

Did God Put Authority and Rule in His Church?

Who rules the church? Was it Jesus' intent to create a hierarchy of human government over the individual Christian? Does the Christian ministry sit in Moses' seat for the church? This brochure explains what you always wanted to know about church government but were afraid to ask!

Paul stood on the beach staring out to sea. This would be his last time in this place. It would have been good to have visited Ephesus once more, but it was not to be. It was just as well. He would not have been in Ephesus one hour before a coalition of Jews and silversmiths would have been plotting murder. There was no point in putting temptation in their way.

Still, the Jews were becoming a bit tiresome. On his first visit to Corinth, he had been left unmolested for a year and a half. This last time it had taken only three months before someone laid an ambush for him.

He shook his head slowly and walked a little further down the beach. In a way, he preferred persecution to what was beginning to happen in the churches. So far, Ephesus had been spared, but it wouldn't last. He would have to warn the Ephesian elders, though he doubted it would help much. The problem was deeply rooted in human nature, and it didn't submit an easy solution.

There had been a time when Paul felt he had the solution to heresy among God's people. When he was a Pharisee, he had believed that ordinary people were not to be trusted with the truth. They could not evaluate truth and error; they had to be told right from wrong. The people had to be protected and restrained—humiliated and intimidated, if necessary—to protect them from deception.

Now he realized that the people had believed Pharisees like himself, not because they were right, but because they were stern. Somehow the people feared and respected strictness in their leaders—perhaps because it matched their image of God. So he and his ilk had been stern—even grim.

It had never occurred to Paul in those days that the devil is grim. He is grim because he knows where he is going. He is not a buffoon. He is deadly serious, and those who do his work are just as serious. You had to be serious to lay waste the church, commit men and women to prison, compel people to blaspheme, and put people to death.

Paul was in dead earnest when he persecuted the church, and, he reflected, dead wrong. Temporal power was certainly useful in keeping control of a religious body, but it was a two-edged sword. It was just as effective in suppressing the truth as it was in stamping out heresy. But the worst thing about such temporal power was that it always corrupted

those who used it—it certainly had corrupted him. He would never again attempt to coerce men into obeying what he believed was the truth, no matter how fervently he believed it.

This left him with a problem—what to do about some of the troublesome people who were now beginning to afflict the church. He had already made up his mind. He would not tell the Ephesian elders to excommunicate them. Before he had sailed out of sight, someone would be using church fellowship as a tool to grind some personal axe. The lazy ones would put a man out of the church rather than go to the trouble of answering his questions. No, he had another approach in mind.

He had already settled on the wording: “Take heed therefore to yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood.” It was in the end the only effective inoculation. He had learned the hard way. The harder you work to stamp out an idea, the more it tends to spread. The only real defense against error was truth, truth, and more truth.

The best he could advise them was to be alert and to feed the flock. He would add, “For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:29).

The Wolves

After nineteen centuries, things haven’t changed much. These are still the two main categories of people who afflict the church. On the one hand, we have the wolves who were never converted—never “one of us.” It is implied that their motives were wrong from the start. Simon Magus fell into this category (Acts 8:18). Motivated by a lust for power, he understood so little about the church that he attempted to buy the power of God.

What creates such men? Three basic motives: ego, money, and power. Simon was on an ego trip before Philip ever arrived in Samaria (v. 9). What he offered to buy was power (v. 19).

Wolves can have a devastating effect on the church and its work, but they may not be as dangerous as the second category. These are insiders who go bad. When Paul said, “Of your own selves shall men arise,” he was referring to the assembled elders.

Why do “insiders” go bad? We are dealing here with people who were converted. Not only were they believers, their lives had borne fruit to such an extent that they were able to rise to positions of influence and power in the church. How does a converted person, a spiritual leader, go bad? They are infected by the same virus that infects the wolves—ego, money, and power.

