

Church Authority: Limited and Specific

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Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 13:34

INTRODUCTION: As you know, the Church of Rome claims for itself what belongs to Christ only: absolute authority. It is therefore especially disturbing when those who call themselves "Baptists" claim that Christ's absolute authority has been transferred to the church. My texts know nothing of such a transfer as I shall demonstrate in this message.

I have heard some advocate what seemed to be absolute church authority for many years. There are even those who refer to the "sovereignty" of the church. The church is not and can never be sovereign if it is subject to the Headship of Christ. Nothing in the word "sovereignty" can apply to the church. "Sovereignty" is "supreme power" supremacy; the possession of the highest power, or of uncontrollable power. Absolute sovereignty belongs to God only." (Webster, 1828). The church is autonomous, not sovereign. "Autonomous" means "independent in government; having the right of self-government" (Webster, 1828). I believe in the autonomy of the church, not the sovereignty of the church. Christ is sovereign; the church is autonomous under His sovereign rule.

I have not found absolute church authority advocated by any reputable and venerable Baptist writer. If such is true, why have many not written at length and demonstrated that the church has the absolute authority some preachers have claimed it to have? In his *The Origin and*

Nature of the Church, Davis Huckabee, writing on "The Church is a Sovereign and Authoritative Assembly" qualified this heading thusly: "The Church is not sovereign in the sense that it can do anything it pleases; it is sovereign in the sense that it is authorized and empowered to do what the Lord commands, and neither needs, nor is to subject itself to any other authority." (p.101) What Bro. Huckabee is advocating corresponds with my definitions above and the exposition which follows.

ONLY CHRIST HAS ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY; THE CHURCH HAS BUT LIMITED AUTHORITY

THE ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, Matthew 28:18: "And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth."

"Power" is "exsousia" which means "authoritative power." This word is found 103 times in the Greek New Testament and is translated in the KJV 69 times as "power," 29 times as "authority," 2 times as "right," and one time each as "liberty," "jurisdiction," and "strength" according to the Greek-English Concordance by J. B. Smith.

Christ alone has absolute power. He said, "All power is given unto me. . ." His power must therefore be unlimited. If it were only limited power He has, He could not claim all power or authority for Himself. That His power and authority is not transferred to the church but remain His alone is evident from His words in Matthew 28:20: "and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." Christ in and with His church is its sole power and authority. The church needs no power or authority transferred to it since it has Christ who has all authority with it to the end of the world.

Christ alone has absolute mediatorial power. When He said, "All power is given unto me," He spoke not as God but as the Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). This power He was given as the fruit and reward of His resurrection. Romans 1:4: "And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead."

Christ alone has universal power. He declared, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth." This means there is no power or authority anywhere that is not His. Jesus said, "All things are delivered unto me of my Father. . ." (Matthew 11:27). He claims for Himself absolute authority everywhere, even in hell. He said, "I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death" (Revelation 1:18).

THE LIMITED AND SPECIFIC AUTHORITY OF HIS CHURCH.
Matthew 28:19, 20: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen."

The church has a commission. A commission is always limited in scope. There is a reason we refer to the Great Commission, not the Great Authority of the church. Note the contrast in the words "commission" and "authorize" as defined in Webster's Dictionary of Synonyms, p. 91: "One authorizes a person to act for oneself if when he is given the necessary legal right or power, with or without instructions of a specified character... one commissions a person when one not only authorizes but instructs him to perform a definite duty or office." From the meaning of these words, it is obvious the church has a commission, not unlimited authority, for Christ not only authorized the church but instructed it to perform a definite duty.

The church has limited authority. Mark 13:34: "For the Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch." That the authority referenced in the passage is not unlimited is obvious by the qualifying statement, "and to every man his work." The authority He gave was to do a specific work. This work is that which is specified in the Great Commission.

The church has only the authority given to it by Scripture. Following are specific works enumerated in the Word of God which the church has authority to do: (1) Preach the Gospel, Mark 16:15; (2) Baptize believers, Acts 10:47; (3) Receive and dismiss members, Romans 14:1; 1 Corinthians 5:5, 13; (4) Elect its officers, Acts 1:21-26; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; (5) Send out missionaries, Acts 13:1-4; 14:27; (6) Observe the Lord's Supper, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; (7) Choose messengers, 2 Corinthians 8:19, 23. You will note that all of these works that the church has been authorized to do are clearly spelled out in Scripture. Where is the passage or passages that clearly explain specific authority has been given to the church to organize other churches? If such authority has been given to the church, surely it is plainly set forth in the Word of God which "thoroughly furnishes unto all good works" (2 Timothy 3:17).

Concerning the formation of churches, John Gill wrote: "Secondly, A particular church may be considered as to the form of it; which lies in a mutual consent and agreement, in their covenant and confederation with each . . . 3. This union between them is made by voluntary consent and agreement . . . 4. As the original constitution of churches is by consent and confederation, so the admission of new members to them, is upon the same footing . . . and nothing else but mutual consent, can make a man a church-member . . . 7. It is this confederacy, consent,

and agreement, that is the formal cause of a church; it is this which not only distinguishes a church from the world, and from all professors that walk at large, the one being within and the other without, but from all other particular churches; so the church at Cenchrea was not the same with the church at Corinth, though but at a little distance from it, because it consisted of persons who had given up themselves to it, and not to the church at Corinth, and so were members of the one and not of the other." *Body of Divinity*, pp. 856-858.

Furthermore, we must stress again that the Scriptures govern the church and are over the church. The church has no authority that is not specifically given to it by the Scriptures. The church is not over the Scriptures and never has authority to act contrary to the Scriptures. For any church to claim it has unlimited authority to do even what the Scriptures do not authorize is to practice Romanism.

Some have contended one must be in the church to understand the Scriptures. This assertion we deny. The Holy Spirit, not the church, is the first teacher of Scriptures, and if one is born of God, he has the Holy Spirit within him. Romans 8:9: "But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his." John 14:26: "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you." See further 1 Corinthians 2:12-14; 1 John 2:27.

The limited authority of the church is substantiated by all Baptist Confessions of Faith. The following excerpts from both ancient and modern confessions confirm that truth that the authority of the church is limited.

The Waldenses Confession of 1544, "The church . . . governed by His Word and guided by the Holy Spirit."

The First London or 1644 Confession, "That every church has power given them from Christ for their better well-being." "Christ . . . placeth some special men over the church."

The Second London or 1689 Confession, "To each of these churches thus gathered, according to His mind declared in His Word, He hath given all that power and authority, which is anyway needful for their carrying on that order and worship and discipline."

The New Hampshire Confession of 1833, "Exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word."

The venerable J. R. Graves wrote, "Each church is a living body, to which Christ committed both the sacred oracles and ordinances of Christianity . . . The true churches are the only authorized exponents of Christ's revelation, and of what Christianity is; and therefore, to them is thus committed its wholeness and its symmetry." Old Landmarkism, p. 35.

CONCLUSION:

"THE CHURCH HAS BUT A LIMITED AND SPECIFIC AUTHORITY; ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY BELONGS TO OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST ALONE!"