

## THE AUTHORITY OF CHRIST IN CHURCH GOVERNMENT

It is a basic doctrine of the New Testament that after His resurrection, Jesus of Nazareth was declared by God to be both Lord and Christ and that He was invested by the Father with absolute Lordship over the Church. *“And He is the head of the body, the Church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things He might have the preeminence.”* (COLOSSIANS 1:18) All authority is His in heaven and in earth. In His own proper time He will exert it to the full, but during this period He allows this authority to be challenged or ignored. And just now, it is being both challenged by the world and partially ignored by the Church.

The present position of Christ in many churches may be likened to that of a King in a limited, constitutional monarchy. He is praised, loved, and supported, but His real authority is small. Nominally, He is head over all, but in many times of crisis, someone else makes the decisions. *“All hail the power of Jesus’ Name,”* is the Church’s national anthem and the cross is her official flag, but in her actual decisions and church government, it is the majority that makes the decisions, not Christ. Democracy has taken the place of Theocracy and a government by the people has taken the place of the headship of Christ. It has been my personal experience that the majority in almost every church is not spiritual nor led by the Holy Spirit. It is generally the minority that follow the leading of God’s Spirit and truly have the mind of Christ.

The Lordship of Christ is not quite forgotten among Christians, but it has been mostly related to theoretical preaching where all responsibility toward it may be discharged in religious emotion. The idea that Jesus Christ has absolute and final authority over the whole church and over all its functions and decisions is simply not now accepted as true by the rank and file of believers. We accept the church government of our group as being identical or similar with that of Christ and the apostles. Whatever the group or denomination says or thinks is unquestioned, whether it is Biblical or not. To avoid the hard necessity of either obeying or rejecting the plain New Testament church pattern, we take refuge in a liberal interpretation of it. We seem to have the idea that Christ is on a long trip and that He has left the government of the Church up to frail men. We forget that Christ has made ample provision for church government and that He has taken into consideration the weaknesses of men and the need for discipline. The Vicar of Christ on earth is the Holy Spirit, and if the Biblical pattern is obeyed and the foundation properly laid, the Holy Spirit will insure that the Church is established, edified, and purified. When we lack a personal and progressive relationship with the Holy Spirit, it is natural, or more correctly, carnal, to fall upon human abilities and adopt a democratic form of government. This is tailor made for the flesh and we fall easy prey to the enemy’s wiles to weaken the Church. Human means are devised to achieve ends that we assume to be divine. These eventually become policy and thereafter the Lord doesn't even have a vote.

Who remembers when a conference chairman brought his Bible to the table with him for the purpose of using it? Minutes, regulations, rules of order, yes: The Sacred New Testament, No!! What foreign mission board actually seeks to follow the guidance of the Lord as provided by His Word and His Spirit? When is the Holy Spirit called upon to separate His choice for a certain position or mission field? When do we hear the voice of the Apostle or Prophet saying, *“Separate me Saul and Barnabas for the work whereunto I have called them?”* (ACTS 13:2) When is the unselfish desire to see the lost won to Christ the actual motive of their planning? They may pray for God to give success to their enterprises, but Christ is desired as their helper that they may extend the boundaries of their own name and influence.

In the conduct of our public worship, where is the authority of Christ to be found? The truth is that today the Lord rarely controls a service, and much of Christian worship would go on even without the presence of God at all.

The causes behind the decline in our Lord’s authority and many, I name only three.

One is the power of custom, precedent, and tradition within the older religious groups. Not Christ, but custom is Lord. Their influence has passed over into the other groups such as the Full Gospel assemblies, the Holiness churches, and the Pentecostal churches.

The second cause is the revival of intellectualism among the evangelicals. This is not so much a thirst or learning as a desire for a reputation of being learned. The foolishness of the Cross is indeed foolishness to many. There is certainly no excuse for a shabby presentation or ignorance of the English language, but we must not allow the pendulum to swing to the other extreme. The evangelicals who, with some justification, have lacked true scholarship, now grab for these status symbols with shining eyes, forgetting that the true wisdom of God is diametrically opposed to the wisdom of the world. It is possible for a minister to be wonderfully prepared scholastically and yet be totally unprepared for his real duty to win souls and mature the Church of Jesus Christ.

The third cause is the ignorance of revelation concerning the five gift ministries and their operation in the Church today. Two of these ministries have been relegated to the New Testament time and this has produced a failure in church government where most needed. It is with this subject that I desire to deal at length and to bring the early church pattern into clear perspective relative to our present democratic church order. I propose to define the reason for lack of harmony in doctrine and the reason for much of the immaturity, church contentions, party rivalries, and divisions so prevalent today. I am not assuming that these conditions did not exist to some degree during the apostolic days, but we should note that they did not exist unchecked nor undisciplined as at present. There will always be some measure of carnality in the Church if it is growing and if new souls are coming in, but God has certainly made provision for this and not abandoned us to flounder in our own inventions.

