

Understanding the Congregation's Authority

by Jonathan Leeman

Chapter 5

Your Pastors Train You for Your Job

Introduction

Hebrews 13:17

¹⁷ 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.

How are we to understand the relationship between the authority given to leaders and the authority given to the congregation?

(p. 44) "We can say that the whole church, elders and members together, possesses the power of the keys. But the elders possess an additional authority to teach and to set the pattern for how the keys should be employed. ...we need to distinguish between *possession* and *leading in the use*."

Authority of Command, Authority of Counsel

(p. 45) "If you have either kind of authority, you have the right to make commands, and those under your authority are morally obligated to obey your commands (within certain limits). The difference is, someone with an authority of command also has the power to enforce what he or she says; while someone with an authority of counsel does not, but must rely upon the power of the truth itself or upon Jesus to enforce it on the Last Day.

For instance, princes and parents of young children possess what I'm calling an authority of command. ...

Yet we can also think of other authority figures who, in varying degrees, have the ability to give commands that, too, are morally obligating. But they have not been authorized by God to enforce their commands. Think of a husband's authority or a parent once the child reaches a certain age."

(p. 45) "How is this way of thinking about two kinds of authority useful for the topic of congregations and elders? I think we can say that the congregation, which possesses the keys to the kingdom, has an authority of command. ...The pastors or elders, by virtue of their call to teach, have an authority of counsel."

What tool has the local church been given to enforce its authority?

Do elders have any recourse when they are disobeyed?

(p. 46) “Those who possess an authority of counsel, like husbands and elders, must continually work to teach and to woo. A godly wife and church member, of course, will require little wooing because each recognizes God’s call to submit to husband or pastor. But when points of disagreement arise between wife and husband, or between elder and church member, the husband or elder’s only recourse is to woo and to persuade. He cannot pick up “the sword” like the state or “the rod” like a parent. Rather, he must explain himself and seek to instruct. He should not “lord it over” wife or member (Col. 3:19; 1 Pet. 5: 3). It may be that the husband or pastor is in error. If he is godly he will be able to hear contrary counsel from wife or member. Yet the fact that God has made the husband or the elder an authority means that he must take the initiative to woo. He cannot force, but neither can he abdicate or give up. Passivity is not an option for him, lest he face Jesus’ displeasure on the Last Day.”

What should the elders do if the matter of disobedience is a clear matter unrepentant sin issue? (e.g. an adulterous affair)

Is the matter of disobeying your leaders itself ever a matter that should be brought to the church for judgment?

Authority to Teach

(p. 46) “...insofar as an elder possesses an authority of counsel, not command, it should not be surprising that an elders’ authority centers around teaching.”

(p. 48) “The picture Paul provides for both Timothy and Titus is the slow, patient, day-to-day, repetitious work of seeking to grow a people in godliness. An elder doesn’t force but teaches, because a forced act of godliness is no godliness. A godly act is willfully chosen from a regenerate, new covenant heart.”

What kinds of things should be matters of church discipline and which require patient instruction from the elders?

Leading and Training

1 Timothy 3:2–7

² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, *able to teach*, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the

condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

Which of the qualifications above would you want to be true of every Christian?

(p. 48) “Third and finally, we should consider what an elder is and does: he is an example for the flock who leads and trains to live like he lives, insofar as he is walking in the way of Christ. Elders do not constitute a separate ‘class’ of Christians.... Fundamentally an elder is a Christian and a member of the church. He is set apart and recognized as an elder because his character is exemplary and he is able to teach.”

(p. 49-50) “With elder-led congregationalism, it is always class time. The discipleship doesn’t stop. ... The whole congregation, elders and members together, possess the keys of the kingdom. But the elders have the task of training, equipping, and leading in the congregation to use the keys in a right manner.”

Ephesians 4:11–16

¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Which parts of the body are charged to speak “the truth in love?”

What central “truth” should saturate all our truth speaking?

What are some different places and kinds of “speaking” we should be engaging in?

Jesus’ Discipleship Program

(p. 50) “So now we have come full circle to where we began in chapter 1. Jesus established the leadership of elders and the rule of the congregation as his discipleship program.”

(p. 51) “Church members have a job, and pastors train them for their job. The shepherds, who are above reproach and able teachers, establish the pattern of sound living, as well as for guarding the *what* and *who* of the gospel. ... When the authority of the keys is removed from the church’s hands, the ministry of the Word might continue powerfully and fruitfully, but the ministry of application is hindered. No longer do the elders have the opportunity to walk the whole church through ‘real life’ questions of membership and discipline, as discussed in Chapter 2. The elders lose a major tool in teaching the congregation how to apply the gospel to real life.”

Do you understand his reasoning here? Questions?

Conclusion

(p. 51) “The best definition for elder-led to congregationalism, I said in chapter 1, is your pastors training you to do your job. Elder leadership and congregational rule provide a field for training.”

(p. 51-52) “Surely members should oppose elders whenever they contradict the Scriptures or demand something beyond the scope of biblical gospel ministry. The congregation always maintains one hand on the emergency brake for such occasions. But hopefully this is a rare occurrence. If elders are leading well, most decisions should enjoy something close to unanimity.”

Prayer:

- ❖ Help us be obedient to the leading and instruction of the leaders here at RBC
- ❖ Guide and give wisdom, humility, and diligence the RBC leaders