

# 6

## *Restrictions of Authority*

The board of elders considered their stand on a particular doctrine. The stand? They partook of communion on a weekly basis. The use of “unleavened” bread was considered inconvenient so they decided to use leavened. They felt leaven wasn’t always a sign of sin so it was fine to use in communion. Now consider that the elders are confronted by someone who has moral objections to communion with leavened bread. Since they’ve already decided, should that allow them to forcefully silence the objecting person? Should they be allowed to declare “their” church doesn’t believe that way so if others can’t keep silence on the issue they need to fellowship elsewhere? Does any church have that kind of authority? Is any church so much “man’s” that such decrees can be made and rightfully demanded of the others?

It’s in such as this that we need to be extremely careful in such statements as, “that’s the official stand of this church”. At this point it’s too easy to cross over the boundary of “the local church” into the arena of “a local sect”.

This issue has legitimate concerns needing to be addressed as to how apostate doctrine’s dealt with. There are biblical

methods. To ignore these methods and pursue the “official” creed is the method of man and sectarianism. It assists in surrounding ourselves with Christians who hold the exact line of beliefs we’ve subscribed to. This makes for more comfortable talk around the table at fellowship gatherings, but speaks nothing of true love.

## **The Solution**

### **LOVE**

From a look at such passages as Romans chapter 14, we see not all brethren did hold the same view. Were those who believed differently treated as filthy rags to be held at a distance or thrown away? The chapter shows just the opposite. We see we’re to treat them with love! To even say something like, “that’s not the official stand of this church” sounds of contempt and superiority.

That chapter give this very important word:

*1 Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations* *Romans 14:1*

If the brother’s stand is a position from some ignorance of God’s Word, we find the exhortation to receive them. This reception is without the condition of either them or us to expect continual badgering by the other to “change their mind”. As soon as we present “the official position of our church”, we belittle them and “badger them”. This chapter sheds a little light on this issue.

From here we can move to another important passage:

*9 Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.* *Titus 1:9*

First of all, note that “*gainsayers*” are those who like to contradict. They enjoy argument and making sure everyone knows their opinion. For the church, this shouts flesh and lack of love. For these people, we’re not to answer them through a gag order,

but through a skillful use of the Word that will silence contentious people. Even then the silencing is not with hatred but with the intention of “*exhort*” in the passage.

This verse doesn’t say to, “agree to disagree”. The method of dealing with such was clearly spelled out: Using the Word of God, by sound doctrine to shed light on the issues concerned.

## **FORBID**

In a word search for two important words reflecting on this issue, I was surprised at what I found. The first word was “forbid”. For such an issue as church government, God could have put some very enlightening instruction with such a word. The word is found in the Greek, but only given with the command to “forbid not”, such as:

*14 But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Matthew 19:14*

Other uses showed things such as Jesus forbidding His disciples to “forbid” other disciples to speak:

*39 But Jesus said, Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me.*

*Mark 9:39*

Jesus dealt very clearly with the gag order method in this passage.

The remaining uses of pertenance were calls for “God to forbid”! In these, the calls were cries to God to forbid horrendous evils in teaching or behaviour.

## **SUFFER**

The second powerful word I looked up was “suffer”. That word has two meanings. One of enduring discomfort. The other of tolerating something. In the area of toleration, we could gain instruction as to what God calls for the church to do in making demands on others. Both the lack and the content make a powerful point. Aside from comments on what some have suffered others to do or not do, we only find two really pertinent passages.

The first is what God Himself won't suffer:

*13 There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.*

*1 Corinthians 10:13*

This is one lack of toleration I'm glad God won't endure!

The second passage refers to the only thing we find an apostle will not suffer:

*12 But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.*

*1 Timothy 2:12*

Sobering words too often held in contempt today!

## The Elder's Authority

An important fact to be aware of, is the amount of authority, and under what conditions, the authority of elders extends. This is a point that's been misunderstood and has serious repercussions. In some instances, it's resulted in an oppression, in others, there's no power to govern.

### PETER'S BALANCED OUTLINE

A board of elders isn't a board of totalitarian dictators. They're mature men in their walk with the Lord, who help brethren with their walk. One passage to start with is found in 1 Peter:

*1 The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: 2 Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; 3 Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. 4 And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away. 5 Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.*

*1 Peter 5:1-5*

- With verse 1, we see the plurality of elders addressed by Peter. He was an elder at the assembly where he resided, for he didn't always remain so mobile as the apostle Paul did. We see his staying in one church for a long time in the Acts when he stayed in Jerusalem, even after persecution caused many to disperse from that location (Acts 8:1).

- Verse 2 starts with the elders' responsibilities. Peter addresses motives here and faithfulness in duty. Just because they're elders, doesn't mean they don't need reminding of the seriousness of their charge and responsibilities.

We see the elders are to *"feed"*. With the modern concept of "Pastor/Congregation", we conceive the picture of the man who gives sermons while the congregation just sits there. This concept provides for the saculina parasite problem. So what should we envision with this word *"feed"*? The key is found in the following word of what they were to feed, *"the flock"*. We have the proper imagery drawn by Peter. The feeding is compared to a shepherd taking care of his flock. How did a shepherd care for his flock back in the time of Peter? Remember the shepherds that first Christmas morning? They were out watching their flocks in the fields by night (Luke 2:8). They didn't shut their flocks in and throw them hay. They took their sheep to where they could gather food and exercise on their own. They watched and protected them, they took them to where they could find food. If they were sick, they doctored them, but they didn't shut them in a pen and force feed them. See the 23rd Psalm for another illustration on this line.

- Verse 3 carries the weight of power the elders actually have. The word translated as *"being lords"* is defined as, "control, subjugate, exercise dominion over". This verse tells us the elders aren't to have such power. The power is that of example. The elders are men who have been proven to be men of example as we saw in Timothy and Titus. Being such, they're to help others attain to what they have found, and their words are to be held in greater respect.

