

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Presbyterian Anarchy, Part 3" (Colossians 2:18-23, Acts 15)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/3/2012

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Friends, if you have listened to the first two parts of this message, you will recall that we are dealing with one of the most serious developments taking place in the nominally conservative Evangelical church in our time.

The evil tyranny of counterfeit authority has infected the two leading reputedly conservative Presbyterian denominations in North America – the Presbyterian Church in America and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

The PCA and OPC in the Grip of Heresy

The result is that damnable heresy has come into these two churches. Men in the pulpits of these denominations, and in seminaries associated with these denominations, are being permitted to openly preach and teach that sinners are saved not by the blood of Jesus Christ alone, but by water baptism.

With the approval of the official governing bodies of these denominations, men are teaching that a sinner is not justified in the sight of God by faith in Christ alone, but by a combination of faith in Christ plus the sinner's own works.

Men in the PCA and the OPC are being permitted to deny that the basis on which we shall stand justified before God on the Last Day is the finished work of Christ alone. Men are being permitted to openly deny the imputation of Christ's perfect righteousness to sinners. They are teaching that there is a so-called "second justification" based on works at the Last Judgment.

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These damnable heresies have gotten into the PCA and the OPC because men in the leadership of those two denominations have exercised counterfeit spiritual authority. They have exercised that counterfeit authority to teach things that the Word of God does not teach and clearly condemns. They have exercised that counterfeit authority to place men who teach these things in the pulpits of their churches, and in other positions of authority within the church.

And, they have exercised that counterfeit authority in order to protect the men who teach these things, when other men who are faithful to the Gospel have charged these false teachers with heresy. They have used their counterfeit authority to acquit these false teachers, and to put a stamp of approval upon their damnable heresies.

Colossians 2: A Graphic Picture of Present Conditions

Now our occasion for considering these matters is the fact that we are currently studying a part of Colossians chapter two which condemns such things. In Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen, the Word of God says this:

Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head [that is, to Jesus Christ], from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.

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Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations — “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” which all concern things which perish with the using — according to the commandments and doctrines of men?

These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh. (Colossians 2:18-23)

It is a testimony to the timelessness of the Word of God that this passage graphically pictures, and utterly condemns, what is taking place in the PCA and the OPC. Men are perverting judgment. They are cheating people of their reward in Christ. They are saying, in effect, “We judge as unworthy of reward, even unworthy of salvation, anyone who would stand against what we are teaching and promoting and protecting.”

They are indeed “vainly puffed up by their fleshly minds.” They are following the ungodly lead of unbelieving academics and theologians.

They have usurped the authority of Christ as Head of the Church.

They are teaching “the commandments and doctrines of men,” in place of the true doctrine of Christ. They are imposing a religion of works and ceremonies and regulations that is not the authentic Gospel of God’s free grace in Christ.

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The Nature of Genuine Authority in the Church

Now in contrast to this, we have been examining what the Bible says about the nature of genuine spiritual authority within the church. We began in Ephesians chapter four.

We saw that the *source* of genuine spiritual authority is Jesus Christ alone.

We saw that the *standard* of genuine spiritual authority is the written Word of God alone.

We saw that the *purpose* of genuine spiritual authority is to build up true Christians – the regenerated, Spirit-indwelled people of God – in the true faith, and to guard them against error that will draw their souls away into the snares of the Devil.

The Structure of Genuine Authority

Now we have also been examining the *structure* of genuine spiritual authority that God has established in His Church. And we find a three-part structure.

And before we consider that three-part structure once again, let me say something that is vitally important.

As we examine the Biblical pattern of authority in the church, it is clear that our Lord Jesus Christ never intended, never sanctioned, a bureaucracy. He never sanctioned a complex administrative structure. He never sanctioned top-down church government.

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Scriptural church government is Christ-ordained authority exercised in humility and with fear and trembling by men who view themselves as the servants of Christ.

Scriptural church government is not complex. It is simple.

Scriptural church government is only top-down government in one sense, and that is that Jesus Christ and no one else is the Head of the Church. Scriptural church government is very much about local authority. And the pattern that we see in Scripture is not a hierarchy of authority.

Listen to me carefully. The only hierarchy we see is the headship of Christ, the preeminence of Christ, over all of those He has placed in authority within the church. We do not, anywhere in the New Testament, find the idea of the preeminence of certain men or of certain groups or committees or agencies of men within the church. What we find is not higher authority, but wider authority, always connected directly to the Head, the Lord Jesus Christ. That is a vital distinction.