It is much more dangerous to the church when insiders go bad—and go bad they will. When ministers we have trusted begin to speak “perverse things,” it poses a special problem. At first, the reaction among brethren is confusion. Psychologists call it “cognitive dissonance.” It means simply that things you “know” don’t harmonize. Since you believe the teacher, apostle, leader, or minister, you “know” that what he says is true. You also know that the Bible is true. The problem is that the minister and the Bible do not agree.

As we might expect, the first reaction of most of the people is to attempt to reconcile these two opposing ideas. But a surprising thing happens when they fail to reconcile them. Instead of deciding that there is something wrong with one of the authorities in question, most people conclude: “*There must be something wrong with me.*” For a time thereafter, such people describe themselves as “confused.” If a minister’s teaching seems to contradict what you already know to be true, you may have difficulty at first in seeing it as an error. You first assume the fault is with you, and you are confused! If you cannot get by this stage, discouragement, depression, and apathy are bound to follow.

How do you get by this stage? Follow Paul’s admonition to “Prove all things and hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). You do not get over it by assuming that the preacher is right and you are wrong. That may indeed be the case, but you have no obligation to assume it, and no preacher has the right to claim it. The preacher, apostle, or teacher is not the standard of right and wrong. The Bible is!

Follow the example of the Bereans and “search the Scriptures” to see if these things are true. Be like the Ephesians who tried those who claimed apostleship (Revelation 2:2). When there exists a conflict between the teaching of a prophet and the plain teaching of Scripture, don’t lie to yourself and pretend both are right. The attempt to reconcile conflicting ideas is natural. The attempt to *believe* conflicting ideas is a sure road to confusion.

The Ministry

“There must be a recognition that God works through a ministry,” said one minister. There can be little argument about that. Not only does God work through ministers, He expects them to be obeyed. The Hebrew Christians were exhorted to “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls as they that must give account; that they may do it with joy, and not with grief; for that is unprofitable for you” (Hebrews 13:17).

There is also little argument that the ministry is, or should be, better qualified to research doctrinal matters. But when the ministry presents an idea to the people, are the people qualified to judge the truth of the matter? Does the ministry have an obligation to explain, prove, and answer questions about a doctrine or a teaching? Or do the people have to accept what a minister says, no matter what?

Does God require unconditional, unquestioning obedience to the ministry? If so, then there are some conditions that must be met. First, the ministry must be infallible in all matters requiring such obedience. In the Roman Catholic Church, this finds expression in the doctrine that the Pope, acting as supreme teacher, cannot err when he teaches in matters of faith and morals.

The idea of infallibility has some appeal. If I am expected to give unquestioning obedience to someone, then I have a right to demand that he not make mistakes. After all, the consequences can be rather permanent. How nice to know that my minister will never, never make a mistake in those areas where he requires my obedience.

There is, of course, an obvious problem. What do you do when there is a conflict between ministers? That's simple enough; you go to a higher authority. But what do you do when there is a conflict between the *highest* authority and the Bible? The Roman Catholic Church solves the problem by making the Pope the Supreme Pontiff and by making him the sole interpreter of the Bible. If there appears to be a contradiction between the Pope and the Bible, the conflict is resolved in favor of the Pope.

What seems to be overlooked in all this is where the new convert begins. He begins with no religious authority at all, or perhaps he begins with the Bible. How does he establish church authority in the first place?

Follow me through this very carefully.

There is a well-known television evangelist who claims that Jesus Christ speaks to him personally. How can you know that he is telling the truth? You can't. Personal revelations from God are just that—personal. Since they can not be validated by third parties, then they are of meaning only to the person who received the alleged revelation.

Now suppose this evangelist claims that God gave him a message for you. I don't mean a general message of exhortation, but a personal message of authority. How do you know that he speaks the truth? The answer is simple—you don't.

