

# Authority in Church

## Advanced Information

This subject is made difficult not only by the rich diversity of the NT witness, but also by the diverse trajectories of ecclesiastical traditions from postapostolic times on.

### The Locus of Authority

Arguably, the strongest authoritative human voices in the earliest churches were the apostles (in the narrow sense of that flexible term, i.e., the Twelve (Matthias replacing Judas) plus Paul). Their authority extended beyond the local congregation, even beyond congregations they had been instrumental in founding (for how else could Peter's influence be felt in Corinth and Paul's in Colossae?), but it was not without limit. A Peter could prove inconsistent in practice (Gal. 2:11 - 14), and a Paul could be mistaken in judgment (Acts 15:37 - 40; cf. 2 Tim. 4:11). The objective truth of the gospel, Paul insists, enjoys an antecedent authority; if even an apostle tampers with that, he is to be reckoned anathema (Gal. 1:8 - 9).

So an authoritative gospel must be passed on. That Paul in an early epistle can speak of the old covenant as being read (2 Cor. 3:14) not only presupposes that Christians enjoy a new covenant but anticipates a reading of the new covenant (and therefore a NT canon) with scriptural authority analogous to that of the OT (2 Pet. 3:15 - 16). In such cases, however, whether the penman be an apostle or not, the authority rests in the resulting inspired Scriptures, not the human being who inscripturates them (2 Tim. 3:16).

### Analogous things could be affirmed of OT prophets

Indeed, it can be argued rather compellingly that the true NT analogue of the OT prophet is not the NT prophet but the NT apostle (in the narrow sense). The apostles enjoy a self-conscious authority as God-chosen custodians of the gospel; and if they prefer to exercise their authority with meekness in an effort to win spiritually minded consensus (e.g., 1 Cor. 5:1 - 10; 2 Cor. 10:6; 1 Pet. 5:1 - 4), they are also prepared, if need be, to impose their authority without seeking consensus, and even against the consensus (e.g., Acts 5:1 - 11; 1 Cor. 4:18 - 21; 2 Cor. 10:11; 13:2 - 3; 3 John 10). Their authority is especially prominent in their role as interpreters both of the OT Scriptures and of the teachings of Jesus, as well as of his ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. The church devoted itself to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42).

### NT prophets likewise enjoyed wide authority

Some of them may have been itinerant, not restricting their ministrations to one congregation. "Prophecy" in the NT ranges from Spirit-empowered preaching to direct propositional messages from God; but the degree or kind of inspiration and the corresponding authority status of the prophet are limited. It is virtually impossible to conceive of 1 Cor. 14:29 being applied to OT prophets (once their credentials were accepted) or to NT apostles.

Those who seem consistently to enjoy the greatest authority at the level of the local congregation are the elders, almost certainly the same as those also labeled bishops (or overseers) and pastors (Acts 20:17 - 28; cf. Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:1 - 7; Titus 1:5, 7; 1 Pet. 5:1 - 2). The first term stems from the

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synagogue and from village organization; the second reflects genuine oversight and authority; and the third betrays an agrarian background ("pastor" derives from a Latin root meaning "shepherd").

In a typical list of qualifications for this office / function (e.g., 1 Tim. 3:1 - 7) we discover that almost every entry is mandated elsewhere of all believers. What is distinctive about the elder reduces to two things: (1) He must not be a novice. Clearly this is a relative term, largely dictated by how recently the church in question came into being, since Paul appoints elders mere months after their conversion in some instances (e.g., Acts 14:23). (2) He must be able to teach, which presupposes a growing grasp of the gospel and of the Scriptures and an ability to communicate them well. The other qualifications mentioned (e.g., an overseer must not be a woman, must be given to hospitality, etc.) suggest that he must excel in the graces and deportment expected of all believers. He who would lead the church must himself be a good reflection of it, not a mere professional.

In general, the sphere of responsibility and authority for these bishops - elders - pastors is the local church; there is little compelling evidence for the view that a bishop, for instance, unlike elders, exerted authority over several congregations. A plurality of elders, if not mandated, appears to have been common, and perhaps the norm. On the other hand, only "churches"; one reads of churches in Galatia, but of the church in Antioch or Jerusalem or Ephesus. Thus it is possible, though not certain, that a single elder may have exercised authority in relation to one house group, a house group that in some cases constituted part of the citywide church, so that the individual elder would nevertheless be one of many in that citywide "church" taken as a whole.

The apparent anomalies to this limitation on the sphere of elders can be credibly explained. The writer of 2 John and 3 John labels himself an "elder," even though he is seeking to influence the affairs of other churches; but most likely this particular elder is writing with apostolic prerogatives. The same is true of Peter when he refers to himself as an elder (1 Pet. 5:1). The position of James in Acts 15 is peculiar, but the evidence is being stretched when interpreters conclude that James chaired the proceedings. The case is laid before the apostles and elders (15:4); "the apostles and elders, with the whole church" (15:22), make the final decisions; and the apostles and elders write the letter (15:23). Peter speaks as an apostle, James as an elder; it is not obvious that either "chaired" the meeting. But even if James did so, the crucial decisions were taken by the apostles, elders, and the church in concert.

Deacons may trace the origin of their office / function to the appointment of the seven (Acts 6), but this is uncertain. When lists of qualifications are presented elsewhere (e.g., 1 Tim. 3:8 - 13), stress is laid (as in the case of elders) on features which signify spiritual maturity; but in this instance teaching is not required. Deacons were responsible to serve the church in a variety of subsidiary roles, but enjoyed no church - recognized teaching authority akin to that of elders.

