

‘The authority of the church’

Many years ago, on a Roman warship, the story goes that a galley boss stood at the helm one morning and shouted to the assembled rowers, ‘Today I have good news! All of you are getting extra food tonight!’ The rowers erupted into cheers almost immediately, all except for one very old man seated in the back, who began moaning in horror and said, ‘Oh no, not again’. Puzzled, a newer rower next to him asked, ‘What are you upset about? We’re getting extra food!’ to which the man replied, ‘because, this only happens when the Captain’s nephew wants to water ski.’

I’ve been asked to speak on the subject of the authority of the church today. It’s a subject that some people don’t like and it’s a subject which is very often misunderstood. You see, when Jesus was at Caesarea Philippi and Peter confessed that Jesus is ‘the Messiah, the Son of the living God’ in Matthew 16:16.

It’s then that Jesus says in Matthew 16:18-19 “I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Remember the rock which Jesus speaks of here is the fact that He is the Messiah and Son of God. And Jesus was going to build His church build upon the fact, that He is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Now anyone who has any interest in ancient warfare will know that the most vulnerable part of any city, is the city’s gates. When a city was attacked by an enemy, the enemy attacked the gates and if the gates fell, the city fell.

And so, in many ways, the strength of the fortifications of a city was totally depended on the strength of the gates. Hades is the unseen home of the spiritually dead and what Jesus is saying here is that the strength or power of physical death wouldn’t prevail against the building and existence of the church.

Notice that Jesus gave Peter the keys, plural. One of those keys was used in Acts 2 when he opened the way up for the Jews to get to heaven. And the other key was used when he spoke to Cornelius’ household in Acts 10 where he opened the way to heaven for the Gentiles.

But what does this binding and loosing mean? Let me tell you what it doesn’t mean, it’s not speaking about the apostles being given the authority to forgive people. It’s speaking about the authority to deliver the terms and conditions concerning how a person may enter the kingdom of heaven, the church. The point I’m making is this, the church is Jesus’ church, it’s not man’s and it’s not man made.

Acts 20:28 “Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” The church belongs to Him because He’s the one who purchased the church with His blood. Now loved ones, the question we should always ask is this, **who’s in charge?**

Have you ever been to a restaurant and not been happy with the food? You speak to the waiter, then you speak to the chef and then finally, you speak to the manager. I mean’s there’s nothing worse than trying to make a complaint about something but you don’t know who’s in charge. Now that’s an important question to answer in almost every situation because when we don’t know who’s in charge, the outcome is simply confusion and frustration.

But let me ask you this, **who should be in charge of the church?** Colossians 1:16-18 “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.”

Now we all know that every church has a structure to it, it doesn’t matter if it’s the church of England, the Baptist church or the Seventh Day Adventist church. Every congregation has people who are designated to run the day to day affairs. And in Scripture, we find that the early church had elders, deacons, evangelists, teachers and other kinds of people who took care of certain ministries within the church.

I remember not long ago someone asked me, **who’s in charge of the church?** To which I replied ‘Jesus’. They said, ‘no, no, I mean, who has the authority in the church?’ To which I replied, ‘oh! That’ll be Jesus’. They said, ‘no, no, no, I mean, who has the final say in the church?’ To which I replied, ‘oh! I get you now, that’ll be Jesus’. Now if that person were to ask, **who makes the day to day decisions in a congregation?** I would have said, ‘that would be the elders, who work with the deacons and evangelist and other leaders of the ministries we have available’.

You see loved ones, if the elders approve of something, we would call it church policy. But if the elders don't approve of something, everyone knows, it won't happen. And please know this, unless there was a compelling Biblical reason not to do something, I would back any decision the elders made.

You see, God has given elders a very important responsibility. Their job is to take care of the Bride of Christ, the church and to protect her from heresy and false doctrine and immorality. In other words, they are the protectors of God's family.

That's why God wanted His elders to be good fathers and husbands. **1 Timothy 3:4-5** "He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)"

A good husband and father will have experience in protecting their own family. And so, because they understand how to take loving care of their own families, these elders will be experienced in how to do what's best for God's people. They'll know how to love God's children, they'll know how to encourage growth and set standards for the family.