Through Isaiah, God warned against listening to just any source of spiritual enlightenment: "And when they shall say unto you, Seek unto them that have familiar spirits, and unto wizards that peep, and that mutter: should not a people seek unto their God? [Should] the living [seek] to the dead? [Seek] to the law and to the testimony; *if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them*" (Isaiah 8: 19–20).

So you are not expected to take some one's word for it when he claims to speak for God. You are expected to check what he says against the law and the testimony—another way of saying that you look to the Scriptures for your authority.

Now back to our new convert who is trying to establish the authority of the church. How does he do it? He can establish it solely by the authority of the Bible. *And if church*

authority is established by the Bible, church authority must forevermore be subject to the Bible.

When a disciple has established that the Bible is the truth—that it is, in fact, the Word of God—then he has a standard against which all claims of authority can be judged.

But there is a significant factor in all this that is often overlooked. *The judge is not the minister, but the disciple.* It is the disciple who tests the apostle (Revelation 2:2). It is the disciple who proves all things and decides what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21). It is the disciple who searches the Scriptures to determine if the minister is telling the truth (Acts 17:11). The minister is not judging; he is being judged. When a minister has been found to speak the truth, he naturally assumes leadership and influence. He should be obeyed *as long as he continues to speak according to God's Word.* The apostle Paul never demanded unconditional obedience. He only asked that the disciples follow him *as he followed Christ* (1 Corinthians 11:1).

But one minister argued, “If you have proved that this is God’s church, you proved what is taught, you were baptized, you signed a contract in blood with Jesus Christ, and if you are going to disagree with the authority and the instruction from Jesus Christ then you are going back on that contract.” This minister is confusing our contract with Jesus Christ and our contract with the church. For him, church authority is God’s authority.

There is a fundamentally wrong line of reasoning here. The minister believes that the church is the body of Christ. Therefore, when the church speaks it is as though Jesus Christ Himself is speaking. Since he is the representative of the church, then he is speaking for Christ. If you disagree with him, then you are disagreeing with Christ.

It is a chilling thought. Fortunately, the error is not that hard to find. This argument assumes that the church IS Jesus Christ! But Jesus is not the church—He is the HEAD of the church. *It is the duty of the church to submit to Jesus Christ, not to usurp His authority.* The Roman Catholic Church claims that the Pope is the Vicar of Christ. This does not merely mean that the Pope is Christ’s representative, but that he acts in the place of Christ. But the Pope and bishops in communion with him are not Christ; they are fallible human beings.

It can be nerve-racking putting your life in someone else’s hands. Ask anyone who has undergone open heart surgery. One slip by anyone of several people, and you are gone! But if you die in surgery, you are only gone until the resurrection. How do you feel about putting your *eternal* life in someone else’s hands? Would you feel safe if that person could make a mistake? You would be worried if the surgeon had a hangover from the night before. But what if your minister had a mental disorder? Suppose he were a sexual deviant or a manic depressive? What if he were paranoid or schizophrenic?

“God will take care of it,” is the answer suggested. But when? And what is your responsibility in the meantime? What if you get hurt in the process? If you get hurt—

especially if you are *punished* by God—would that suggest that you might be accountable for what you do while you wait for God to “take care of it”?

That brings us to the second condition that would exist *if* the ministry were to be unconditionally obeyed: Under no circumstances should a man ever be punished for unquestioning obedience to the ministry. If a man were deceived by a servant of God, he should not be held accountable. After all, he has proved that the man is God’s minister, and he has remained subject to God’s government. It is up to God to correct His servants.

Is that what we find in the Bible?

There came a day when the elders of Israel came to Ezekiel to enquire of God, but their heart was not right: “Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their heart, and put the stumbling block of their iniquity before their face: should I be enquired of at all by them?” (Ezekiel 14:2). These were not idols of stone, but something or some one that they had put in the place of God. Even a church, minister, prophet, or apostle can be made an idol.

