

Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same
image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

Authority For Building Up

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2 Corinthians 10:7-18

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 10:7; that's on page 969 in your pew Bibles. Last week we ended the message by talking about a few questions you could ask that really get at the underpinnings of the secular, materialist worldview. The Gospel presents a way of understanding all of reality – it explains why there is something rather than nothing, it explains why things are not now as we sense they should be, it presents a solution to the apparent dilemma and it suggests a resolution that we wait for in hope and faith – the Gospel is a coherent worldview. Even if you disagree with it, even if you don't believe it you cannot deny that it is a coherent worldview. The secular, materialist worldview is not coherent. I was in a meeting last week where a small group of Evangelical leaders gathered together to talk about some social and cultural issues and they brought in a variety of speakers to help guide our conversation. One of those speakers was NY Times columnist Ross Douthat. Ross Douthat is part of the secular elite – there is no denying that – he is a columnist at one of the main cultural engines in our society and yet he himself admits that the worldview of the secular elite in North America and Western Europe is essentially and deeply incoherent. Those were his words – deeply incoherent. The various things they believe don't fit together in any rational or coherent way. As the sociologist Charles Taylor famously quipped:

“Man descended from apes, therefore let us love one another” – Charles Taylor

That is meant to sound irrational. What he is saying there is that the worldview of modern secular elites – that we descended from apes, that we are essentially just animals, that our group survived because we were better at passing on our genes than Neanderthals or other hominids – that worldview does not logically translate into any sort of pattern for human behavior. And yet, we all believe that we should behave in generally benevolent ways. Let me bring this right down to street level. If its true that human beings are just highly evolved apes and that we survived when other groups failed because we are better at passing on our genes then they were then, in theory, why is it wrong for a man to grab a healthy, pretty woman and drag her by the hair into an alley in order to engage in reproductive behavior? If she is a healthy female and the end goal is to pass on our genes to healthy offspring – what makes rape such a repugnant and despicable act? We can't connect what we believe about reality to what we believe about behavior – there is no THEREFORE in the modern secular worldview. There is no authoritative standard for human behavior flowing out of the big things we believe about REALITY; and as a result the conversation about AUTHORITY is one of the most important conversations you can ever have with an unbeliever. In the absence of an obvious authority we have embraced all manner of competing authorities as a culture. Everybody is listening to somebody. They may be listening to themselves – the Bible says that for some people:

their god is their belly (Philippians 3:19 ESV)

They do whatever their lusts and appetites tell them to do. For some people their authority is the secular elite in culture and media. They do whatever Oprah says is good, or Dr. Phil or whatever Elizabeth Gilbert told them to do in her book Eat, Pray, Love. That book has been called Augustine's Confessions for post-Christian heretics; it is amazing the impact that book has had on the morality of contemporary women.

Everyone is influenced by the authority that they recognize. That's why last week I told you to ask your friends how they decide right and wrong. That is a foundational question in our culture and it is the question being addressed in the passage that is before us. In Corinth the issue is that false apostles have come into Corinth with their false teaching and as is always the case, bad teaching and wrong authority lead to destructive living. That's what has happened and so Paul is arguing for right authority. He is trying to push the church back onto the foundation of the

prophets and Apostles with Christ as cornerstone. That has been the theme of this letter and Paul has come back to it again and again and again.

This morning, because we have dealt with several other passages like this I am going to take a more systematic approach. Rather than going through the passage word by word and clause by clause I am going to pull up to the forest level and address the issue of authority GENERALLY. We'll look at this passage and a few others in order to answer some questions that we have as modern day people trying to submit to the Lordship of Christ and the authority of God's Word in the church. Let's begin with the text in front of us. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 7.

