

AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH OF GOD

Most protestant church organizations today vest tangible authority in the laity, which effectively is able to hire and fire their ministers. But some few non-mainstream church organizations follow dictatorial leaders, whom they follow with near blind loyalty. Both types of organizations claim a biblical basis for their form of church government, but are either of these extremes the biblical form of government? With Jesus Christ as head, are there any tangible “checks and balances” for ministerial authority; or, should the authority be entirely vested with the top human leader? What does the Bible say about authority in the Church of God?

By Wayne M Icenhower

Democratic nations are collapsing into anarchy and tyranny that will lead to their sudden destruction, and eventual defeat in war. This anarchy is being fomented by very powerful people manipulating the degenerate masses into a frenzy of mindless rebellion, which they plan to meet with overwhelming force. God’s people in every age are influenced by the society around them, and today is no different. Among the churches professing to hold to the faith once delivered, many are throwing off what they view as the shackles of authoritarian rule.

But what are they embracing? Unknowingly, aren’t the people of God falling right into strong delusion concerning government?

The final age as prophesied in Revelation 2 and 3 is Laodicea. The word Laodicea is formed from two Greek words. The first word is Laos, which means “people”, while the second word “dikalo”, which can mean either a personal opinion or a decree. That is—a sentence given by a judge. Therefore, putting them together, the word “Laodicea” can mean both “people’s opinions” or “people judged”!

That in itself would be an indication that we are now in the final church age—Laodicea. We are in an age where everyone in the western world believes they have an opinion that’s equal to and as well founded as any other persons view regardless of genetics, life experience, or education. I Timothy 3:1-4 describes the end time generation: “This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God;”

Understand. An opinion is not wrong simply because it is held by a lay member. But, it is wrong if the judgment does not align with scripture. We live in an age where people justify their behavior with all kinds of twisted reasoning, in some cases using scripture out of context to turn good upside down, and justify their own selfish desires.

So that is where we have come to in the Church of the Living God. People taking it upon themselves to decide to remarry under any circumstance, when divorced—even when God bound their marriages in the faith. Where most professing true Christian’s believe that it’s OK to have birthday bashes, or even a Christmas dinner. It’s fine with them if the races are mixed in marriages, or if they sometimes work on the Sabbath. Why? Because the people say so, and will seek out leaders claiming to be true ministers that support their view.

Autocratic Rule

But, what about rigid hierarchy with enforced governance? Some organizations claiming roots with the WCG are led by tyrannical demagogues that wield what they think is absolute authority with respect to human conduct. If civil society would allow for it, these arrogant, narcissistic men leading their corporate bodies would have no problem taking it upon themselves to pronounce the severest punishments for deviance from what they say is truth.

In effect, they are deciding what is truth based on their own opinion and all dressed up with a misuse of scripture that sometimes becomes so absurd the *non-sequitur* illogical ramblings are impossible for reasonable minds to follow. They invoke the name of “Herbert W Armstrong” when convenient in an attempt to stamp their own silly ideas with legitimacy and authority.

They use the term “God’s government” to justify their actions as they abuse of God’s people, and destroy the credibility of the ministry. The door to their organization becomes one that is rotating, with many of God’s people going in with high hopes, and leaving discouraged and usually bitter. Organizations such as the Philadelphia Church of God (PCG) and the Restored Church of God (RCG) have contributed greatly to the rejection of God’s truth in this age. Why?

Because the people of God experiencing first hand abuse and oppression from the carnal, selfish leadership generally conclude that ALL authority vested in men becomes corrupt. They determine that it is better to live within a weak organizational framework as somewhat of a social club member, than to submit to the authority vested in any men. They see the misery and destruction in the wake of the arrogant and vain demagogues so prevalent in the end-time Laodicean age.

Submit Yourself One To Another

Many of the same authoritarian type leaders in the Church of God have applied this scripture to marriage only. Why? Usually their hidden agenda is not so much to disrupt human families with confusion, but mainly to exclude the ministry from submitting to those they think are beneath them *at any time.*

Let’s take a look at this scripture closely. Note that the chapter opens by addressing the collective body, “Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for sweet-smelling savor (aroma).” [Ephesians 5:1-2]

The Chapter’s versus between verse 3 and 18 are also addressing the spiritual body of Christ collectively. Then we come to verse 19, “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; *Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.*” [Ephesians 5:19-21]

Notice these verses—including verse 21—apply to the Church of God as a whole. Paul does not move to the relationship between husbands and wives specifically until verse 22! He is admonishing every Christian to remain humble and governed by THE TRUTH!

So what is the truth?

If our standard is God's word, the truth is only that which can be clearly established by scripture! Anything else falls into the realm of *opinion* and *personal preference*.

The people of God—including the ministry of ALL ranks—must be willing to submit to the truth when revealed. Everyone must be willing to change and become more in conformance with Biblical admonishment and law. We must all learn to “submit one to another in fear of God” by following Jesus Christ, and being willing to change our minds when proven wrong.

