word *diakonos* in a manner that goes well beyond the true meaning of the word and winds up adding concepts to the original text that were never intended. One place is in 1 Timothy 3:13 where Paul says:

“For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

The words, “have used the office of a deacon” were all used to define the one Greek word, *diakoneo*, which is translated by A. H. Strong as: “To be a servant, attendant, domestic, to serve, wait upon.” W.E. Vine adds this, “The Revised Version rightly omits office and translates the verb *diakoneo* to mean simply to serve.” Notice that Vine admits that the word office is not found in the verse.

Throughout the entire NT the word *diakoneo* is NEVER used to imply or show an office and it certainly doesn’t imply rule. It is the service done by one who is a servant to another person. The use of the words “have used the office of a deacon” was an attempt by the King James Version translators, it would appear,

to identify an office that was already in operation at the time of translation and to continue it by including a phrase in the text to support it. Thus, a hierarchical office is assumed by the King James Version translators, but unauthorized by the writers of the New Testament.

Let us restate the problem with the word office in the English versions of the New Testament. Because having an office of authority called deacon in the church was the cultural bias and desire of King James and the scholars he enlisted to translate the Bible, the translators hierarchical view of authority in the church made its way into the King James Version. Their concept of church authority is nowhere to be found in the sacred Scriptures, but this system of authority had already become a religious hierarchical system by 1611. The translators practiced what is called eisegesis in their translation of the Greek into English, which means they read something into the text that is not there.

While it is true that historically the concept of authority in the church has emphasized the idea of being over others, this idea is a cultural concept and is not a biblical mandate at all.

The Mistaken Notion of the Office of Pastor

But it isn't just the incorrect inclusion of office of deacon in 1 Timothy 3:13 that leads the church astray. The erroneous concept of an office of authority is also found in the King James Version rendering of 1 Timothy 3:1 where Paul said this about a bishop according to the KJV, "This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desires a good work."

Again, the word office is not present in 1 Timothy 3:1, and the word bishop is the single Greek word, *episkopos* which means to tend or to oversee. So the word office was incorrectly placed in the verse and the word bishop was used to translate oversee, because the translators had bishops in King James'

day, and it seems that King James and his men wished to maintain their hierarchical positions of authority in the church.

A proper translation of 1 Timothy 3:1 would simply be, “If a person sets their heart on overseeing, it is an honorable work they desire to do.” There is no office of bishop at all in the text. It is just a person desiring a ministry of overseeing to which the Apostle is referring.

The only other instance in the New Testament where the English word “office” is found is in Romans 12:4 where the KJV says, “For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office.” But the English word office in this verse DOES NOT properly translate the Greek word at all. The word being translated is *praxis*, which means a doing or deed or function. It is the same word in Romans 8:13, “...for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds (*praxis*) of the body, you will live.”

Simply put, the office of pastor/elder/bishop or deacon, as an office that conveys inherent authority in the church, simply does not exist in the Bible.

Nobody Rules “Over” Anybody in the Church

The biggest proof-text for the idea of someone ruling, (being over others in authority) in the church and particularly with the elders doing so, is found in Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24. These verses say:

“Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation.” (Hebrews 13:7)

“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.” (Hebrews 13:17)

“Salute (to draw to one’s self) all them that have the rule over you, and all the saints. They of Italy salute you.”
(Hebrews 13:24)

There are several observations that need to be made about the above three verses:

(1) Notice the word elder does not appear in these verses. It simply is not there.

(2) The word “over” is not actually in any one of these three verses, so we will lay it aside as an unfortunate and an unwarranted addition to the text by translators. It simply is not there in the original text.

(3) It’s also worthy of note that the 13:7 verse is written in the past tense though incorrectly translated by the KJV in the present tense. The verse is to be correctly translated this way:

“Remember those who were your guides, whose faith you are to imitate, taking note of how they were faithful to the very end of life.”