But who does the church belong to? It belongs to Jesus. You see, the elders must always make their decisions based upon what they think Jesus would want because the church doesn't belong to the elders, it belongs to Jesus. And the elders, along with the deacons, preacher, and teachers and other leaders in the church, will be accountable on the day of judgment for how they have treated the Bride of Christ. That's why we need to continually lift up our elders in prayer and encourage them and help them wherever possible.

Elders, as God's authorities in spiritual things weren't placed in their position by the popular vote of the people, but by the sovereign act of the Holy Spirit. **Acts 20:28** "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." In other words, the Holy Spirit set down the criteria and qualities a man needs to become an elder.

As they serve, the members of the congregation need to know them because of the work they're doing. **1 Thessalonians 5:12** "Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you."

As members of this congregation, we must always submit to them and make their work a joy. **Hebrews 13:17** "Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you."

Elders, will always be working to maintain a godly balance in their dealings in the church. They mustn't be overbearing, but at the same time, they shouldn't be too weak, standing by while evil men or false teachers harm the church. As a congregation we must recognise their authority within the church. And they must recognise that every decision they make is based upon what they think Jesus would want according to what's been revealed within God's Word. But more importantly, they continue to remember that **'Jesus is the Head of His church'**.

We've talked about the elders and how important it is for them to keep Jesus as the Head of His church. But, **how about the rest of us? How do we know whether we have allowed Jesus to be the Head of His Church?** Because please know this, when Jesus is the Head of a congregation, that congregation will be a healthy church. But, if that church isn't healthy, it's usually because somebody forgot to let Jesus be in charge.

Look at this picture of a thermometer, **what does a thermometer measure?** It measures heat doesn't it and **what's the normal body temperature of most people?** 98.6. Now if you were to take my temperature and it was 102, **what would that tell you?** It would tell you I'm sick. If my temperature is too high, then I'm sick, I'm not healthy. And loved ones, it's the same within the body of Christ, if somebody's temperature within the church is too hot.

Now you guys have been around long enough to witness what I'm talking about. You get some guy coming into a congregation and he has major issues. He wants everything done his way because he thinks he knows what's best. He will shout people and when you don't agree with them, they just get angrier and angrier. People get confused and they don't know who to believe or whose right. **And who's at the receiving end of these outbursts?** Usually the elders or the preacher.

In my experience, the one measuring stick I use, with **'the church police'**, is always the fruit of the Spirit.

I'm sure we've heard someone say, **'that just makes my blood boil!'** Well, what's interesting is that in almost every language, anger is portrayed as being **'hot'** about something. In the Greek language, there's a word called **'thumos'** and **do you know what that translates into in English?** Let me show you **Galatians 5** and see if you guess the word.

Galatians 5:19-21 "The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like."

Did you the guess the word? It's the word **'wrath'** or **'fits of rage'** as the NIV has it. It literally means, heat, anger boiling up. In other words, anger is often a sign of a heat, a heightened temperature, an unhealthy soul.

Now contrast that with **Galatians 5:22-23** "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law." Notice the difference between the **'acts of the flesh'** and the **'fruit of the Spirit'**.

The acts of the flesh are filled with anger and frustration, but the fruit of Spirit has no anger, it has no strife, there is no contention. **Why?** Because when we bear the fruit of the Spirit, Jesus is in charge, He's our head. When He's in charge we can trust Him to control the situation. We don't need to shout and yell to get a point across. We don't have to grab a song book and beat somebody over the head with it, **why?** Because Jesus is in control.

As someone once said, **'90% of the friction of daily life is caused by the wrong tone of voice.'** When people get angry, people tend to mistreat other people in the body of Christ because they're not living up to their expectations. Loved ones, when you witness a fellow Christian getting angry, because they're not getting their own way, it's probably because they feel they've become the head of the church. They're effectively taking the control away from Jesus.

But we must never forget that Jesus is the final authority in the church because He is the author of the church. He thought about the church before the creation of the world. He came and died for the church and shed His blood to purchase it. Now we all know that if we have a temperature, we need to take some medicine. And what the Bible prescribes is found in **Proverbs 17:22** "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."