⁷Look at what is before your eyes. If anyone is confident that he is Christ's, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ's, so also are we. ⁸For even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed. ⁹I do not want to appear to be frightening you with my letters. ¹⁰For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account." ¹¹Let such a person understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present. ¹²Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding. ¹³But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you. ¹⁴For we are not overextending ourselves, as though we did not reach you. For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ. ¹⁵We do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others. But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged, ¹⁶so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's area of influence. ¹⁷"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." ¹⁸For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends. (2 Corinthians 10:7-18 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Having defended his discipline in verses 1-6 Paul here comes right to the heart of the matter which is his authority to act on Christ's behalf to pull down – that was verses 1-6 – and to build up. There are other folks – false apostles – commending themselves as apostles but Paul will not compare himself to these folks. It doesn't matter what people say about themselves it matters what God says about us. Paul isn't boasting inappropriately about his authority – as these others are – in fact he says that on judgment day he will not be ashamed of claiming to be an apostle because HE IS an apostle. God made him one. Jesus commissioned him as such. They struggle to see it because they look at physical appearances. Paul doesn't look or sound like they imagine an apostle would, but that is neither here nor there. He is what he is and if he does not find them as he would when he visits then they will come to know, personally and experientially, his authority as an apostle – that's the gist of the paragraph.

Now, I'm not sure if there was ever a time in church history when you could read that passage and briefly summarize it as I have done and then said to the congregation: "This is the Word of the Lord" – there has probably never been a generation that would have gladly shouted back "THANKS BE TO GOD!" The notion of authority has ALWAYS been hard for us to understand and embrace but I think I am safe ground in suggesting that it has never been MORE SO than in our day. We have questions; we have reservations; we need further discussion on this matter and so we will give ourselves to some of that this morning. By God's grace I want to try and address 3 important questions that we have concerning this matter before suggesting an appropriate response at the end.

The first question I think we need to address is this:

Who has authority in the church?

The answer to this question is actually really easy, just like in Sunday School the answer to this question is.... JESUS! That's correct. Jesus has authority in the church. In the Great Commission to the disciples Jesus said:

¹⁸"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18–20 ESV)

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given TO ME. Go and make DISCIPLES. A disciple is someone who is under the discipline of Jesus Christ. A disciple is someone who obeys or observes all that Christ commanded – as we said last week, the church is not in the decision business we are in the OBEDIENCE business. We go out and invite people to come under the saving Lordship of Jesus Christ – amen? Amen. That was an easy answer despite that there are many so called Christians who appear not to know that. There are many people who want to be saved by Jesus but who do not want to obey Jesus. Let me be very clear. You cannot have Jesus as Savior if you are not submitted to him as Lord.

Now, you might wonder where that is in the text we just read. After all, the text is about Paul's authority as Apostle, not Jesus' authority per se. Well, look at verse 8:

The authority that Paul has as an apostle is that WHICH THE LORD GAVE – it is derivative. Paul, as an apostle, is exercising authority on behalf of Jesus Christ.

That takes us to our second question:

How is the authority of Christ mediated in the church?

I will try and be helpful and brief here – which is no easy task. The authority of Christ in the church is mediated in three ways. First and foremost, it is mediated:

i. Through the Scriptures

The Bible is the Word of Christ. Christ was the Spirit of prophecy in the Old Testament according to 1 Peter 1:11 and 1 Peter 3:19. When an Old Testament prophet said “This is the Word of the Lord” – the LORD there is Jesus. The Old Testament prophets were being animated by Jesus; the Old Testament therefore IS the Word of Christ. The Gospels of course are the WORD of CHRIST and we remember from last week in John 16 that the words of the Apostles are also the Word of Christ. The whole Bible is the Word of Christ. Therefore we say that the church’s foundation is:

the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20 ESV)

To be a Christian therefore is to receive the whole Bible as the Word of the Word of God – that is definitional to being saved, that’s what God said:

But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.
(Isaiah 66:2 ESV)

So Jesus says in Isaiah 66:2; Jesus is the Spirit of Prophecy – Jesus says that a real Christian does not argue with the Word of God, does not try and judge the word of God or lessen its authority – a real Christian studies the Word of God so as to understand and submit to it. Jesus rules over his church first and foremost VIA the Word of God – amen? Amen.

Secondly and in a derivative sense, Jesus reigns over the church:

ii. Through his duly appointed leaders – pastors and elders

Christ is the Over Shepherd of the church but Christ recruits under shepherds who exercise authority on his behalf. Peter talked about that:

¹ So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Peter 5:1–4 ESV)

You read that last week in the RMM. Peter speaks here as an elder – as a pastor – those words are used interchangeably in the New Testament – and he says to the other pastor/elders: “Shepherd the flock of God; exercise oversight, not domineering, being an example and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory.”