This is the ONLY means to have unity and harmony in the Church of God!

Prove That Leadership Is From God First and ALWAYS!

While we must not fall into the trappings of democracy and everyone doing what is “right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25), we must also learn to better recognize true Godly leadership. As brethren of Christ, we should not expect perfection in human leadership; but we should be able to expect humility and a willingness to acknowledge truth. ALL of the people of God should be able to readily say “I was wrong”, or “I’m sorry”!

These traits are far more important than assessing a man's credentials based on who the human hands in his ordination belonged to! In fact—given the state of the Church of God today—it has become obvious that it DOES NOT MATTER AT ALL who ordained who, and when, and in what organization—as long as the man being ordained (1) has the Holy Spirit, (2) understands what he is being ordained into, (3) walks humbly in the true faith of Christ—which includes the system of beliefs practiced in the true Church of God.

Conversely, if a man has by his actions worked himself up in this or that corporate church of God organization through politicking and backscratching; nothing—absolutely NOTHING—miraculous occurred when hands were laid upon his head even if Herbert Armstrong himself ordained the man. Such men WERE NOT set apart for any service to God, but are often “. . . murmurers, complainers, walking after their lusts (and their mouth speaketh great swelling words), shewing respect of persons for the sake of advantage.” [RV Jude 16] It doesn't matter whether those human hands belonged to a false minister, a true minister, an apostle, or any other man!

What is crucial is whether the man being ordained meets the Biblical qualities described in Titus 1 and I Timothy 3, and possesses true understanding. Of course, we cannot expect men to be perfect, but they should generally qualify based on these scriptures! They should also NOT BE A NOVICE [I Timothy 3:6], as is so often the case with young men without experience or education being “lifted up” and ordained in organizations where the “big Kahuna” expects strict, unquestioning obedience in cultic fashion! It is plain in such cases that those ordinations are invalid and useless.

Generally, shouldn't the example as practiced by the Waldensians and Jesus Christ himself be followed, with no one being ordained until they are of a minimum age of 30 years? They should also have developed a set of practical skills used in making their own living, and at least supporting themselves. Christ is our example, is he not? “For even hereunto were ye called:

because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps:" [I Peter 2:21] Jesus Christ himself did not begin his ministry until 30 years of age. We can also consider King David, that did not assume real authority until he was around that age.

If one has been in the true faith for very long, it is very likely that they have observed many ordained with the only life experience being the church college they graduated from. How can such young adolescents effectively shepherd the flock of God? If they have not learned to balance a checkbook, pay their own way, or keep the Sabbath and Holy Days in the face of adversity? How could they have been tested and tempered in preparation for the huge responsibility of being an example, teacher, and leader? Without such experience, how could they ever counsel others with useful wisdom?

But what about when the the minimum qualifications described in the preceding paragraphs are met? Should a follower of the true Christ subordinate themselves to men without testing them?

OF COURSE NOT! WHEN you—as a child of God—prove that a man is humbly working for Christ—follow them as they follow Christ! Christians are not required—and in fact should never—go along with heresy! While God hates division and “he that soweth discord among brethren” is an abomination to Him (Proverbs 6:16-19), many quickly assume that the lay member or lower ranking minister must always fall in line or he will be “causing division”.

This is often NOT the case AT ALL! Usually, through the centuries, God has allowed men to “creep in unawares” [Jude 4] to TEST the people of God. While the apostasy in the end time is unique in its size and scope, a testing of God’s people by being exposed and perhaps tempted by false ministers is nothing new “under the sun”! The people of God must be on their guard for HERESY COMING FROM THE TOP RANKING MINISTERS!

And what is heresy? It is not necessarily deviating from EVERYTHING Herbert Armstrong taught and enforced. With the benefit of hindsight and records, it is not difficult to prove that Herbert Armstrong – like any human being – was very imperfect and made mistakes during his long ministry. Heresy is very simply deviating from CLEAR Biblical dictates—another words, what the Bible states is right or wrong in plain terms.

But when real heresy is verifiable and plain, the people of God ARE NOT the ones causing division when they REJECT it. In fact, it is those injecting the heresy that are the abomination to the Living Christ! Oh, they always wrap the deceit and hypocrisy up in bright ribbons and packaging to make it prettier, but what’s inside the box always has the same obnoxious stench and rottenness!

Now, all that said; a certain amount of imperfection and error should be expected—as it is always present when human beings are assembled. NO LEADER IS PERFECT! Unity is of such high importance that God expects self control and protocol in presenting what one believes to be error. If the leader is following Christ, he will always “submit” to truth when the Bible clearly leads the way. THE BIBLE IS OUR CONSTITUTION AS CHRISTIANS, AND IT MUST GOVERN US ALL!

