



The Ten Commandments

(28) The Fifth Commandment

(7) Authority in the Church

Exodus 20:12

1 Peter 5:1-5

Hebrews 13:17

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Our subject this evening is authority in the Church. This is the seventh sermon on the Fifth Commandment, which is, “Honor your father and your mother.” We are following the Reformed tradition in understanding the command to honor our parents as pointing to a broader principle in Scripture that we are to give honor to other people in various ways depending on the nature of our relationship to them. And so we have been exploring the biblical teaching having to do with honoring other people and part of that has to do with honoring those who are in authority over us. So today I want to preach to you some of what the Bible teaches about authority in the church.

As we have seen before, the whole of biblical teaching concerning authority of some people over other people is very counter-cultural. The prevailing way of understanding our relationship to other people is that we are free from all authority over us except in ways that are absolutely necessary for society to function. In order to live in society we must submit to the authority of the law of the land. And there are a few other areas in which modern people are willing to submit to the authority of others. One of the predominant themes in our culture is the freedom of the individual. And while the Bible also has a lot to say about the idea of freedom, it also has a lot to say about submitting to the authority of others over us in ways that the average person in our society finds unacceptable and offensive. And it is very difficult to live in this society without absorbing some of that attitude.

And the biblical teaching of authority in the church falls into the category of biblical teaching that is offensive to modern sensibilities. And the fact is that many people who consider themselves Christians are also unwilling to submit to the biblical teaching about authority in the church. But the Bible teaches it and the biblical claim is that submitting to legitimate authority as part of church membership belongs to true freedom and it is part of the way of life that results from being delivered from our sins on the basis of the life, death and resurrection of Christ and the application Jesus' resurrection life to us by the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

In this sermon we will look briefly at 4 aspects of the biblical teaching on authority in the church. The first is the authority of elders in the church. The first principle of church government is that Jesus Christ is the head of the church and he rules the church by his word. But the next principle is that Jesus has given a carefully circumscribed authority to those whom he has called to be elders in his church. That is expressed most clearly in Hebrews 13:17 which says to all believers in Jesus Christ. "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." That is about as clear as clear can be. Anyone who rejects what this verse says is failing to submit to Jesus as the head of the church. Jesus says to all his people, "Obey your leaders and submit to them...."

Now I said that the authority that Jesus gives to elders is carefully circumscribed. It is not an absolute authority. Elders do not have the authority to regulate every aspect of your lives. Their authority is a limited authority for a number of specific purposes. One of those purposes is oversight. Hebrews 13:17 says that church leaders, "are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account." Jesus has given elders the task of watching over the souls of his people and Christians are to obey their leaders and submit to them as they exercise that oversight. 1 Peter 5:2 makes the same point when it says that elders are to "shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight...." What this means in practice is that elders, and the Bible includes ministers in that, are charged by God to keep watch

over the lives of the people under their care and give encouragements and direction and rebuke as necessary from the word of God.

And church members are to submit to that oversight and direction from God's word. Elders do not have the authority to tell you what color to paint your kitchen, but if you are straying from the path of God's word, they have the authority to tell you to change your life in that area. They are accountable to God for doing that. And you are accountable to God for what you do with their direction.

There are other aspects of the authority of elders as well. In Matthew 16, Jesus gives the disciples and by extension, elders, the keys of the kingdom. That means that Jesus has given elders the authority to open the door of the kingdom to believers and to close the door of the kingdom to unbelievers. That is done through preaching which declares who may enter in and who may not. It is also done through admitting believers into the membership of the church and to the sacraments and removing unrepentant church members from the church through discipline. Preaching and the administration of the sacraments takes place under the authority of the elders.

And then there is the general government of the church. 1 Timothy 5:17 says that "the elders who rule well [should] be considered worthy of double honor." Clearly Paul sees ruling in the church as part of the calling of the elder and from that we arrive at the idea that the elders have the authority to govern the church – so the authority to organize and to see to it that what need to happen, happens.

Now deacons have authority too. That idea is not as prominent in the biblical teaching about deacons, but Acts 6 which is a key text telling us about the role of deacons in the church, tells us that the first deacons were given the task of administering the support of the widows in the church and the implication is that along with the task came the authority to perform the task. That authority comes under the authority of the elders, but as far as church members are concerned, there is an element of submission to the deacons in areas where the deacons are giving leadership. I mention that because in practice the deacons make a lot of decisions relating to the life of the church and while it comes

under the overall oversight of the elders, it is still an important and significant exercise of authority in the church.

Now I am aware that there is much more than can be said, but in this context I just wanted to give a very brief reminder of some of the biblical teaching on the authority of elders and the responsibility of church members to submit to that authority.