So shepherds – or pastors or elders – they work for Jesus the Head of the church. Jesus is the CHIEF Shepherd and pastors and elders are UNDER SHEPHERDS. They exercise HIS authority, not their authority. That’s an important distinction. We need to hear both sides of that statement. First of all we need to just acknowledge that pastors and elders actually do have authority. When Paul writes to pastors he commands them to exercise authority; he says to Timothy for example:

charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God (1 Timothy 6:17 ESV)

charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. (2 Timothy 2:14 ESV)

Command and teach these things. (1 Timothy 4:11 ESV)

Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. (1 Timothy 5:7 ESV)

Paul expected pastors to exercise authority in the church. There is simply no way around that. However, we need to hear the other side of that statement, which is that pastors and elders do not exercise their own authority, they exercise the authority of Jesus as given in the Word of God.

Paul is very clear on that, he tells pastor Timothy:

Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 1:13 ESV)

devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. (1 Timothy 4:13 ESV)

And of course most famously, Paul said to Timothy:

¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16–17 ESV)

Everything Timothy does in the exercise of his pastoral authority needs to be done from the authoritative Word of God. His authority as a pastor is ENTIRELY DERIVATIVE.

Let's get down to brass tacks then. A pastor or elder is authoritative only when they stand on the Word of God. If the pastor speaks on his own authority then he is operating without authority. But if he speaks from inside here – from within the word of God – then he speaks with the authority of Christ himself. That is the belief that lies behind our little concession to liturgy each Sunday when two times during the sermon we say the words “thanks be to God.” We say it after the actual reading. I read the text and I say: “This is the Word of the Lord” and you say “thanks be to God.” Then often at the conclusion of the message explaining and applying the text, I will say again, “This is the Word of the Lord”. Now you understand that I am not saying that my sermon should now be added to the canon of Scripture – no I am actually giving you the opportunity to affirm – or not – that my sermon has been nothing other than the explanation and application of the text. If my sermon has been faithful to the text then it is authoritative – it is as the Word of the Lord – if it hasn't been faithful then it is your duty NOT TO SAY “thanks be to God”. If you slept through the message you probably shouldn't say anything at that point. That is me submitting my word to your discernment and that takes me to my final point in terms of the mediation of Christ's authority in the church.

Jesus reigns over the church:

iii. Through the congregation as a whole

This is where we differ with Presbyterians. Presbyterians would agree with the first two things I have said but would differ with us here. Baptists are a brand of “Congregationalist” which is to say we believe that Congregations are independent of any extra-ecclesial body like a denomination or Pope and that the Congregation as a whole exercises spiritual discernment and authority. For the sake of time let me take you right to the critical passage. When talking about church discipline, after he talked about meeting face to face and if necessary taking some other people with you, finally, at the end, as the terminus of the process Jesus said:

¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, **tell it to the church**. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 18:17–18 ESV)

That passage sounds like Jesus expects the whole church – all the members collectively – to ultimately own the process of excommunication – an obvious expression of authority. The church together is responsible to bind and loose – to let in and to kick out. The elders and pastors have a critical role to play, obviously and may do a great deal of work behind the scenes and before the process reaches this climax but at the end of the process, if a person won’t repent of their sin the church as a WHOLE wields the hammer of excommunication. By the way, you see this in the Old Testament. When there was a capital crime committed there was a process that involved witnesses and a verdict but in the end the entire congregation was expected to participate:

“Bring out of the camp the one who cursed, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him. (Leviticus 24:14 ESV)

Excommunication is the NT equivalent of capital punishment. We’re not a country anymore, we are churches in countries. We don’t stone, we excommunicate and while the elders and pastors may conduct a trial and summon witnesses and deliver a verdict at the end of the day we execute the sentence as a church. As a congregation – Old Testament and New.

The third question we need to ask and answer quickly is this:

What is it given for?

There is authority, it is mediated – but what is it for? The answer to this question is simple,

you've seen it in the text, authority in the church is for building up. It is for edification. Paul says that in verse 8 and he says it more fulsomely in Ephesians 4. There we read:

¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11–13 ESV)

Authority is given to the church FOR the church. Let me say that again: Authority is given to the church FOR THE CHURCH. You need this. I need this.