What would happen to such people if they went to a prophet and he happened to be deceived? Would they be held accountable if it was the prophet’s mistake? The prophet is certainly held accountable: “And if the prophet be deceived when he hath spoken a thing, I the LORD have deceived the prophet, and I will stretch out my hand upon him, and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel.”

Fair enough, but the people who listened to him and obeyed his voice will not be held accountable because they were following God’s government, right? Wrong! “And they shall bear the punishment of their iniquity: the punishment of the prophet shall be even as the punishment of him that seeketh unto him” (Ezekiel 14:10).

Who Leads?

One minister, zealous to establish apostolic authority, used Moses as a classic illustration: “When God sent Moses into Egypt,” the preacher insisted, “He backed him up at every turn.”

And indeed He did. God gave Moses the power to perform miracles. Every prediction he made came true. Every plague he promised came to pass. By the time he ordered the Israelites to kill a lamb and strike the blood of the lamb on their lintels and doorposts, they were ready to do as they were told. It was well that they did. That night the death angel took the firstborn of all Egypt. But when the angel saw the blood on the doors of the Israelite houses, he “passed over” them and spared their children.

Then, as Israel left Egypt and began the march to the Red Sea, Moses continued to lead. “If Moses had ordered a right turn and you had turned to the left, where would you have been when the time came to cross the Red Sea?” the minister queried. “God’s servant

says ‘Follow me,’” he continued; “so are you going to trust God’s proved servant, or are you going to follow your own ideas?”

It seems a reasonable argument. Yet there are two serious errors in it. First, no matter how many times a servant of God has been right, if he is human, he can fail. Moses rebelled late in his ministry and was not allowed to take the people into the promised land. Paul had been right as often as anyone, yet he disciplined himself, lest, after having preached to others, he himself should be a castaway.

Second, and more important, they were not merely following Moses. The biblical account is quite specific—by day, they followed a cloud, and by night, a pillar of fire! Need we ask what the Israelites should have done if Moses went north, and the cloud went south? “But,” someone will protest, “Moses would never do that!” Oh really? Then how was it that he rebelled? The event may be unlikely, but as long as human leaders make mistakes, we must be ready to answer.

It is not foolish to ask what we should do if a minister asks us to believe or do something that is contrary to God’s Word. The only reason for calling it a foolish question is because we don’t want to answer it. But there is an honest answer. If Moses turns north and the pillar of fire turns south, we follow the fire!

Does God hold a Christian accountable for the things he does while following church authority? If the individual Christian is expected to obey the ministry *no matter what*, if he is to give *unquestioning* obedience to church government, then he cannot be held personally responsible for anything beyond that obedience. *But that is plainly not the case.*

The seven churches of Asia pose an interesting illustration. These seven churches, from Ephesus to Laodicea, were seven local churches existing side by side in Asia Minor in the first century (Revelation 1:11). However, in John’s vision, they seem to represent more. John saw seven golden candlesticks and one like the Son of man standing in the midst of them. He held seven stars in His right hand. Since the number seven in the Bible represents completion or wholeness, it is easy to conclude that these seven churches represent the whole church. The angel who spoke to John identified the seven golden candlesticks as “the seven churches”—obviously the seven churches of Asia described in verse 11.

Most of the churches have one or more problems that are addressed in the letter. Whose problems are they? Problems of the leadership, problems of the brethren, or both? When we look carefully at each letter, even though it is initially addressed to the angel of the church, *the text of each letter is written to the membership*. Take Smyrna, for example. God wrote to the “angel” (messenger) of the church of Smyrna, “I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty. Fear none of these things which you shall suffer: behold the devil shall cast *some of you* into prison that you may be tried; and you shall have tribulation ten days: Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life” (Revelation 2:9–11).

Notice that even though the letter is formally addressed to a singular “angel,” it is actually written to a plurality (“some of you”). The letter to Pergamos is written in a similar vein where it speaks of Antipas “who was slain among you” (Revelation 2:13). And, of course, if we adopted a strict posture that each letter was written to the angel, not to the individual members of the church, then it is only the angel of the church at Ephesus who is promised to be kept from the hour of tribulation (Revelation 3:10).

