

House-Churchism: An Ecclesiastical Panacea or Poison? (4)

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Church Authority in the Old Testament

The pre-eminent example of church authority in the first pages of the Old Testament is Melchizedek. He is mentioned briefly, but his role as both king and priest is significant. Such was Melchizedek's position that even our father Abraham, the father of all the faithful, submitted himself to his spiritual authority. Melchizedek had the priestly authority to bless Abraham and the authority to receive tithes from Abraham. The writer to the Hebrews draws out these astounding points as an illustration of Christ's kingly and priestly offices (Heb. 7:1-10). God does not condemn Melchizedek's position of authority in the church as having pagan roots or as an obstacle to Christ's authority but He extols it as a picture of Christ (Ps. 110:4). Though the shadow must be put away now that Christ has come, the example of Melchizedek shows us that it is not at all contrary to God's will for some to have authority over others in the church. Whether this is still the case after the coming of Christ, we will later examine.

If not for Melchizedek, we would look at the patriarchs, especially Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as the first major examples of church authority. These had authority over their families in the covenant of God, especially the authority to teach and admonish and chastise their children, including when those children were older (Gen. 18:19; 27:8; 35:1-5). They also had authority to pronounce prophetic blessings regarding their children, and to make sacrifices to God for themselves and others (Gen. 8:20; 9:25-27; 27:27-40; Ex. 18:12; Job 1:5). God gave these men authority in the church by calling them with their families into His covenant so that their families comprised the church of those days (Gen. 9:12; 17:7, 19; 26:24; 28:13). The distinct families were nevertheless autonomous. Abraham did not have authority over Rebekah's household, but sent gifts and entreaties with his servant to find a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24:5-9). Jacob did not have authority over Laban's household, but had

to labour as a hired servant and remonstrate with Laban for his daughters as wages (Gen. 29:15-30). Even Moses, at the end of the time of the patriarchs, did not have authority over Jethro's Midianite family, although the Kenite children of Hobab later joined themselves to the nation of Israel (Num. 10:29-32; Judg. 1:16; 4:11).

The prophetic office is another example of church authority during this time. This office ordinarily includes authoritative preaching of God's Word (prophetesses and a few others are exceptions). Enoch and Noah are significant examples, both prophesying and preaching of the coming judgment of God in the Flood as a picture of the end of the world (Heb. 11:7; I Pet. 3:19-20; II Pet. 2:5; Jude 14-15). The appointment of these men, as with all prophets, is a special case. The prophets were all appointed by a direct call from God. This was the case with Moses, the pre-eminent prophet of the Old Testament, as also with the subsequent prophets such as Samuel, Isaiah and Jeremiah (Ex. 3:10-14; I Sam. 3:10-20; Isa. 6:5-9; Jer. 1:4-9). By means of their prophecy itself as the authoritative Word of God and witnessed by the signs of their prophecy (such as miracles or fulfilled predictions, e.g., in typical form pointing to and confirming a later archetypal fulfilment), the church recognized that these men had been appointed as prophets by God. If any claimed the authority of the prophetic office illegitimately, they were to be stoned to death according to the Mosaic law (Deut. 13:1-5). They were to be judged as false prophets if what they claimed did not come to pass (or had not occurred) or if they promoted departure from God (e.g., teaching contrary to what He had already revealed). Only true prophets were given the authority to deliver the oracles of God. Frank Viola makes much of Moses' desire that all God's people would be prophets, but for now this suffices to demonstrate that at that time this was certainly not the case and the vast majority were not given prophetic authority. Further, although this is a special case, it is still not true that prophets took such authority upon themselves by simply deciding themselves to begin to function as prophets. They were first called to be prophets and then carried out their prophetic function as the responsibility of their prophetic office. We will return to this subject when considering New Testament prophets, whether all can, may or should prophesy and in what sense all believers are prophets.

