

No.10, The Power of the Church

Our most recent studies on the subject of *The Church* dealt with that vital feature of Christ's Headship & Government of the Church and the related issue of submission to His headship and the government He has ordained. Christ is the Church's Head in a twofold fashion: in an *organic sense* -- the Church is His Body, joined to Him in a real organic union; and in an *administrative sense* -- i.e., Christ is Head or King of the Church, His spiritual commonwealth, administering rule and government over her for her well being. And it is in His capacity as King of the Church that Christ has clothed her with power or authority, giving rise to this subject of *The Power of the Church*.

At the very outset it is vital that we distinguish the nature of the *power* that is under discussion in this article. In the Greek New Testament there are two primary words both translated *power* but with different meanings altogether. The first of these is *dunamis*, a word that basically denotes ability or might. The second word is *exousia*, the sense of which is freedom of action, the right to act, **authority** therefore; and it is this kind of power that is in view under the topic *The Power of the Church*. Certainly, the Church needs the former; that is the Spirit-given *ability* to exercise her ministry, Acts 1: 8. Indeed, she will have no real authority if she does not have the might of the Spirit. But within the confines of the subject before us today, it is the Church's authority that is in view.

I. THE DERIVATION OF THIS POWER

As noted, the Lord Jesus Christ, in His capacity as her Head and King, has endowed the Church with an essential power. Consequently, whatever the manner in which that power is properly exercised within the Church, it is a derived power. It finds its source in the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. All true authority in things spiritual belongs to Christ alone, Matthew 28: 18 -- "*All power is given unto me.*" In this text the word employed by Christ with reference to the power given to Him is *exousia*, the word, as we have seen, that signifies "authority". Note that it is authority *given* to Christ. Thus, it is not the inherent authority of His essential deity that is in view. Rather, the Lord speaks here of the authority given to Him as the exalted Mediator of the Church as part of the reward of His sufferings, cf. Philippians 2: 8-10. But all such authority belongs to Christ. Therefore, the authority that the Church possesses is a derived authority.

II. THE DELEGATION OF THIS POWER

That power was first given by Christ in its fullest degree to the Apostles in particular. For example, in Matthew 16: 18 Christ refers to His intention to keep on building His Church (which is the sense of the words "*I will build My Church...*") but proceeds in v.19 to give promise of power to the Apostles who were represented by Peter. To these Apostles as representatives of the Church or Kingdom of heaven (for in these verses these two terms are obviously used interchangeably) Christ gives "*the keys*", keys clearly being the emblem of power or authority, cf. Isaiah 22: 22. Possessing these keys, the Apostles had power to "bind" and "loose". The binding and loosing are indicative of what is forbidden and what is permitted within the Church; and the judgments made, obviously in keeping with the mind and will of the Lord as revealed in Scripture, are sanctioned in heaven.

Moreover, Christ extended this power to the Church in general, Matthew 28: 18-20. Note again that all spiritual & ministerial authority or power is Christ's -- He is the source. However, that power is delegated to His Church as v.v. 19 & 20 imply. These verses are often described as *The Great Commission* and rightly so. But note that the Church's commission arises from Christ's assertion of all power being His. He declares -- "*All power is given unto Me...Go ye therefore...*" i.e., "go in and with the power and authority I delegate to you." What follows then is a summary of the Church's ministry: to make disciples, administer the sacrament(s), and edify the saints. But the point is clear: the Church is only able to fulfil her spiritual and ministerial function on the basis of the authority that Christ has given her.

For example, the Church, through her officers, has the right to excommunicate an unrepentant professor of faith. But the Church can only do so because Christ Himself dwells in her, supplying her with a proper standard of judgment, 1 Cor 5: 7, 13. Note -- this power of Church officers to exercise discipline is not derived from men. It is certainly not derived from civil authority, which has no power in ecclesiastical matters. But neither is it derived from the congregation who have elected the officers of Christ's Church. The choice of ruling elders by the people in the Church is in obedience to the way revealed by Christ, but the choice of the people is not the source of the power that resides within the office and is exercised by the office-bearer. Christ Himself is the source of this authority.

III. THE DIVERSITY IN THIS POWER

In the power delegated there is diversity with regard to its implementation, but in essence there are three particular areas.

1. **First, the Church must exercise her Christ-given power in relation to the truth.** Christ's Church is the depositary of the truth, Jude 3, a great privilege in itself, but a privilege that carries great responsibility, requiring the Church to exercise the authority Christ has given her.

(a) **The Church must use her power for the preservation of the truth.** Having been entrusted with the truth, the Church has been constituted the keeper of that precious deposit, 1 Timothy 3: 15. Note in this verse the fact that the Church is "*the pillar and ground of the truth...*" meaning, not that she is the originator or source of the truth but the support and stay of it against all the forces of unbelief and error, Jude 3.

(b) **The Church must use her power for the propagation of the truth.** The command of Paul to Timothy aptly sums up the task that is constantly incumbent on the Church -- "*Preach the Word...*" 2 Timothy 4: 2. The truth is to be propagated for the two-fold purpose of the gathering of the elect from the nations of the earth and the edifying of those already converted, Matthew 28: 19, 20; 1 Corinthians 1: 21; Acts 20: 32. Note -- there is an increasing need to adhere to the Christ-ordained means of propagating the truth. With so many adopting carnal and worldly measures in worship services so that the centrality of preaching is being displaced, Christ's Church must assert her authority, banish all such innovations and employ the only means that Christ has ordained and promised to bless -- the solemn labour of preaching the Word.

2. **Second, the Church must also exercise her Christ-given power in the area of ecclesiastical government.** It is the Lord's will that "*all things be done decently and in order,*" 1 Cor 14: 40. Consequently, the authority given by Christ to His Church includes the right of self-government, by carrying into effect the laws that Christ the King, the Shepherd and Bishop has revealed for the beneficial ruling of His flock.

The New Testament gives direction concerning the appointment of Church officers, namely elders and deacons, 1 Tim 3, Titus 1. It also reveals in various ways the mind of Christ for the regulation of His Church, as well as giving some examples of good government.

For example, in Acts 15: 23-29 it is recorded that the early Church, in the form of an assembly of her elders, settled a question pertaining to the standing of her Gentile converts. Moreover in chapter 16: 4 it is seen that the decision of the Jerusalem assembly was binding on all the congregations. These Scriptures cannot be understood to mean anything other than that the Church possesses spiritual and ministerial power, given to her by the Lord Jesus Christ and must be exercised when necessary. It is, therefore, a power that is subordinate to Christ's sovereign authority over the Church (Matthew 28: 18), and it must be exercised in harmony with the Word of God and through the direction of the Holy Spirit. But when this power to govern is properly administered it will lead to the well being of the Church, Acts 16: 5.

3. **Finally, the Church must exercise her Christ-given power in the area of discipline.** The Lord has given the Church the right or authority to guard the purity of her ranks, the ultimate goal of all discipline. For example, Christ's Church, through her appointed officers, has the right to excommunicate the individual who by profession of faith had been included within the pale of the congregation but forfeited that privilege by dishonouring it through wilful sin and impenitence. It is true that the Church can only exercise such discipline by virtue of Christ's dwelling in her by His Spirit and by the Scriptural standards of judgment with which He as Head has supplied the Church, 1 Corinthians 5: 7a, 13b; 6: 2-4. But as she carries into effect Christ's laws, she guards and promotes holiness, and she also promotes the spiritual growth of her members by securing their obedience to the will of Christ.