Can I share with you a story about how I have benefited from this in my own life? I am a pastor in this church and an elder but I am also, first and foremost, a member. I exercise authority but I am also under authority. A couple of years ago I came due for a sabbatical. Our church Employee guidelines state that if the Lead Pastor serves more than 7 years, somewhere in years 7-10 he is to be granted a sabbatical, provided he intends to stay for an additional 3 years – or something to that effect. So I came due and the Board kindly offered me the chance to do a sabbatical study leave. That appealed to me. I would like to do some further study and a sabbatical would allow me to perhaps knock off half of a doctorate or something like that. However, at the time, SL was not recovering as well as we had hoped from her blood disorder. And the kids were young and I wasn't sure that me disappearing to Louisville or Chicago for 4-6 months to do a doctorate was such a good idea. On the one hand I heard this verse “study to show thyself approved a workman who needeth not be ashamed” and on the other hand I heard that if a man doesn't take care of his own family he is worse than an unbeliever. Which verse should I listen to? I prayed, I wrestled and I couldn't find peace. I wanted to be ambitious for God and give him a good return for his investment in me, but I also wanted to be a good husband and father – God commands those things too. So what should I do? I decided to submit to my elders. I asked three men on the Board – the Board Executive, to pray about the issue for 1 month and then to tell me what to do. I would abide by their decision. All three told me the same thing. Now is not the time. I rested in that. I'm not sure what I would have decided on my own – I couldn't trust me own heart! There was fear in there and there was ambition in there and neither of those are helpful and so regardless of what decision I might have made I would not have trusted it as God's will. So I trusted in the authority that God had put over me and it was wonderful. I slept like a baby. That was God's will for me, I'm absolutely certain of that. It was

authority FOR MY GOOD, for my HEALTH, for my MATURATION and UPBUILDING.

Thanks be to God.

Application:

(Note: For those making inserts/slides – please don't display the headers in this section, only the verses. These notes are for me only. Thanks!)

Now in the few minutes we have left, let me see if I can press these truths that we have found in Scripture home on your hearts as indeed they have been pressed home onto mine. Let me first press upon my fellow believers.

For believers:

1. Authority is not optional, even if you've had a bad experience

I know that some of us have had bad experiences. There are bad shepherds out there who have used their authority to build empires instead of edifying believers and I know that hurts people. I want to stand with you in naming that as sin and I want to encourage you by reminding you that shepherds are promised an even stricter judgment than regular sheep. No pastor or elder gets away with anything. You can rest in that. God will deal with that, but let me also say that you need to get over that. A bad experience is not a life long exemption. A person may get food poisoning but they do not then swear off eating for the rest of their lives, they just become more discerning. You have my permission to be discerning as to what manner of leadership you submit to. You should visit a church, sit under the preaching, visit the elders, talk to the members in order to make sure that a church is safe. When you have done that you should submit to the authority of that safe church and her officers. This is not optional, this is for your good.

2. Expect to be blessed by the exercise of authority

Spurgeon is famous for saying that: "I have learned to **kiss the wave** that throws me against the Rock of Ages." Authority can be painful, Hebrews 12:11 says that, but if it causes us ultimately to be closer to Christ then it should be embraced. It is for our good. Don't live your life in fear

of authority – learn to seek it, learn to embrace it, take advantage of it because it is for your good.

Now lastly, to my non-Christian friends, to my neighbours and fellow citizens who are trying to figure out authority in a world with no obvious and logical authority within – let me commend to you the Lordship of Jesus Christ. He is the best of all Masters.

The god of your belly will lead you astray; for you are not wise enough, you cannot see far enough to anticipate the harm that your sinful lusts and desires will work upon your friends and loved ones. The principle of harm and social advantage is ultimately inadequate because of our own selfishness and near sightedness. The god of your belly cannot be trusted.

Neither can the social elites. The priests of this fallen world are blind guides for the blind. They are hopelessly incoherent. They are working without a map and they are whistling past the graveyard of a dead and dying culture. They haven't got a clue what they are talking about. Do not trust yourself to them.

Trust in Christ. He is the only one who came down from heaven. He is only one who lived well and righteously on the earth. He did for you what you could never do for yourself and he paid for what you have done in his body on the cross. He ascended to the Father's right hand and he has taken his seat and begun to rule. Kiss the Son. Embrace him as Lord. Take his yoke upon you and learn from him. For he is gentle and lowly of heart and you will find rest for your souls. This is the free offer of the Gospel and this is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God.