The next historical examples of church authority in the Old Testament are the judges from Moses to Samuel (some of whom were also prophets or became

judges in connection with their prophetic office, while Moses and Samuel also performed priestly functions, both being from the tribe of Levi). The office again represented a God-given position with authority over others. The function of the office could not be carried out by those who did not have the office and being appointed to this office conferred the responsibility to carry out its authoritative function, namely to adjudicate on matters pertaining to God's law, pronounce binding judgments and even execute those judgments as an instrument in God's hand (I Sam. 15:32-33). For this latter reason, the judges were involved in warfare against Israel's enemies: sin within and the pagans without (Judg. 2:18-19; I Sam. 7:3-13). Before Moses had been officially appointed by God, his attempts to function as a judge were scoffed at as illegitimate: "Who made thee a prince and a judge over us? intendest thou to kill me, as thou killedst the Egyptian?" (Ex. 2:14). When God called him forty years later, Moses was concerned as to how the Israelites would know that he had been appointed to his office by God. The signs of the rod-serpent and the leprous hand and the plagues against Egypt were given as signs to confirm his calling and appointment as a judge and prophet whom God had sent. Later we find that Moses is the only one carrying out the function of judge in Israel when his Midianite father-in-law Jethro gives him godly advice (Ex. 18:16). Moses takes Jethro's advice to appoint other men to be judges. This was clearly a role to which one had to be authoritatively appointed. It also involved spiritual authority over others in the church, as is apparent from its function to pronounce binding judgments and also in that these men were called "rulers" or even "gods" (Ex. 18:21-26; 21:6; 22:28). Finally, we should notice in passing that the qualifications that Jethro insists upon for these judges ("able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness") are echoed later in New Testament qualifications for elders, which we will examine later.

We also discover priestly authority in the days of Moses, in distinction from the authority of judges or of prophets. Again, this was a position to which one had to be officially appointed and which conferred the responsibility to carry out a specific function which one would not otherwise have the authority to perform (Ex. 28:1). The priestly function involved a sphere of authority over others, though not the same sphere of authority as that of prophets (speaking God's Word) or of judges (pronouncing and executing judgments). For example, only the priests had the authority to offer sacrifices to God. With regard

to priests especially, God instituted very specific ceremonies by which they had to be hallowed in order to serve in their priestly office (Ex. 29:1-35). By means of the priestly office, the entire congregation is consecrated to God in holiness, so that He is our God and we are His people, and so that God dwells among the congregation and we know that He is our God (Ex. 29:44-46). We will consider the significance of this office later in the light of the New Testament, when we turn to the unique priestly office of Christ and the office of all believers as priests. For now, notice what happened when even one with the dignity and authority of a godly king in Judah attempted to perform the function of a priest to which he had not been appointed. In the pride of his heart, Uzziah went into the temple to offer incense and was struck with leprosy with which he had to suffer for the rest of his days for his folly (II Chron. 26:16-21).

The great example in the Old Testament of God's judgment against those who reject the church authority which He has appointed and who attempt to take to themselves that authority is the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. These men attempted to usurp the authority given to Moses and Aaron based upon essentially the same argument made by Viola: "Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them: wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the LORD?" (Num. 16:3). Moses' response is humbly to tell them to let the Lord show whom he has chosen (vv. 4-7). Furthermore, he rebukes them for the very thing of which they had accused him, taking too much upon himself, and points to the privileges which God had given them as Levites (vv. 7-11). None of the other tribes had the authority and privilege to serve at the tabernacle. The whole congregation would have been consumed by the wrath of God on account of this rebellion, but for the intercession of Moses and Aaron, and the congregation separating themselves from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram—all in the mercy of God (vv. 19-27). What follows is one of the most remarkable and fearful demonstrations of God's approval and defence of the authority which He appointed in the church (vv. 28-35). When the people subsequently complained, the Lord sent a deadly plague among them which killed 14,700 of the congregation and would have slain more had not Aaron taken the incense and "stood between the dead and the living" (vv. 41-50). How can we understand this terrible judgment except that the gravity of rebellion against those whom Jehovah has appointed to office in the church

is rebellion against God Himself? As the Lord said to Samuel, “they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them” (I Sam. 8:7).

Viola imagines that Moses ascended Mount Horeb because “With the Fall came an implicit desire in people to have a physical leader to bring them to God.”¹ As the outworking of this “fallen instinct,” he claims, “The people wanted Moses to be a physical mediator between them and God because they feared a personal relationship with the Almighty.”² But Scripture paints for us a very different picture (Deut. 5:23-29). The people, including Moses, feared because God taught them to be afraid with terrifying signs so that they would know that to approach Him without a mediator is certain death (Heb. 12:20-21). It was not man’s “fallen instinct” that appointed Moses to act as a mediator but God’s perfect wisdom in presenting Moses as picture of the true Mediator, Jesus Christ (Deut. 18:15-16). This God-fearing desire for a mediator was explicitly approved by God and was the occasion for promising the true Mediator of whom Moses was a type (Deut. 18:17-19). The writer to the Hebrews leaves us with this warning: “See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven” (Heb. 12:25).