Every letter closes with an admonition for everyone who has ears to hear what the spirit is saying to the churches. The letters, then, are written, not merely to the angel or leader of each church, but to the church—that is, to the “assembly” of God’s people. Every individual member has the responsibility to hear what the spirit says to all the churches.

Realizing, then, that each individual in the churches was *responsible* for the things said to the churches, let’s take a closer look at what was said to Pergamos and Thyatira. The leadership in the church in Pergamos was permitting people to hold the doctrine of Balaam—which involved eating things offered to idols and committing fornication! If you had been in Pergamos, would you have been excused if you had followed those leaders who were teaching you to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication? Notice that God admonished them to “repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.” And if you were found to be following those who teach the doctrine of Balaam, you would be in the position of having God fight against you, *even though you were following church government!*

Then there’s Thyatira. Here the leadership of the church is permitting a woman named Jezebel to teach “my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols.” Supposing you had followed *this* teacher, listen to God’s judgment: “Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and *them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation*, except they repent of their deeds.” Read very carefully verse 23: “And I will kill her children with death; all the churches shall know that I am He which searcheth the reins and the hearts: and *I will give unto every one of you according to your works.*”

Sobering words, these. But there is some encouragement. God continues, “But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, *as many as have not this doctrine*, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come” (Revelation 2:24).

There were *brethren* in the Thyatiran church who sat side-by-side and held two very disparate forms of doctrine. *Every one*—each individual—was going to be dealt with according to his own works. Some would be punished severely through great tribulation, and others would not. Those who followed church government into error would suffer. Those who evaluated Jezebel and rejected her would not.

What does this tell us about our personal responsibility before God? Is it true that all we need to do is find out where God’s church is and then do as we’re told?

Then there is the church at Ephesus of whom God says, “Remember therefore from whence you art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.”

But what happens to the individual Christian who is trying his best to remain faithful to God when his church’s candlestick is removed out of its place? What is entailed with the “removal of the candlestick”? Does that mean that a given church can *cease to be the true Church of God*? Absolutely! But what happens to *you* in that circumstance? If you have followed the *leadership* of that church, you have followed them right out of God’s church even though you remain “in the body.” If you remain true to God’s Word, and *repent*, God will give you to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God (Revelation 2:7). Notice that every letter includes a promise to the *over comer*. Sometimes it is necessary to overcome false teaching *even within God’s church!* You cannot claim absolution simply because you were following orders.

To be sure, the Bible calls for obedience to the ministry in the church. But is that obedience absolute, *unqualified* obedience? Or is it *qualified* obedience? Peter had to face the question in a way that is far from our experience. Peter and John had been arrested and held because they were teaching in Jesus’ name. They had been arrested by the legitimate religious governing body of the time. The men who had arrested them were the men who Jesus had described as “sitting in Moses’ seat.” This was no rabble, no mob, but legitimate authority. When they had commanded them not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus, Peter replied, “Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than God, judge you. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19–20).

Later, when they were arrested again and brought before the council, the High Priest asked them if they had not been warned not to teach in Jesus’ name. Peter replied, “We ought to obey God rather than men.” It is easy to see how this is true where *civil* government is concerned. It is not even so difficult to see where the religious government of the Jews was concerned.

But if it is true *anywhere*, why not in the church? *Just because we are in the church, are we now free to obey men rather than God?* When you put it that way, the question is monstrous. But why shouldn’t you put it that way? As long as it is possible for the leadership of the church to go contrary to God’s will, then Christians will always be faced with the question of whether to obey God or to obey men.

No one understood better than Paul how easily a minister could fall. He disciplined himself, lest “by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway” (1 Corinthians 9:27). He was concerned that any defection on his own part should not lead others astray, warning the Galatians, “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:8). He also was painfully aware of Peter’s fallibility (Galatians 2:11–14).