## **Patterns of Authority**

The more difficult question is how these two offices / functions, viz., elders / pastors / overseers and deacons, relate their authority to the authority of the local church or to some broader grouping of churches. Historically one of three avenues has been followed, with many variations.

### **Congregationalism**

tends to place the ultimate choices in the hands of the entire congregation. In part this stance is a reaction against the interposition of a priestly class between God and man; the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:9) is central. Churches decide alongside the apostles and elders (Acts 15:22); churches are responsible to protect themselves against false teachers (Galatians; 2 Cor. 10 - 13; 2

John); churches become the final court of appeal (Matt. 18:17); and even when the apostle Paul wants some discipline to be exercised, he appeals to the entire local church in solemn assembly (1 Cor. 5:4).

## **Episcopacy**

labels its chief ministers bishops and lesser ones presbyters (or priests) and deacons. Some within this camp see the function of the bishops as heir to the apostles; others point to the intermediate roles of Timothy and Titus as portrayed in the Pastoral Epistles, men who had power themselves to appoint elders (Titus 1:5), as had the apostles in the churches they founded (Acts 14:23). Certainly the threefold ministry was defended as early as Ignatius (c. 110 AD), without, apparently, a traumatic debate reflecting change.

## **Presbyterianism**

points out that presbyters in the NT occupy the most important place after the apostles; and in any location the plurality of presbyters (or elders) seems to argue for a committee or college of presbyters who exercised general oversight over the congregation in the area (1 Thess. 5:12 - 13; Heb. 13:17).

As most frequently practiced, all three of these prevailing patterns raise questions. Presbyterianism has raised an inference from Scripture to the status of principle. Episcopacy makes disjunctions between bishop and elder that cannot be defended from the NT, and therefore appeals to Timothy and Titus as paradigms are futile, not least because their functions are best explained on other lines (and in any case they are not called "bishops" over against some lesser clergy status).

Congregationalism tends to read principles of democratic majority vote into NT churches. Ironically, some forms of congregationalism elevate the pastor; once he has been voted in, to near papal authority, in practice if not in theory.

The problem may lie in the fact that we have too often envisaged church authority flowing in straight lines, whether up or down, instead of recognizing the somewhat more fluid reality of the NT. The normal responsibility for and authority of leadership in the NT rests with the bishops - elders - pastors; but if they are interested in pursuing biblical patterns of leadership, they will be concerned to demonstrate observable growth not only in their grasp of truth but also in their lived discipline (1 Tim. 4:14 - 16). They will comprehend that spiritual leadership, far from lording it over others (Matt. 20:25 - 28), is a balanced combination of oversight (1 Tim. 4:11 - 13; 6:17 - 19; Titus 3:9 - 11) and example (1 Tim. 4:12; 6:6 - 11, 17 - 18; 1 Pet. 5:1 - 4) which, far from being antithetical, are mutually reinforcing. By the same token such leaders prefer not to dictate terms but to lead the church into spiritually minded consensus.

Whereas Christians are encouraged to support and submit to spiritual leadership (e.g., Heb. 13:17), such encouragement must not be considered a blank check if churches are responsible for and have the authority to discipline false teachers and to recognize an antecedent commitment not to a pastor but to the truth of the gospel. Modern models are not so much wrong as frequently lopsided, favoring a prejudicial selection of the NT data. Similarly, the Ignatian defense of a threefold ministry was not so much a rebellious aberration as an attempt to ground the rising monarchical episcopate in Scripture in order to use it to ward off traveling preachers who were frequently found spreading Gnostic heresy.

## **Spheres of Authority**

The spheres in which ecclesiastical authority (however such authority is to be manifested) operates are primarily three. First, the early Christian churches exercised discipline, which ranged all the way from private and thoughtful admonition (e.g., Gal. 6:1) to excommunication (a severe social pressure when

the entire church was cooperating) and even the handing over of a person to Satan (e.g., 1 Cor. 5:5; cf. Matt. 16:19; 18:18). Calvin was not wrong to identify church discipline as the third distinguishing mark of the NT church. Second, they enjoyed responsibility for and authority over a substantial range of questions affecting internal order, e.g., arrangement for collection of monies for relief of the poor (2 Cor. 8 - 9) or the administration of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:20 - 26). Third, churches had some responsibility and authority in the selection of deacons and elders and delegates (e.g., Acts 6:3 - 6; 15:22; 1 Cor. 16:3).

In no case were decisions established by mere majority approval; nor were these spheres of authority the exclusive prerogatives of the entire congregation. Apostles appointed elders, and Timothy had hands laid on him both by the apostle Paul and by the presbytery (2 Tim. 1:6; 1 Tim. 4:14). This need not mean such appointment was made without close consultation with the church; but if the authority granted Titus is significant (Titus 1:5), it appears that oversight, especially in the case of fledgling churches, was exercised first by the apostles and then by their appointees.

In sum, there is dynamic tension among the constituent parts of the church as far as the authority of each is concerned. Two boundaries, to say the least, are fixed: (1) the church is not at liberty to ignore or countermand or contravene the authority of the gospel itself, now at last inscripturated, without sooner or later calling into question its own status as church. (2) The church of the NT does not expect its authority to be administered directly to the surrounding world, but to be felt through the transformed and redemptive lives of its members.

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(Elwell Evangelical Dictionary)

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