- Verse 4 is the only passage that uses the title "Chief Pastor", which carries the concept of the modern pastoral system. A

shepherd is a pastor. The term pastor comes from the fact that a shepherd “pastures” his flock in taking care of them. We see here, in verse 4, the “Chief Shepherd” who is shown to be Jesus ONLY. As long as we don’t take the position of “Chief Shepherd”, can we be heir to Peter’s promise of receiving a crown of glory when Jesus comes to see how we’ve fulfilled our charges from Him.

- Verse 5 is a powerful summary to follow what’s preceded it. It starts with an important call for the less spiritually mature to pay heed to the elders. They’re in a serious position of representing godly examples. When they call a fellow believer to account for some misbehavior, they should be held in respect.

“*Yea, all of you be subject one to another...*” puts in a necessary regulator, as it were. Subjection isn’t just to the elders. Subjection is to whatever light of God is in any one of us. We’re to watch out for each other. There’s no “exercising of dominion over” any brother by another brother. Though there are elders, we’re equals. Only the head (Jesus) directs the body.

This thought, of subjection to one another, is seen in Romans:

*14 And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another.*

*Romans 15:14*

As we can see, by looking at this from Romans, the ability to admonish one another lies in our being filled with the goodness and knowledge of God.

This verse in 1 Peter concludes with the path of security. If you’ll remember, I said humility and the love of God are safety qualities we need to prevent us from straying. We can have a “correct” church government, but still fall into pride over having such. The proper government is only safeguarded by proper humility. In fact, the proper government can only be maintained by proper humility!

## **AUTHORITY LIES IN RESPONSE TO THE HEAD, NOT POSITION**

The following verses show an example of where an individual gained dictatorial power in an assembly:

*9 I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. 10 Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church.*

*3 John 9,10*

A vital point must be understood! Authority is for upholding the commands of the Lord. No elder has the power to give commands not fulfilling the charges of God. Christ is the head and all, including the elders, are organs in His body that are to follow the orders given by the head. Any body that has body parts issuing their own orders is not the true body. When we find such in the human body, we call it cancer. A cell that no longer follows a pattern of growth following the health of the body. A cancer cell is one that consumes the life force of the body to create its own growth. Eventually it kills the body if not killed or removed. That is what Diotrephes had become!

When an elder becomes “Chief”, stepping out of the bounds of scripturally based authority, this is the kind of mess that can result. Even though there is this danger, we need to be careful to not hold the office in disrepute.

Properly exercised, the office is to be held in honor:

*17 Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine.*

*1 Timothy 5:17*

### **ELDERS HAVE A SPECIAL PLACE, BUT JOINT RESPONSIBILITY OF THE BRETHREN**

*12 And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; 13 And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves. 14 Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men. 15 See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both*

*among yourselves, and to all men. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15*

We see an important division. Verses 12 and 13 relate to the elders, and their receiving due respect by the rest of the brethren. Verses 14 and 15 show a joint responsibility of all the brethren. When we read verses such as 14 and 15, we tend to picture them as being words to the “Pastor”. They tend to look like responsibilities of the Protestant “Pastor”. Reading the verses carefully, we see they weren’t such at all. “*Now we exhort you, brethren,*” was an introduction, in verse 14, to all the Christians in Thessalonica. We gain a glimpse of what true discipleship and fellowship in the church is really supposed to look like. It isn’t a group of laity that sits and listens to the clergy give intellectually challenging messages to impact our personal lives. The “laity” are supposed to be actively ministering to one another. The elders (who are not clergy) are to be a type of cheerleaders and referees.

## ELDERS’ RULE

*7 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. 24 Salute all them that have the rule over you, and all the saints. They of Italy salute you.*

*Hebrews 13:7,24*

These “rulers” are teachers of God’s Word. Elders lead by example and through verbal direction of God’s path. That’s the reason one of the qualifications for an elder is “*apt to teach*.” They all have the responsibility to communicate what they’ve learned.

We find that word “*rule*.” Elders possess the power to issue commands the local body is to obey. What kind of commands? To what extent is that ability to demand?

*4 And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem.*

*Acts 16:4*

From Acts 16:4 we see the strength of the decisions of the body of elders. They faced a doctrinal issue that had to be settled. Their decision was issued as the official statement of the church that was located in Jerusalem.



**MARKING TO AVOID**

The ministry of the elders is authoritative. In the following two passages, we see the whole assembly is addressed with the responsibility to deal with wayward brethren. Seeing this is enjoined on all saints, we see how the elders would also have the authority to call for such separation from certain individuals, if necessary:

*17 Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. 18 For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple. Romans 16:17,18*

*1 Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. 2 Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. Galatians 6:1,2*

A final passage shows the limitation of authority, with the previous verses, in showing the necessity for proper judgment:

*11 Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge. 12 There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another? James 4:11,12*

James addresses those who were criticizing other brethren for not living to their standard of laws, which weren't God's laws. We know this because verse 12 points out there's only "one lawgiver". The people James addressed were obviously criticizing others by their own laws, not just upholding God's true laws. We know an example of this was addressed by Jesus when the Pharisees condemned Him for not first washing His hands before eating. Jesus laid into them about their making many laws, and some even contradicted direct laws God had given (Mark 7:5-13).

When we saw the decree of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem in Acts 16:4, we can glean, from looking over Acts chapter 15, their decree came from seeking God's direction. This was given through His signs and wonders in conjunction with the words found in the already existing scripture of the Old Testament. The authority

wasn't in a particular man to decide.

The elders' authority is limited to declaring God's laws and upholding them. **The elders don't have the authority to create laws.**