These three forms of church authority (king/judge, priest/Levite and prophet/teacher) continued throughout the Old Testament with minimal variation. The king was essentially a higher judge over all the tribes, a permanent hereditary office (as opposed to an office given by God in response to prayer for deliverance), with additional rights and privileges that judges did not have. The core of their ministry was the same, to rule by pronouncing and executing judgment in Israel and upon her enemies. Godly David, when already anointed to be the next king, would not lift a finger against King Saul, the Lord’s anointed, even though Saul had shown himself to be wicked and disobedient to God. The king was anointed by the priest and later (or at the same time) installed into his office publicly. When the kingly office was dis-

¹ Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity? Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2008), p. 108.

² Viola and Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, p. 109.

solved, Israel still had its elders and governors to rule and judge, with Nehemiah being the pre-eminent example after the captivity (Neh. 13:7-31). The priests and Levites were restored to their responsibilities after the captivity when the temple was rebuilt. The teaching responsibilities of the priestly and levitical offices became more prominent after the return, as exemplified by Ezra (Lev. 10:11; Neh. 8:4-8; Mal. 2:7), just as there were no more prophets until John the Baptist. To such a church, the Lord came. The Lord did not bring revolution or a rebellion (contrary to Barna and Viola's presentation of Christ as a revolutionary), but acknowledged the church authority of His day and submitted Himself personally to their authority, though exercising His own prophetic office in rebuking their hypocrisy: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not" (Matt. 23:2-3; cf. 26:62-64).

Of Christ's own authority and of church authority in the New Testament, we have much more to say. The strongest argument which Viola makes is based, after all, not upon a denial of church authority in the Old Testament, but upon the unique authority of Christ (i.e., as if His coming as the archetypal Mediator in His three-fold office as Prophet, Priest and King abolishes all offices entirely) and upon all New Testament believers being prophets, priests and kings (i.e., as if this precludes the possibility of special offices). Yet this survey of Old Testament church authority teaches us two important things. First, it lays the foundational basis for understanding Christ's authority and church authority in the New Testament. Second, it shows us the falsity of Viola's claims that possessing authority through a specific office in the church (positional authority) or possessing authority over others in the church (which he calls "hierarchical") are inherently pagan concepts in origin and nature. So far are these from being pagan concepts that God Himself instituted and defended precisely this form of church authority in the Old Testament, even to the extent that those who rebelled against this authority met with the severest of judgments. Using essentially the same approach, we will next expose the fatal weaknesses of Viola's main argument and see in precisely what ways the form of church authority is different in the New Testament when the church became catholic or universal. We will also review the severity of God's judgments against those who despise this church authority in the New Testament,

a reiteration which is especially important for those tempted towards the errors of Marcionism or dispensationalism in this area.

The Rule of Christ the Prophet, Priest and King

The subject of especially the Gospels but also woven throughout the entire New Testament is the one kingdom of God, of heaven and of Christ. This is the kingdom to which the Old Testament prophets bore witness. This glorious kingdom is defined in that God is the King through Jesus Christ, the promised Son of David (Luke 1:31-33). Christ's kingdom is not of this world, that is, its origin is not from this present evil age. Therefore, its principle and character are completely different from the kingdoms of this world (Heb. 1:8). Because it is a kingdom established by righteousness, it endures forever and cannot be defeated (Prov. 16:12; 25:5; 29:14; Isa. 9:7). It is the kingdom of heaven, whose character is heavenly, spiritual, righteous, holy and full of truth (John 18:36-37; Rom. 14:17).

Yet it has citizens who, because of their King, are not of this world, yet are in it (John 15:18-21; 17:14-19). The citizens of the kingdom of God are His elect people, who bear distinct characteristics and receive the blessings of this kingdom (Matt. 5:3-16; 25:34; I Pet. 2:9-10). This kingdom is composed also of elect infant citizens (Matt. 11:25; 19:14; 21:16). Those who are not His people are not citizens of His kingdom, but belong to the kingdom of darkness and Satan (Matt. 12:25-28; Eph. 2:2; Col. 1:13). Because His is a spiritual kingdom of righteousness, the citizens must also be righteous (Ps. 15:1-2; 101:6-8).