We need to do things decently and in order in the church. But we must be extremely careful not to erect a mode or structure of authority that is not clearly mandated in Scripture. To do anything more than that opens the door to man-made authority, to counterfeit authority – and this leads inevitably to man-made doctrines, counterfeit doctrines. We must maintain the simplicity that is in Christ.

The PCA and the OPC have long ago departed from this, and it is an essential part of their problem today. They have erected bureaucratic structures and hierarchies of

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authority that heretics, and those who support and condone heretics, can use to protect heresy and prevent Godly action.

Now with that being said, let us return to the Biblical model of genuine, Christ-ordained authority within the church. And we do find that there are three aspects or spheres to this authority structure. And I use that term "sphere" deliberately. Scripture is not talking about a hierarchy. It speaks not of higher realms of authority, but wider realms, and that is a vital difference that we must maintain.

We saw in Ephesians chapter four and in other passages that the structure of genuine spiritual authority is rooted in the fact that Christ has given to His Church, has given to the body of Christ, men of His choosing – expositors, evangelists, pastor-teachers, and also elders. It is their job to carry out the responsibility that Christ has given them to edify the saints according to the Word of God, and to guard the saints from anything that is contrary to the Word of God.

Local Eldership

In Ephesians chapter four, in Acts chapter twenty, and in Titus chapter one, we saw the first and most important part of that structure. God has given the teaching elders and ruling elders of the local congregation by far the greatest weight of responsibility for edifying and guarding the flock of God. Biblical authority in the church is, first and foremost, local authority. And one of the responsibilities of the elders of the local church is, as we have seen, to make sure that the pastor-teacher remains true to the Word of God, and to hold him accountable if he strays from it or contradicts it.

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The *Presbuterion* – A Wider Assembly of Elders

We also find in First Timothy chapter four, reference to a second aspect of this three-part structure of authority within the Church. That second aspect is an assembly of elders across churches, called together for a specific purpose – to make sure that a man who claims to be called by Christ to the Gospel ministry in fact has a genuine calling, to make sure that the man is qualified for the work, and if so, to signify their confirmation of Christ's setting apart and gifting of that man for the ministry by the public act of laying their hands upon that man.

And by the same token, although the reverse of this is not explicitly stated in Scripture, it is also reasonable that the assembly of elders who examines a man and confirms his calling and commission to preach the Word, should also examine the evidence when a man is accused of betraying that calling by departing from sound doctrine, leading the church away into error. And if the accusation is true and the man does not repent, the wider body of elders must join with the elders of the local assembly to put that man out of the ministry, and out of the church.

Titus chapter three verse ten commands us: "A man who is a heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject." The first admonition should come from the elders of the local church. The second admonition should come from that wider body of elders. And if the man will not heed those two admonitions from godly men on the authority of Christ and His Word, that man is to be rejected – the force of the Greek is that such a man should be avoided, shunned, not treated as having any authority, repudiated.

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And so these are the two aspects of the structure of genuine, Christ-ordained authority within the church, which we have considered in much more detail in our last message.

But we also find a third element in the structure of authority that we see in the New Testament for the church. This is the case of a yet wider body, or a general assembly, being called together in order to deal with a vital matter that is of concern to the entire body of Christ. And so that is where we proceed now.

A General Assembly

In Acts chapter fifteen we find that the first such general assembly of the elders of the church was called. They met at Jerusalem. And it is very significant that the issue with which this very first general assembly dealt, is the very issue with which the OPC and the PCA are dealing today. That very first general assembly at Jerusalem made a godly judgment on that question, which stands forever. The presbyteries and general assemblies of the OPC and the PCA have made ungodly judgments that deny the truth that was asserted once and for all in Acts chapter fifteen.

The issue at hand at that first general assembly of the church was this: How is a sinner made right with God? Is it by faith alone, or is it by faith plus works? Is it by faith alone, or is it by a physical ordinance? Is it by faith alone, or is it by membership in a visible body of people?

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Certain men from Judea were saying that salvation is by faith plus works, that salvation is by a physical ordinance, that salvation is by membership in a visible body of people. Paul, and Barnabas, and Peter, and James and others all spoke against these men by the authority of Jesus Christ. And that first general assembly made a decision that is engraved in the pages of Holy Scripture, stands forever, and leaves no room for dispute: Salvation is by faith alone, not by faith plus works. Salvation is by faith alone, not by a physical ordinance such as circumcision or water baptism. Salvation is by faith alone, not by membership in a visible body of people.

The PCA's and OPC's Dismal Failure

Here is where the men of the PCA and the OPC have fallen away from the most central truth of the Christian faith. They are saying, as those men of Judea did, that salvation is by faith plus works, that salvation is by a physical ordinance, that salvation is by membership in a visible body of people. Many of their local church elders, many of their wider assemblies of elders meeting as presbyteries, and even their denomination-wide general assemblies, have failed to uphold the truth that the elders of the church upheld in the very first New Testament church general assembly ever convened.