I will commence by laying a basic foundation of common belief and thought in reference to the gifts of the Spirit and the gift ministries. There are nine manifestations of gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 CORINTHIANS 12:8-10). These nine gifts or manifestations of the Holy Spirit are separated into three categories, i.e., gifts of utterance, gifts of revelation, and gifts of power. These are never to be confused with the five gift ministries of our ascended Lord. Paul helps to clarify this distinction when he states, "*Now there are diversities of GIFTS, but the same Spirit (gifts of the Spirit) and there are diversities of ministries, but the same Lord.*" (1 CORINTHIANS 12:4) (Gifts of ministry given by our Lord.) The aforementioned are manifestations of the Holy Spirit through believers, the latter, are manifestations of Christ's ministry through His ministers. Both, however, are operated by God. "*And there are diversities of operations but it is the same Lord.*" (1 CORINTHIANS 12:6) To further clarify this, I would suggest that the thousands of ministers of God in all the world can be classified in five distinct categories or ministries. This is assuming, of course, that the minister has a definite ministry and is not merely a "help" or witness for Christ

*"Wherefore he saith, when he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive and gave gifts unto men, And he gave some Apostles; and some, prophets; and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the Body of Christ: Till we all come in the UNITY OF THE FAITH, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: That we henceforth be NO MORE CHILDREN, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the sleight of men and cunning craftiness they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into Him in all things, which is the head, even Christ."* (EPHESIANS 4:8-15)

The five ministry gifts given by Christ to the Church are the revelation of Jesus Christ. His Lordship and Headship over His Church is revealed through these five channels as the Holy Spirit motivates and controls. Those with the ministry of Apostle or Prophet should not expect that their ministries will always be received or recognized. Paul's apostolic ministry was challenged many

times, but he could justifiably refer to the “*proof of apostleship*” that was evident in his life. We should also remember that our Lord said before His ascension, “*as the Father hath sent me, so send I you.*” (JOHN 20:21) He was not spared the suffering, scorn, or rebuke of the religious leaders of His day. We should not go forth expecting honour or recognition, but go forth meekly in His Name desiring only the smile of His divine approval. It is to be our chief concern that we make “full proof” of our ministry and honour our calling by profound dedication to the vocation. As it was in the writing of the Holy Scriptures, “*Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost,*” (2 PETER 1:21) so it should be today in the direction and government of the Church. Christ, given to be Head over all things to the Church, exercises this headship as He speaks through five ministries of revelation through His servants. The Church thusly is established, organized, disciplined, set in order, edified and nourished. These gifts were given for the perfection of the saints that they might do the work of ministering to the other members of the Body and to the world. They were given for the up building of the Body of Christ, both spiritually and numerically. They were given for the unification of the Body of Christ, “*Till we all come into the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.*” (EPHESIANS 4:13) We certainly have not attained this unity, neither on the international level nor in our individual denominational circles. Therefore, we conclude that all five ministries should continue unchanging as they were in the apostolic age, until the termination of this dispensation. In many circles today, the church has an energetic passion for unity, but it has apparently rejected the Biblical pattern to obtain this unity. Instead of recognizing these five ministries given to produce this “*unity of the faith,*” we are preparing to jettison truth, for the fabled dream of unity. I am certainly in favour of unity, but this is the “*unity of the Spirit.*” It is not a “*Spirit of unity*” that Paul referred to, but the “*unity of the Spirit.*” It is quite a different thing in operation. A so-called spirit of unity is carnal, the work of feeble human efforts. The “*unity of the Spirit*” or the unity that the Holy Spirit produces is Divine and cannot be realized apart from doctrinal unity. We are urged to “*contend for the faith*” (JUDE 1:3) once delivered to the saints, upon which the church is built, and without which she will surely crumble. By ignoring progressive revelation and discipline to be administered by present day apostles and prophets we are hindering the perfection of the Church and building with a weakness in the very foundation.