The point that I want to emphasize is that this idea flies in the face of the spirit of our age with its emphasis on personal freedom and freedom from anyone telling us how to live our lives. The Bible has lots to say about freedom, but it also has lots to say about submission, first of all to God and his word, but also to the people whom God has placed over us. And in connection with the church, God has deemed it best for his people that there be elders whose task it is to be shepherds of his sheep and what this means is that obedience to God includes submitting to the authority of the shepherds that God has placed over us.

And this is one of the reasons why church membership is not an option for followers of Jesus Christ. It is a testimony to how much the thinking of the world influences the church that there are churches today that do not require formal membership. It is actually surprising that there is even a discussion about this question in the church, because it is so clear in the Bible. Not in the sense that the Bible spells it out explicitly, but it is clear in the sense that for the church to operate as the Bible says it must, church membership is absolutely necessary.

And the biblical teaching about the authority of elders in the church is an important part of that. In order for elders to exercise their oversight, they must know who are under their care – who they must give an account for. In order for believers to submit to the oversight of elders, they must know to whom they must submit. In order for the elders to exercise the keys of the kingdom they must know who belongs to the church and who does not. In order for unrepentant sinners to be put out of the church, it must be clear who belongs and who do not belong to the church.

So the biblical teaching about authority in the church requires church membership. The requirement of believers in Jesus Christ to submit to the oversight of elders requires them to be members of a specific congregation. The biblical teaching about salvation includes church membership and not submitting to church membership is direct disobedience to the clear teaching of the word of God. Those who claim to be Christians and are not submitting to the oversight and shepherding of elders are living in rebellion against God. God says, submit to your leaders and they are refusing to do that.

That is why when we invite guests to the Lord's Supper we include in that invitation the proviso that they be members of a faithful evangelical church. People who are living in open defiance of the word of God are not believers according to the biblical description of believers. There is no category in the Bible of a believer who has a relationship with Jesus, but not with the church.

That is one of the points of the Lord's Supper. By being related to Christ we are also related to one another and the Bible does not have a category of people who are in Christ, but not in the church. And that is why we confess in the WFC 25:1 that outside of the church "there is no ordinary possibility of salvation." The proof-text that the authors of our Confession give is Acts 2:47 which says that on the days following the day of Pentecost, "[T]he Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

So submission to God includes submission to the oversight and shepherding of elders as members of the Church. True believers in Jesus Christ are not independent. The Christian life is not a life of independence. The Christian life is not me and Jesus. The Christian life is personal, and each believer has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, but fundamental to that relationship is membership in Christ's Church and submission to those who are over us in the Lord.

And that belongs to freedom in biblical terms and categories. The bible uses the term freedom in a way that is very different from the way that the world uses it. Freedom in biblical terms is happily living as we are designed by God to live. Freedom in biblical terms is freedom from the independent spirit that is a characteristic of our sinful nature. The

freedom of the gospel is freedom from the penalty for our sins through faith in Jesus Christ, but also freedom from the power of sin that is the true bondage for human beings. There is lots of room in that freedom for making our own decisions for many things in life. But the essence of freedom in biblical teaching is the freedom of happily living in submission to the will of God and that includes happily living in submission to the shepherding of the elders God has placed over us.

And that is for our good. That is a blessing. That belongs to the good life as the Bible describes it. This belongs to the way of flourishing as the beloved people of God. This is part of the way that God shows his love and care for his people. We are not meant to go it alone. We are meant to be shepherded ultimately by the great Shepherd himself, but part of the way that he shepherds us is to provide under-shepherds to watch over our souls as those who must give an account.

And that applies to elders as well. When a man is called to be an elder he is not by that call removed from the oversight of elders. That is why the Bible always speaks of elders in the plural. There is always a body of elders who work together, and elders are accountable to one another and to the session as a whole. There is no one in the church who stands above the need of accountability and shepherding. There is no place of independence in the Church. There is no one in the Church who is independent of the oversight of elders. One of the key characteristics of believers is inter-dependence. And true freedom in biblical terms is submitting to the inter-dependence of church members and that includes the accountability to elders.

Now when I described the authority of elders in the church, I said that that authority is limited and carefully defined by Jesus. 1 Peter 5:3 says that elders are not to be “domineering over those in your charge, but [they are to be] examples to the flock.” Peter here is reflecting Jesus’ own words in Matthew 20:20-28 and parallel passages. The key verses for our purposes now are 25-28, “²⁵But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸even as

the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.””

When Jesus delegates authority he requires that it be exercised following his example of servant-authority and he specifically forbids domineering and what we today would call authoritarianism. The exercise of authority in the church is a form of service to the sheep. It is for the sheep and not for the shepherd. And it is an authority that does not extend beyond applying the word of God. The elders may not require of the people anything that is not required of them by Jesus in the word of God.