Many in the PCA and OPC are teaching their people these soul-damning falsehoods instead of the saving truth. Many of them are protecting and even promoting those who teach these falsehoods. They are doing this, they say, in the name of "unity" and "peace". But any form of unity that is not unity in the truth is unity under the banner of

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Satan, not unity under the banner of Christ. Any form of peace that is not subject to the authority of the Prince of Peace is a counterfeit peace. It is not peace with God. It is not genuine peace among believers. It is a peace treaty with the Devil. It is a peace agreement with Satan's ministers.

What of Those Who Claim to Remain Faithful?

And what of the men in the PCA and the OPC who still claim to hold onto the truth personally? Are they living up to their claims? Are they living up to their Christ-ordained responsibilities? No. They are failing to be the church's front line of defense against error. They are, in many cases, sitting on their hands, doing nothing of value, when they should be leading their people out of apostasy. Many of them are saying, "All is well and quiet in my local church. All is well and quiet in my presbytery. All I need to do is keep my head down and stay out of the battle."

Pastor, elder, how can it possibly be well and quiet in your local church when your local church is affiliated with such apostasy? How can it possibly be well and quiet in your presbytery when your denomination has decided that the question, "How is a sinner made right with God?" has multiple answers, and each one is permitted and considered valid?

Pastor, elder, how can you possibly just keep your head down and stay out of the battle, when men who claim to preach the one true Gospel meet together, and join hands, and fellowship with men who clearly preach another gospel in your presbyteries and general assemblies? How can you tolerate the fact that many men who no longer

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hold the truth come to session and presbytery and general assembly meetings with a small Bible, or no Bible at all, but often carry a large copy of *Robert's Rules of Order* so that they can manipulate meetings to gain ground for their heresies?

Dear friends, any man who claims to be qualified as a pastor-teacher or as an elder of the church cannot take such a position. Any man who claims to follow Christ cannot follow a multitude to do evil. Any man who claims to follow Christ in these denominations needs to get out and be part of a remnant.

A Biblical View of the Body of Christ

God has done His greatest work through remnants. Gideon and his army reduced by God from 10,000 to 300. Jonathan and his armor-bearer. Twelve apostles. One hundred and twenty on Pentecost. One man, Martin Luther, standing against the counterfeit authority of Rome and risking his life for the truth that a sinner is made right with God by belief alone, in Christ alone. J. Gresham Machen and a relative handful of stalwarts leaving the mainline Presbyterian church in 1936.

The great British preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones called men to action against the same kinds of apostasy in Britain in the 1960s. He said this:

Unity must obviously never be thought of primarily in numerical terms, but always in terms of [spiritual] life. Nothing is so opposed to the Biblical teaching as the modern idea that numbers and powerful organization alone count. It is the very opposite of the great biblical doctrine of "the remnant"...

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God has done His greatest work throughout the centuries through remnants, often even through individuals....This is not to advocate smallness or exclusiveness as if they had some inherent merit; but it is to suggest that the modern slavish attitude to bigness and organization cuts right across a central biblical emphasis. Indeed it suggests ignorance of, and lack of faith in, the power of the Holy Spirit.

The greatest need of the hour is a new baptism and outpouring of the Holy Spirit in renewal and revival. Nothing else throughout the centuries has ever given the church true authority and made her, and her message, mighty.

But what right have we to pray for this, or to expect that [God] will honour or bless anything but the truth that He Himself enabled the authors of the Old Testament and the New Testament to write? To ask Him to do so is not only near blasphemy but also the height of folly.

Reformation and revival go together and cannot be separated. He is the Spirit of truth, and He will honour nothing but the truth. The ultimate question facing us these days is whether our faith is in men and their power to organize, or in the truth of God in Christ Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Let me put it another way: Are we primarily concerned about the size of the church or the purity of the church, both in doctrine and in life? Indeed,

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finally it comes to this: Is our view of the church Roman Catholic (inclusivist, organizational, institutional, and hierarchical) or [is it Biblical], emphasizing the universal priesthood of all believers and the need for keeping the church herself constantly under the judgment of the Word?¹

Dear friends, that question, which Martyn Lloyd-Jones put forth fifty years ago, is the question that every pastor, elder, and member of any church must constantly ask. May God give us the grace to continually answer it according to His Word. Amen.

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¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "The Basis of Christian Unity," in *Knowing the Times: Addresses Delivered on Various Occasions 1942-1977* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), 163-164.