Our citizenship, therefore, is a gift of the King who Himself has given us His own perfect righteousness (II Cor. 5:19-21; Col. 1:13-14). Our entrance to this kingdom is, therefore, not something we do but a miraculous work of God's grace. There is no prerequisite for us to perform before God makes us citizens. We become citizens by a new birth according to the will of God (John 1:11-13; 3:3-8; I Pet. 1:3-4). No man can purchase or earn citizenship in this blessed kingdom (Ps. 49:7-8; cf. Acts. 22:28). Our citizenship was won and purchased by our King (Eph. 2:12-16).

As King, Christ protects and defends His citizens from all our enemies: the world, the flesh and the devil (Ps. 2; Isa. 4:2-6; 9:6-7; 11; Rom. 8:35-39). But He also rules the citizens of His kingdom. The sceptre with which He rules

us in grace is His word of truth in us, so that this is not like the ineffective, exclusively external rule of earthly kings. His rule is spiritual. He rules us with His Word in our very hearts by His Holy Spirit in us (Isa. 59:16-21; Eze. 36:26-27; Zech. 4; John 6:63; 14:15-18; Col. 3:12-17; I Pet. 1:25). Those who are not citizens, but rebels and traitors, will be smashed like a potter's vessel (Ps. 2:9; 21:8-12; 89:20-23; Isa. 60:12; Dan. 2:44-45; Rev. 2:26-27). Christ rules over them too, though not graciously but with a rod of iron (Ps. 110:5-6; Phil. 2:9-11; Rev. 12:5; 19:11-16).

He has ascended to heaven and is no longer with us bodily (John 14:28; 16:5-7; Acts 1:2-11). Having ascended, He poured out His Spirit on the church, as He had promised. It is by the Spirit of truth that Christ dwells in our hearts while He is yet in heaven (Luke 17:20-21; Rom. 8:9-11; Eph. 3:14-19; Col. 3:15-16; I John 4:13). In the Old Testament, the presence of God was hidden in the temple in thick darkness behind the veil, but now we are the temple as members of the body of Christ, and we are seated with God in heaven in Christ who dwells in us and we in Him by the union of His Spirit (I Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; II Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:4-7, 20-22; I Pet. 2:5). In earthly kingdoms, there is distance between the king and his subjects, and only a select few may ever come near or be heard. In the kingdom of heaven, every citizen is before the throne (Rom. 5:1-2; Eph. 2:18; 3:12; Heb. 4:14-16; 8:1-2; 10:19-22; I Pet. 3:18; Rev. 7:14-15). All believers have the status not just of citizens, but of free sons and heirs of the King (Matt. 25:34; Luke 12:32; John 8:35-36; Rom. 8:15-17; II Cor. 6:18; Gal. 4:4-7, 28-31; Heb. 3:5-6; James 2:5; I John 3:1-2).

But, since the Spirit works by means of the Word, how does Christ bring His Word to us on earth, the church militant, that we may be ruled by it?

He neither walks on earth, nor thunders from heaven, nor whispers secretly in our ears (despite the claims of certain fanatics). The gifts by which the ascended Christ communicates His authoritative Word to the church militant are listed for us in Ephesians 4:8-16. These are described as apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors. These are the authoritative teaching offices that Christ has given to His church and by which He rules His kingdom in the New Testament age. The term "office" is used here simply to mean the authority necessary to carry out a particular role (or function) with a corresponding responsibility. House-churchism denies this authority and, therefore,

takes issue with the term “office,” and necessarily distorts the function and responsibility. To analyse this, it must first be understood more fully what these teaching offices are.

They are all temporary offices in that they will no longer be needed in heaven (to which we have not yet attained, unlike certain hyper-spirituals). They are also special offices because they are not common to every believer. Every believer has a common office along with diverse gifts but only some of these are the special offices. The key passage which instructs us on the subject of the diverse gifts of the Spirit in general is I Corinthians 12 (cf. Rom. 12:3-8). It makes clear that there are many different gifts but they are all given by the one Spirit in the one body of Christ. This body is composed of many different members with different purposes and corresponding gifts, all of which are necessary for the good of the whole body. And yet there is a proper order for all are not of equal authority, value or importance (I Cor. 12:28; 14:5). Specifically, not all are teachers (I Cor. 12:29; James 3:1). Also these offices are here listed as gifts among other lesser gifts which demonstrates that, if some fanatic makes a claim to an office, it matters not if he has many excellent gifts, if he has not received the gift of the office itself. It also shows that God does not call to office those to whom He does not also give the necessary gifts (even if such gifts must be nurtured and cultivated sufficiently through practice, training and instruction before answering a call).