The False Church

After all, how does a “false church” come to be? There is not a hint in the Bible that a single preacher started a “false church” from scratch. The apostles were not concerned about new, pagan churches claiming to be Christian. Simon Magus seems a prime candidate to start his own church, but he is never heard from after Acts 8. Apparently, the apostles did not consider him worthy of further mention. He was obviously a phony and posed no threat to anyone but himself. They were more concerned about real ministers, and even whole churches, going bad. John wrote of just such a situation: “I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not...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).

Here was a situation where the true brethren were put out of the church, and only a corrupt minister and his followers were left. Where is the true church? Expelled and scattered. Where is the “false church”? It is the remaining “establishment.” Here is a plain biblical illustration of how a “false church” comes to be. It happens when the true church goes bad.

When the true church goes bad, it nearly always becomes authoritarian. Since it is beginning to adopt doctrines that are not supported in the Bible, it must increasingly appeal to “church government” in order to maintain control. Excommunication and shunning become weapons to be used against those who dissent. “Church government,” which should denote God’s government over the church, slowly but surely becomes the church’s government over the individual Christian.

The “gates of hell” do not prevail against the church. Jesus Christ has promised that He will always have a church, but He did not promise that it would always be the visible, established church. His church will always be composed of those who remain faithful to Him, no matter what their “church government” might demand of them or do to them.

Samuel

But isn’t there a risk that in going contrary to church government we will be going contrary to God? Isn’t that what happened when the elders of Israel rejected Samuel’s leadership? No man should ever lightly reject the governance of the church or its ministry. But that is not what happened to Samuel.

As Samuel grew older, he did the most natural thing at the time. He placed his sons in administrative offices. It didn’t take his sons long to become corrupted, and in short order resentment formed itself into action.

It was not, however, a rabble that presented itself before Samuel to demand change. It was the *elders of Israel*. These men held an official office dating back to Moses, and were spiritual leaders in Israel (Numbers 11:25).

When these elders formed a delegation and came to Samuel, they did a curious thing. While they mildly pointed out the errors of Samuel's sons, they didn't ask for their removal, nor did they ask for the removal of Samuel! They asked for a change at an even higher level. They asked for a king to judge them like all the nations round about (1 Samuel 8:5).

When Samuel went to God about the matter, the Lord said to Samuel, "Hearken unto the voice of the people in all they say unto you: for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them" (1 Samuel 8:7).

Some have assumed that the act of rejecting Samuel's leadership was, in fact, the rejection of God Himself. But the passage does not read, "In rejecting you, they have actually rejected me." God says plainly that they had *not rejected Samuel*.

And indeed, there is no suggestion that they had. In fact, they acknowledged the goodness of Samuel's leadership by contrasting the actions of his corrupt sons. There is no reason to believe that had they gone to Samuel and asked for the removal of his sons that God would have condemned them for it. Indeed, that may have been within their responsibility.

But there was something else going on at the same time. No mention is made of it in chapter 8; Samuel explains it later. After the king had been confirmed, Samuel stood and protested to all Israel concerning his integrity. He demanded that they bear witness before the Eternal and before his king as to whose ox he had taken, whose ass he had taken, whom he might have defrauded, whom he might have oppressed, or at whose hand he had received any bribe. The people replied, "You have not defrauded us, nor oppressed us, neither hast thou taken ought of any man's hand" (1 Samuel 12:4).

At this point, Samuel adds a new dimension to the discussion: "And when you saw that Nahash the king of the children of Ammon came against you, ye said unto me, Nay; but a king shall reign over us: *when the LORD your God was your king*" (v. 12).

It was not the rejection of corrupt human leadership that was perceived as rebellion against God. It was the rejection of God Himself!

Is it possible that an entire church could make the same mistake as the elders of Israel—that they could reject Jesus Christ as their King, asking for, and accepting, a human ruler over the church?