Do you remember a few months ago during our kid's time that I asked everyone to show their angry face? Remember I challenged you to try something? I said, the next time you were feeling angry about something or with someone, try singing the chorus, **'Jesus loves me, this I know.'** Now when we did that, we quickly found out that it was pretty difficult to sing that chorus with a clenched fist and an angry face. **Why was it hard for us to be angry while we sang that song?** Because, if Jesus loves us, we trust that He'll take care of things we can't control, including the things that make us angry.

We've seen that Jesus must be the head of His church, we've seen that everyone within a congregation, the elders, the deacons etc are subject to the leadership of Jesus. And so, every decision we make in the church must be based upon what we think Jesus would want in this congregation. **Now the question is why? Why should Jesus be allowed to be the Head of His church?**

Well, we saw earlier that He bought the church with His blood and we saw that He is the head of His church. But there is another reason why we Christ should be head of His church. And the answer is simple, Jesus earned that right.

Colossians 1:16-18 "For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy."

Jesus is the head of the church, because that's His right. Jesus is the head of the church because that's the way God designed the church to function.

Who remembers going to the seaside and putting your face above a headless frame painted to represent a muscle man, a clown, or even a bathing beauty? I'm guessing many of us have had our pictures taken this way, and the photos are humorous because the head doesn't fit the body.

And I wonder sometimes, if we could picture Christ as the head of our local body of believers, [would the world laugh at the misfit? Or would they stand in awe of a human body so closely related to a divine head?](#)

When I was younger my friend bought a car, which ran pretty well but over time it begun to run sluggish, until it finally broke down. He got under the bonnet to discover that someone had tried to change parts of the engine and added a few extra things to make it go faster. You see, that's what happens when you try to change the actual design of the car in the first place. When you start tampering around with the design, it will eventually not run right. And loved ones, it's only when Jesus is the **'head of the church'**, that the church will ever run right.

Notice what Paul says earlier in Colossians. **Colossians 1:10-11** **"And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might."**

Think about this, when Jesus is the head of His church, this is what you get. You are empowered to live a life worthy of your Lord and you can please Him in every way. When Jesus is the head of His church, you can bear fruit in every good work and you can grow in your knowledge of God. When Jesus is the head of His church, you can be strengthened with all of the power of God.

If it ever gets to the point where Jesus isn't the head of this congregation, then the opposite will apply. We won't be empowered to live a life worthy of God, we won't be able to please Him. We won't be able to bear fruit, we won't grow in our knowledge of God. If He's not head of this congregation, then we won't be strengthened by the power of God.

And one thing I've learned over the years as a preacher, is that when Jesus is present in His church, people change. When Jesus is in charge of people's lives, they become different. When Jesus is in charge, people are transformed by His presence and His power.

[I heard a story about a young man who left home for his first year of university. His mother was concerned that he wouldn't keep his dorm room in order, so when she visited him on his birthday, she wasn't surprised to find his room in a total mess. There were papers and books scattered all over the place. But what shocked her the most were the obscene pictures hanging on the walls.](#)

[And so, at Christmas time, she sent her son a box of presents, including a portrait of Jesus. He thanked her for the gifts but didn't say anything about the picture. In the spring, when she visited the school again, her son was eager for her to come to his room.](#)

[Upon entering, she found on the best wall space the picture of Christ, all the other pictures were gone. Wisely she said, 'Jack, there is something different about your room. Did you get a new rug?' 'No,' he replied. 'Is this new paper on the wall?' 'No', he replied. 'When I was here before, it seemed to me you had more pictures than now.' 'Yes, I did, mum, but those other pictures seemed out of place after that one of Jesus came into the room.'](#)

People's lives change when Christ is the head of the church and His elders are acting on His behalf within His church. Let me say this just before we finish, I don't know about you, but I personally struggled when we appointed elders here. Not because of the elders themselves but because I wasn't used to working with elders. I know the elders have struggled to settle into their God given roles. And some members have struggled to adjust to having elders and maybe some of you don't see any difference.

But loved ones, I thank God, that this congregation has Jesus as it's Head. I thank God for our elders who acknowledge Jesus as the owner of this congregation. I thank God that I serve with so many people that show love for each other and create an atmosphere of safety and acceptance that reflects our Master. Because a church without Christ as its head, is a church with no real Biblical authority.