The spiritual maturity necessary in the Body of Christ can only be brought into being by the exercise of all of these five ministries working in unity and harmony with each other. If these goals could be attained by the three ministries recognized at present, then it would have been superfluous for Christ to have given five. It is indisputable that the twelve apostles enjoy a distinctive position over the twelve tribes of Israel and that the Apostle Paul is unique in his position to the Gentile Church. Nevertheless, it is apparent by a careful study of the New Testament that other lesser apostles existed as can be ascertained by the following scriptures. “*Which when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard of, they rent their clothes, and ran in among the people...*” (ACTS 14:14) “*But other of the Apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother.*” (GALATIANS 1:19) “*Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ... Nor of men sought we glory, neither of you, nor yet of others, when we might have been burdensome, as the apostles of Christ.*” (1 THESSALONIANS 1:1; 2:6)

The purpose of all these ministries is that the Church may grow up in maturity in Christ, “*unto a perfect man (mature body) unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*” (EPHESIANS 4:13) Spiritual maturity is a requirement for communion with our Lord in true and deep spiritual fellowship. Fellowship is possible with children only on a limited spiritual or intellectual plane. The reference or relationship that Christ has to the Church must be “*no more children tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine,*” (EPHESIANS 4:14) but by reason of her maturity have more perfect fellowship and coordination with the Head. The Church must come into her position and relationship as the bride of Christ, a fully adorned, sanctified, and Spirit led company of believers.

Not only does her spiritual communion and worship depend on-it, but it is required if she is to be useful in doing the work of the ministry. Only as the Church comes into spiritual maturity can she come into her Divine authority, and restorative and redemptive power. Is it not written, "*Ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness*"? (GALATIANS 6:1) The immaturity of the contemporary church is clearly noticed in the rivalry and sectarian spirit so prevalent, Paul rebuked the Corinthian Church by stating, "*For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal and walk as men?*" (1CORINTHIANS 3:3) The absence in our church government of the apostle and prophet has been the cause to some degree for the immaturity of many churches. Carnality cannot be remedied totally by apostolic teaching, but failure to adopt apostolic church government has allowed the strife and division to go unchecked and undeterred. The epistles were dedicated to a great degree to correcting individual church disorders and the personal ministry of the apostles served as a guarantee that the Divine order was obeyed.

I have emphasized these truths to focus attention upon the need for the five gift ministries in our churches. To have each ministry operating to the fullest, they must be recognized and accepted. For souls to be saved, Christ must be accepted and believed upon. For the exercise of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, they must be accepted and given liberty to operate. For the functioning of the ministries of the apostle and prophet, they must be recognized and allowed to function in divine order. Unless we recognize that "*God hath set in the church first apostles, secondarily prophets, etc.*" (1CORINTHIANS 12:28), we shall continue to place men of our choosing in these positions of authority, entirely invalidating the plan and purpose of the gifts of ministry and subjecting the Body of Christ to carnal and inadequate ministries.

Nowhere are we encouraged to seek after these ministry gifts nor to attempt to acquire these positions in church government by political manipulation. These gifts are given sovereignly by God. It is in regards to the manifestations of the gifts of the Spirit that we are urged to "*covet earnestly*" and to "*seek after.*" I can never doubt that there are many of these ministries in the Church today, I refer particularly to those of the apostle and prophet, yet because of the ignorance of God's provision, many are not making "*full proof of their ministry*" and thusly are "*neglecting the gift*" that is in them. The proper minister in the wrong church is equally as bad as the inadequate minister in the right church. It was not by democratic vote, but by apostolic direction that Titus was to "*set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city.*" (TITUS 1:5) As a younger apostle under the direction of the apostle Paul, he was to ordain spiritual leaders "*in every city*" which clearly implies his ministry was not limited locally as would be that of a pastor.

What then are we to do? First, we are to recognize God's provision in this matter and to attempt to reorganize our churches in accordance with the New Testament pattern. Secondly, we are to study the apostolic and prophetic ministries and recognize and accept these ministries when God confirms and approves them. Thirdly, we are to earnestly seek the direction of the Holy Spirit in our every choice and learn to expect divine intervention and not rely upon democratic government where the New Testament pattern shows otherwise. If you are not in a position of church leadership, then be sure you have the personal direction of the Holy Spirit that "*worketh in us, both to will and to do of His good pleasure.*" (PHILIPPIANS 2:13)

If the only position we seek is the centre of God's perfect will, then we can be assured that ultimately we shall find our perfect function in the Body of Christ. For the true Christian, the one supreme test for the ultimate worth of anything religious must be the place our Lord occupies in it. Is He Lord or symbol? Have we found our place in the Body of Christ, and are we willing to function therein in accordance to the Bible pattern and in subjection to spiritual church government? Whether our works prove to be wood, hay or stubble or gold and precious stones in that final day will depend upon the right answer to that question. Let us bow to His Lordship in our lives and listen attentively for the voice of the great Shepherd of the sheep through His dedicated servants, His gifts to the Church. Amen.