So when must a true Christian disfellowship from an organization that he believes to be moving away from the truth. Every true Christian has their own breaking point in tolerating apostates and their heresy. However, all men and women of faith should draw the proverbial line in the

sand with respect to the (1) Gospel of the Kingdom of God, and (2) the nature of the true Christ. Imbedded in a drift away from these two basic tenants of faith is deranged prophetic dogma promoted as a tool of someone seeking to become an object of worship and authority to their followers.

From recent church history, it seems that when wolves move an organization toward a different spirit, they always change the nature of the living Christ, and pervert the Gospel [Galatians 1:6-8, 2 Cor 11:2-4]. After these essential doctrines are tampered with and changed, it is inevitable that other serious heresy and error will follow as the organization is corrupted. At that point, a true Christian must understand clearly that Satan and his demons have influence over the leadership, and the organization will NEVER move back to practicing the true faith.

Stated another way, there are always many times in a Christians life to “obey God rather than men.” [Acts 5:29] Obedience to God necessitates DISOBEDIANCE to those that are enemies of God, whether they are devious and arrogant false ministers or secular leaders. True Christians MUST NEVER willfully follow heresy or untruth as *clearly revealed in scripture!*

The Government of God

Mr. Armstrong toward the end of his ministry often presented the phrase, “Government is Everything”, as an essential and perhaps the most important truth. While his intentions were true and clear, elaboration on this phrase is necessary, and it would be better stated that “The Government of the True God is crucial and necessary in completing God’s plan for mankind”.

While it is true that this Government will never be established perfectly until Jesus Christ returns as its visible King of kings; we must be conscious as Christians that we are in training for that government and kingdom. A part of that training as disciples of Christ is learning the ways of God. It is here that the ministry plays a huge role, and is in fact referred to as “teachers”, so that we “all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” [Eph 4:13]

Understand—and this is difficult for so many today because of the state of the church—the Bible clearly states that Christians should, “Yield to those taking the lead of you, and submit, for they watch for your souls, giving an account, that they may do this with joy, and not *with* grieving; for this *would be* unprofitable to you. (Literal Bible Translation)” [Hebrews 13:17]

Therefore, while the ministry should naturally be provided respect; it is NOT an unconditional respect and it is NOT extreme! 1Peter 2:17 call on true Christians to “Honour all *men*. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king”. We are to honor and respect each other throughout the brotherhood.

Many have also quoted this verse when referring to respect for the ministry, “Let the elders *that rule well* be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and in teaching.” (1 Timothy 5:17) Note here the qualifier is “that rule well”. Double honour should be afforded a senior minister who uses his office unselfishly for the faith once delivered, and for God’s people.

We are all brethren—FAMILY—if we have understanding! A true minister is under the same law, subject to the same regulations, observing the SAME doctrine as the physically fragile ninety year old widow. While ministers are ordained to be administrators of God's clearly revealed regulations based upon the laws of God, a true minister of God understands that he is subject to the same laws, statutes, and judgments!

So many false ministers believe they have unbridled authority to teach their opinions and expect rigid compliance to all kinds of personal vagaries and preferences. Such is NOT the way of the true Christ! In this age, it is both sad and pathetic that so many families and children have been soured in the faith as a result of false, ignorant and very ordinary men, providing poor and often overbearing counsel.

A true minister is NOT A DICTATOR and has no such authority! So many leaders in the end-time church of God seem to think they ceased being a sheep and became a shepherd at the moment a man's hands were laid upon their skulls. All true Christians understand that the Bible uses metaphors to teach throughout its pages. The metaphor of shepherd and sheep is with respect to protection and care and sacrifice—NOT OWNERSHIP! The people of God DO NOT belong to any man—and pity the man that thinks differently! They are attempting to steal what is not theirs—but that which belongs to the living, powerful, CHRIST!

A true minister's job is to care for the flock of God—*of which he is also a part of*: "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight *thereof*, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;" How should this take place? "Neither as being lords over *God's* heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. (I Peter 5:2-3)

How clear! While there must by necessity be authority vested in a true minister, the MAIN method of teaching as well as admonishment is to be a *living example*! The Government of God that is coming to earth is very different from the satanic governments around the earth. The difference starts at the top levels of leadership, and extends to the entire family of God!

"But Jesus called them *unto him*, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mathew 20:25-28)

Brethren of God: there is a new way coming soon to earth! We are called to that better way. If off track—let's get back in the lane NOW! Understand that there must be authority, and there WILL BE AUTHORITY! Without it, there is chaos and confusion and heresy.

But that authority has checks and balances, with the Holy Bible serving as the arbiter and constraint for EVERY CHRISTIAN! God expects all followers of Christ to be equipped for self-governance by VOLUNTARILY submitting to the Word of God!

The Kingdom of God is COMING very soon, with ALL AUTHORITY: "And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world are become *the kingdoms* of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever." [Rev 11:15]

If we are called of God now, then we are in training NOW to be a part of that perfect and righteous government!