Our WCF is very clear on this. In chapter 20, which speaks with the liberty of conscience, paragraph 3 says, “God alone is the Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.” James 4:12 says, “There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy.” And Paul writes “You were bought with the price, do not become bondservants of men. (1 Corinthians 7:23)

This means that elders must be very careful not to intrude upon the Lordship of Christ. Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Church. Elders are not lords. We may not require anything of anyone that is not rooted in the word of God. The standard that must govern our teaching and our exhortations is the word of God. If we warn you and tell you to change your ways, it must be because of what is taught in the Bible.

Having authority in the church is a very serious matter. It is a serious matter because of the great love that Jesus has for the church. Ephesians 5:25 says, that “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” The church is his bride that he loves with a very tender love. And it is in the context of that love that we must understand the task of elders to shepherd the church and to have oversight. Paul puts all this together in Acts 20:28 where he says of elders, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” And as Hebrews 13:17 tells us elders must keep “watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account.”

That is an awesome responsibility. But all of this shows how important the authority of elders is in Christ's way of caring for his people. The elders must understand the gravity of their calling in the light of the love of Christ for his people and the people must understand the gravity of their responsibility to submit to the leadership and oversight of their elders in the light of the love and the wisdom of Christ in watching over their souls in this way. And all of this must be understood in the light of the great issues of life and death that are at stake in how we live our lives as those who profess Jesus Christ as our Lord.

One more point about authority in the church. The biblical teaching about authority in the church is the basis for the Presbyterian form of church government. Just as individual Christians are under the authority of others and just as elders are under the authority of the session, individual congregations are under the authority and oversight of all the elders in a specific area. We are not independent as individuals, but neither are we independent as churches.

The key passage for this is Acts 15 which tells the story of what is known as the Jerusalem Council. There was a controversy in the early church about circumcision and whether it was necessary for salvation. That controversy could not be decided at the local level and so we are told in Acts 15:2 "Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about the question." There was a meeting of the apostles and elders from a number of churches. The question was discussed. A decision was made, and that decision was communicated in a letter to the churches that were having the problem.

It is on the basis of this passage as well as some of the principles of authority and oversight that we have already considered that the Presbyterian form of government was formulated. Not that every jot and tittle of our church government is found in explicit passages, but as our Form of Government puts it, "While the Scriptures do not teach a detailed form of Church government, the Presbyterian form as adopted by the ARPC is agreeable to and founded upon the Old and New Testaments. The Presbyterian form of Church government is by presbyters (elders) assembled in Church courts" (2.2).

What we see in the Bible is that neither believers nor elders are independent. We are inter-dependent. We all need accountability and oversight as well as wisdom from others and encouragement. And on the basis of all that the Scriptures say about this, we believe that it is agreeable to and founded upon the Bible that churches are members of larger groups of churches and that the elders and ministers of all of those churches work together to oversee and to govern and to shepherd all of the churches represented.

One of the things that this means is that if something is going seriously wrong in a congregation or if the elders or the minister of a local congregation are teaching false doctrine or not living in submission to the word of God that the members of that congregation can appeal to the Presbytery for help. That is also the case with any serious problem that cannot be solved at a local level. This means that your elders and minister are not only accountable to one another, but we are also accountable to our fellow elders and ministers of the Presbytery. We are all under authority. None of us is independent. And that is a profoundly biblical principle.

This is all related to the Fifth Commandment because the Fifth Commandment deals with authority and how God has ordained authority structures among human beings for their good and their wellbeing. It is our natural tendency to want to go our own way, but when our hearts are renewed we begin to see God's grace and wisdom in the structures of authority that he has instituted, and we thankfully submit to those authorities as part of our submission to God and we do so freely and willingly because by grace we are beginning to understand freedom from a biblical perspective and not from a worldly perspective.

And as I have said, there is still plenty of room for making our own decisions about many things in our lives. God has created us and saved us to serve him by the decisions that we make in life. He establishes the parameters in his law but within those parameters there is all kinds of room for personal initiative and personal choices. The Christian life is a wonder blend of submission to God and freedom to make choices inside of God's parameters for our lives. And the various ways that we are under the authority of other people does not detract from that. Micro-

managing is not God's style and it should not be the style of any exercise of authority. There is lots of room within God's way for our lives for us to make choices and either enjoy the good results or suffer the bad results of those choices. Living to the glory of God involves learning to make wise choices in the light of God's truth.

And the overarching reality when it comes to God's authority structure for our lives is God's love and care for his people. The highest authority is God's authority which is also the Lordship of Jesus Christ and one of the most glorious truths in all of existence is that God is for us. He has sent Jesus, his own Son, to come to earth for our salvation. That involved the greatest possible sacrifice. And the salvation that Jesus accomplished is the way of the greatest possible blessing for us.

Jesus is the great Shepherd of the sheep who laid down his life for his sheep. Jesus loves his sheep and is committed to their care and flourishing. And he has put in place a structure of authority and oversight in his church as part of the way that he cares for his sheep. And it is for us to submit to that authority and seek to profit from it as part of our respect for and love for our Lord and Saviour.