One Mediator

When Jesus advised His listeners to obey the Pharisees because they sat in Moses' seat, did He intend to sanction a particular form of church government? It is true that God spoke to His people through Moses, and God Himself chose Moses' successor. But how does this "succession of Moses" affect the church?

We are told that Moses was a *mediator* between God and Israel (Galatians 3:19). A mediator stands between man and God to make intercession. Israel did not want God to speak with them but asked Moses to be a go-between (Exodus 20:19). From that time forward, God spoke to Moses, and Moses spoke to Israel.

Who holds Moses' office in the church? Who is to act as a mediator between God and the Christian? The writer of Hebrews left no doubt. Comparing Jesus' ministry to that of the Old Testament, he concluded, "But now hath He obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also He is the mediator of a better covenant" (Hebrews 8:6). Comparing His sacrifice to that of bulls and goats, he continued, "and for this cause He [Jesus] is the mediator of the New Testament" (Hebrews 9:15; 12:24).

A fundamental change has taken place between the Old and New Testaments. In Old Testament times, God used many mediators. He, "at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, but hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son" (Hebrews 1:1–2).

Paul told Timothy, "For there is one God, and *one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus*" (1 Timothy 2:5). This leaves no room for a hierarchy to speak for God—no room for a minister to sit between you and God—no room for another master.

Jesus made it plain that, "No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other" (Luke 16:13). As long as a minister remains faithful to God's Word, there is no conflict. But when a minister begins to enforce his own edicts apart from the Bible, then the faithful servant of God has no choice—He must obey God rather than men.

Paul spoke of a day when every knee should bow and every tongue confess to God. In that day, "everyone of us shall give account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12). It will not be enough in that day to claim that you merely followed your leaders. There will be no one to plead your cause but the one mediator between God and man—Jesus Christ. No minister, no apostle will be able to stand between you and the Father.

In that day, there will be no coattail salvation. God spoke of a day when He would visit His people in wrath, saying, "Though Noah, Daniel, and Job were in it, as I live, saith the Lord GOD, they shall deliver neither son nor daughter; they shall but deliver their own souls by their righteousness" (Ezekiel 14:20). No one will be there to make intercession for you except Jesus Christ, your one Mediator.

No Authority?

Did God put authority and rule in His church? Was it Jesus' intent to create a hierarchy of human government over the individual Christian? It is not an unreasonable question. The governments of the day were virtually all authoritarian, and there is reason to believe the disciples might have expected the church to be governed the same way. When they asked questions based on this assumption, Jesus was quick to set them straight: "Ye know that

the princes of the gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. *But it shall not be so among you:* but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister [servant]" (Matthew 20:25–26).

It was never Jesus' intent that "do minion" and "authority" be tools for governing His church. There would be no imperial trappings for His ministry. There would be no earthly head of the church. *Jesus Christ* was appointed "the head over all things to the church" (Ephesians 1:22). He claimed, "All power is given to *me* in heaven and in earth" (Matthew 28:17).

But what about the ministry? Have they *any* authority? Absolutely! Ministers are to be honored for their work's sake. They are to be followed as they follow Christ. They are to be respected as servants of Jesus Christ. And they are to be obeyed as they lead the church in working together to carry out the great commission to the church. After all, the ministry is called of God, commissioned of God, gifted of God, and empowered of God to carry on His work here below. It was to the ministry that Jesus promised, "and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world." Without the ministry, the church would be fragmented and ineffective. The gifts of the ministry are given "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" (Ephesians 4:11–13).

Never cease to study God's Word and to prove all things. But never fail to respect and honor those men whom God has sent. Never cease to search the Scriptures and test those teachers who come your way. When those teachers have been found true to God's Word, then never fail to follow. And when your ministers are faithfully caring for the welfare of the church, never fail to obey. But never forget that, in the end, if you follow a Moses, Samuel, or Paul into error, God will hold you and you alone responsible.

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