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# MEDITATIONS

## ON CHURCH AUTHORITY

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The initial step of salvation is a very personal experience between you and God alone. There is only one mediator between God and man, and that is Jesus; it is not the church. My convictions need to be based on the Word of God and not upon a man or written decrees of the church. So where does the church enter into the equation? What authority do church leaders have?

Every baby born into the world was created personally by God and is responsible to God. But every child is under the care of incomplete human parents. God gives every one of His newborn children to human parents. Has He lost His mind?

Does God believe parents are going to raise His child perfectly? Certainly not! God knows that parents are going to fail. Some are going to fail very egregiously. But relating to human parents is obviously an important part of God's plan for human beings. Does our response as children to mortal parents reveal something to an immortal God about our character that would not be exposed if God was our parent?

God has given mortal, imperfect parents authority over His children. Children are responsible to respect the authority He has given to their parents. One of the Ten Commandments addresses this precisely. God commands His children to obey the imperfect parents He intentionally places over them.

God personally led the children of Israel out of Egypt to Canaan. With God leading them in such dynamic and specific ways, you would have expected human leaders to be unnecessary. But He did use human leaders. There were many layers of leadership and it only increased as they proceeded across the wilderness. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. Leaders of the tribes. Priests. Judges. 70 Elders.

Korah, Dathan, and Abiram very "logically" rebelled against the stifling dictates of these mortal leaders and they were consumed by the wrath of God! The decisions of the priests and the judges were to be held in the highest regard. *If there arise a matter too hard for thee in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke, being matters of controversy within thy gates: then shalt thou arise, and get thee up into the place which the LORD thy God shall choose; And thou shalt come unto the priests the Levites, and unto the judge that shall be in those days, and inquire; and they shall shew thee the sentence of judgment: And thou shalt do according to the sentence, which they of that place which the LORD shall choose shall shew thee; and thou shalt observe to do according to all that they inform thee: According to the sentence of the law which they shall teach thee, and according to the judgment which they shall tell thee, thou shalt do: thou shalt not decline from the sentence which they shall shew thee, to the right hand, nor to the left. And the man that will do presumptuously, and will not hearken unto the priest that standeth to minister there before the LORD thy God, or unto the judge, even that man shall die: and thou shalt put away the evil from Israel. And all*

*the people shall hear, and fear, and do no more presumptuously* (Deut. 17:8-13). God put a lot of confidence in these Old Testament priests to make judgments on the wide range of human experience and He required total respect for their judgments. Holy Spirit-filled New Testament leaders should certainly receive at least as much respect.

Today we hear statements like, "I don't need to obey church rules if I don't have convictions for them." Or maybe you have heard, "The church has no authority to make a ruling the Scriptures don't explicitly authorize." Has God changed His viewpoint about mortal leaders having authority over His people? Has God suddenly deemed mortal leaders' judgment suspect? Fortunately, Jesus taught about church authority. *Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.* (Matt. 18:15-17). Do you think Jesus really thought we should treat those who fail to respect the decisions of church authorities like they were heathens? Heathens? I'm sure that is what He meant. How we relate to mortal human authority tells God a lot about our personal character and how we will relate to Him. Jesus brought this into focus in John 15:20. *Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also.* We are, of course, supposed to keep the "sayings of Jesus." But Jesus also made it clear that we are also to keep the "sayings" of those He authorized to lead out in church.

Fear of and respect for God are very important. But God also fully expects us to respect the imperfect human authorities He places in our lives, whether they be parents, civil rulers, or church leaders. Church leaders can fail and require discipline; an example would be Diotrephes in III John 9. Church leaders, like earthly parents, are only human and will fall short. But God has intentionally given human leaders authority over His redeemed children. To dishonor them is to dishonor God Himself. (See Romans 13:1,2.) Whenever church authority is mentioned, we are often quick to note the exception to the rule - that we ought to obey God rather than men. I find it interesting that the New Testament never includes that limiting exception when giving specific instructions to submit to an earthly authority. He never says, "Submit in all things, unless..." Did God understand that we would struggle much more with legitimately submitting than with finding legitimate exceptions?

We live in a generation who "despise(s) dominion (authorities), and speak(s) evil of dignities.... to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever." (Jude 8,13). This cancer, no matter how holy the clothes you wrap it in, is deadly. Don't fall for this diabolical trap. Church authorities are responsible to "take oversight" of the congregation, and to "rule over them" (I Peter 5:2, Heb. 13:17). God has charged me with the responsibility to submit to church authorities. If God can entrust infants into the hands of human parents and if He could entrust the Children of Israel into the hands of human leaders, then He can legitimately entrust you into the hands of human church authority today. You are not so special that you deserve instruction which comes only directly from the perfect Lawgiver to you through personal conviction. Like the rest of us, God wants you to experience submitting to other fellow believers. Really, actually submitting. Happily. Peacefully. It is His wish. It is His desire. It is His command. *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* (Heb 13:17). Developing complex spiritual defenses about why church authority has limited reach into your life is self-deceiving. Obey and submit if you want it to be well with you. That happens to be the exact same admonition God gives to children about how they are to respond to their human authorities. (See Eph.6:1-3.) We should submit to church authorities like we expect children to respect and to submit to the wide scope of authority given to parents.

Having personal convictions based on the Word of God is extremely important. Being able to function graciously and respectfully among the differing personal convictions of others is likely even more important. Respecting and honoring the voice of church leadership is the will of God. When we believe each person's personal conviction trumps the voice of church leadership, we despise dominion, hold in contempt Christ and His body, and join with Satan in the exaltation of Me, Myself, and I. Chaos, fighting, and all the other expression of carnality will result. It's like going to a song service and having every individual simultaneously singing their own song. No harmony. No respect. No order. No Godliness. *And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you; to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves* (1Th5:12-13). If we are going to love our leaders and be at peace, the value of personal conviction will need to be ratcheted down to its proper standing. There will always be a healthy tension between personal conviction and group positions. Let's keep it healthy and not let it degenerate into "spiritual" carnality and the exaltation of "I". Allow the blessing and protection of church leadership to enrich your life and make you full and complete, just as God intended it to.

Thank you, Lord, for all the human authorities You have placed in my life to help me on my earthly pilgrimage.

~Vernon Martin