By the Spirit of Christ working through these teaching offices, the Holy Scriptures have been written and given to us (Matt. 26:56; Luke 1:70; Acts 1:16; 28:25; II Tim. 3:16; Heb. 3:7; I Pet. 1:10-12; II Pet. 1:21; Rev. 19:10), and by these offices these same Scriptures are employed to teach us (Acts 17:11; II Tim. 2:2; 3:16-17; 4:2; II Pet. 1:19; 3:15-16). Therefore, some of the offices are foundational and temporary (Eph. 2:20), while others must continue until Christ returns. The miraculous offices of apostle, prophet and evangelist are no longer given because their purpose is completed, according to the principle that partial provisional measures pass away when their goal is achieved and the completed result is ready to replace them (I Cor. 13:9-10).

These offices are called miraculous because either their exercise involved miracles inherently (prophets) or their exercise was attested to by miracles (especially the apostles or evangelists). The prophets, like Ananias, Agabus

(with other prophets of both Jerusalem and Antioch), Judas Barsabas or Silas spoke by direct, that is, miraculous prophecy, rather than, for example, the ordinary prophecy of explaining and applying the Scriptures. In special cases, they were also involved in conferring offices or tasks on others by means of their prophecy (Acts 9:15-17; 13:1-3; II Tim. 1:6). Furthermore, they exercised this office by speaking their prophecies in the church assemblies, preaching and teaching with authority (Acts 15:32; I Cor. 14:29-31).

This is in distinction to Philip's daughters who "did prophesy" but were not permitted to exercise the office of prophet by teaching publicly in the church (Acts 21:9; cf. I Cor. 14:31-37; I Tim. 2:11-14). Others similarly prophesied as an attestation of the ministry of the apostles and evangelists, such as those who miraculously spoke in foreign languages at Pentecost, in Samaria, Cornelius's house or in various churches established by Paul's missionary labours (Acts 2:4-11; 8:15-18; 10:44-46; I Cor. 9:2; II Cor. 3:1-3; 12:12). Although we do not have (or need) such miraculous prophecy today, the same essential distinction still applies. Every believer has the ordinary office of prophet, to know and confess God's Word as revealed in Scripture, but not every believer has the special office (i.e., the authority) to teach and speak publicly in the church assembly.

Viola's claim that every believer has the right (i.e., authority or office) to speak or teach in the church assembly is in direct contradiction to the clear apostolic instruction which forbids women from doing so. Besides that restriction, in Corinth, which was full of miraculous gifts and prophecy, even those who held the office of prophet were not allowed to speak without restriction. In the first place, only two or at most three were permitted to speak and that strictly in turn (I Cor. 14:27-29). Others would have to wait for the next meeting. Even if some special revelation was given to another sitting by (a situation which does not arise today), the speaker had to first hold his peace before the other could begin (I Cor. 14:30-31). Paul expresses his outrage and astonishment at the disorder and chaos that had been prevailing in Corinth:

How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying (I Cor. 14:26).

His point is this: Since all things in the church must be edifying and orderly, it is absurd and manifestly unspiritual that everyone is permitted to butt into the worship service with his own thing, as if the exercise of his own gifts is more important than anything else. After laying the groundwork about the harmony of the body of Christ, the place of different gifts, the paramount importance of charity and the necessity of understanding for edification, Paul corrects the foolish practices of the Corinthians (and house-churchism) by giving a few simple instructions. No one may speak in tongues without an interpreter. For that matter, only two (or at most three) prophets may be allowed to speak and only in turn. No women may be permitted to speak at all and, in short, everything must “be done decently and in order” (I Cor. 14:40). Then it begins to become clear why churches today have an order of service in which everything is determined in advance and why only the minister of the Word (or ministers, since even today some churches have more than one) is permitted to speak.

Viola appeals to I Corinthians 14, as if it were the divine licence for house-churchism and the condemnation of an order of service, somehow not seeing that this chapter is specifically decrying and condemning such chaos. But the important point is this: Those who spoke in the church required a particular office with the authority and calling to do so, the office of prophet or teacher. House-churchism, and all advocates of lay-preaching, err when they permit anyone without such an office to speak and teach in the church. In the next article (DV), we will examine the authority of Christ exercised through the other miraculous offices of apostle and evangelist, as well as the non-miraculous special offices of teacher, overseer/elder and deacon, which authority is entirely denied by house-churchism.