Hebrews 13:7 is a verse that is reminding the Hebrew Christians of all those mentioned in chapters 11 and 12 and it follows verse 6 which refers to not fearing man, which these people did not do, and gave their lives because of being fearless. It may even include the Apostles themselves. But to make it mean elders is not an option.

(4) In Hebrews 13:17 three words give some trouble as translated in the King James Version. As mentioned above, the word “over” is not in the text, so we will drop it. The three words are: Obey, rule and submit.

Obey

In the Greek it is *peitho*. This word means to persuade, to win over. When it is in the passive and middle voices, it means to be persuaded, to listen to (in Acts 5:40 *peitho* is in the passive voice and is translated they agreed). The obedience suggested in the text is not by submission to any authority, but agreement resulting from persuasion (see W. E. Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words). So, according to Vine’s Dictionary, it means to follow because of being persuaded. It does not mean obedience the way the western mind thinks of obedience. The obedience of Hebrews 13:17 is due to an internal reasoning and agreement that results from persuasion, not an external conformity that is the result of authoritative control.

Rule

In the Greek it is *hegeomai*. This word means to lead, to go before, to be a leader; it does not carry the connotation of ruling over, but that of giving leadership in a church (see Strong’s Word Studies). So, according to Strong again, true leadership is nothing more than going on ahead.

Submit

In the Greek it is *hypeikete*. This word is in the present imperative active tense, and it means to choose to submit or to follow or to yield. This is the word’s ONLY appearance in

the New Testament, and most likely should be translated “yield.”

There is a Greek word that means to be subject to and obey. It is *peitharcho* (peith-ar-KAY-o), one of the words built upon *arche* meaning ruler. It is found three times in the New Testament, twice in Acts (5:29 & 27:21) and once in Titus (3:1). There, and in other writings outside the New Testament, it describes obedience to someone who is in civil authority or to God, but that word is not the word used here.

Even Paul counted himself as a fellow servant. He said in II Corinthians 1:24, “Not that we have dominion [*archo*] over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy, for by faith you stand.”

(5) For a better understanding of Hebrews 13:24 see the above for Hebrews 13:7 and the meaning of the Greek word translated rule.

So the better translation of the Greek language in these verses would be:

“Remember those who had [past tense] been your guides, who led the way with the Word: whose faith imitate, considering the strong way they ended their life.”

(Hebrews 13:7)

“Choose to yield to those who are out in front leading you because you are persuaded they are likewise being faithful in

their task, knowing they will be held accountable.”

(Hebrews 13:17)

“Embrace all those who are your guides or leaders, as well as all the Saints. They of Italy embrace you as well.”

(Hebrews 13:24)

There is no concept of lording authority over someone in the church. There is simply NO TEXTUAL justification for an office of any kind in the New Testament local church with inherent authority vested in it.

This is not to say there are not ministries that can be called pastoral or elder ministries or even deacon ministries in a local church. What can be said is that New Testament local church authority was totally different than any cultural concept of being over someone else.

Real Authority in the Church According to the New Testament

The scriptural model for Church life 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.

This is 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, properly called the Body of Christ.

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 doesn't come because someone has a stronger personality, knows more Bible, or is held in high esteem. That is foreign to the New Testament.

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 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.

What About Elders Over a Congregation?

Someone may ask, “But doesn’t Acts 20:28 indicate that the elders were over the congregation?” There it is said of them, “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.”

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. In fact, Peter instructed the elders to be very careful that elders don’t “lord it over” the flock (see 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.

This is primarily because the present day view of the church is one where the church is seen as being an institution or organization run by leaders who are of a corporate chief executive officer's mentality that is, as has been shown, completely foreign to the scriptures.

The Principles that Flow Out of a Proper Understanding of Authority in the Church

- (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 of the Church

[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 King James Version uses the word office but it is not in the text at all, and it would be better to NOT 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.

Conclusion: 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.

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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 any leadership by this standard if you want to be biblical in church life.

