

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Presbyterian Anarchy (Part 2)" (Colossians 2:18-23, Acts 20:28-31)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 5/27/2012

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Friends, today we are bringing you the second part of the message titled *Presbyterian Anarchy*, which we began on our last broadcast. As we continue that message today, let us look to the Lord once again in prayer.

Heavenly Father, we are dealing today with matters that are difficult, matters that are, to many people, uncomfortable and controversial. But Father, as we look at Your Word we see that our Lord Jesus Christ never shrank from the difficult and the controversial when truth was at stake. Neither did the apostles and the members of the early church. We thank You that they said, "We must obey God rather than men."

Father, thank You for this pattern of righteousness that You have set before us in Your Word. May we, by Your power, live up to it. May none of us ever be ashamed of Christ or ashamed of His truth, ashamed to confront evil, especially within the church. But may we always confront it by Your authority and by Your power, not our own. Thank You for your Word and for the presence of Your indwelling Spirit to give us that power and that enabling. In Jesus' name, Amen.

An Evil Tyranny in the PCA and OPC

Friends, as I said, today's program is the second part of the message titled *Presbyterian Anarchy*, which we began on our last broadcast.

If you were listening to the first part of this message, you will recall that we began to examine one of the least publicized but most deadly developments that

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has been taking place in the nominally conservative Evangelical church in our time.

That development is the evil tyranny of counterfeit authority which has infected the two leading reputedly conservative Presbyterian denominations in North America – the Presbyterian Church in America and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

The result is that damnable heresy has come into these two churches. The core of the heresy is this: Men are being permitted to openly preach and teach that human beings are saved from sin not by the blood of Jesus Christ alone, but by water baptism.

Men in the pulpits of these denominations, and in seminaries associated with these denominations, are being permitted to openly teach that a sinner is not justified in the sight of God by faith in Christ alone, but by a combination of faith in Christ plus the sinner's own works.

Men are being permitted to openly deny that when a person believes on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, not only are his sins placed on Christ, but Christ's perfect righteousness is likewise credited to the sinner. Men in the PCA and the OPC are spreading a false teaching that openly denies the second part of that exchange. They deny the imputation of Christ's perfect righteousness to sinners.

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These men are teaching that sinners are not justified in the sight of God, fully, once and for all, when they believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and are converted. They are teaching that there is a so-called "second justification" based on works at the Last Judgment. Men in the PCA and the OPC are denying that the basis on which we shall stand justified before God on that last day is the finished work of Christ alone. And that is because they deny that Christ's finished work consists not only of His death on the cross for sinners, but Christ's finished work also includes the perfect life that He lived on this earth which qualified Him to be the sinner's perfect substitute and provided a righteousness that is not our own, as the Apostle Paul declares in Philippians chapter three, verse nine. And so these preachers of heresy in the PCA and the OPC have introduced water baptism and the works of the flesh in place of the righteousness of Christ.

In our last message we also began to see how these damnable heresies have gotten into the PCA and the OPC. The reason is that men in the leadership of those two denominations have exercised counterfeit spiritual authority. They have exercised counterfeit authority to teach things that the Word of God does not teach and in fact condemns. They have exercised counterfeit authority to place men who teach these things in the pulpits of their churches, and in other positions of authority within the church. And they have exercised counterfeit authority in order to protect the men who teach these things when other men who are faithful to the Gospel rise up and charge them with heresy.

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Response to Our Last Broadcast

Well dear friends, after we broadcast the first part of this message which I am continuing today, a very interesting thing happened. It is evident that more people have listened to that last broadcast than almost any other we have ever produced. And listeners responded to it in a remarkable way. We received letters, e-mails, and phone calls from people who are presently in the PCA and the OPC, and from people who were once in the PCA and the OPC and have left those denominations because of the apostasy. Some of the people who got in touch with us are pastors and elders.

The sum of what they said is this: Dr. Elliott, you are absolutely correct in what you said in your last message. In fact, you have understated the case. It is far worse than you said. And dear friends, I know that is true, because I have researched and written three books and dozens of articles that deal with the subject, and other men have written about the problem as well.

Dear friends, this outpouring of response to our last broadcast only confirmed that we need to continue this message today. We must continue to speak out about this evil. We need to examine the spiritual anarchy that is taking place within the PCA and the OPC. We need to expose what is being done largely in secret. We need to expose it to the bright light of Scripture. Our authority for doing this is the Word of God – among other places, Ephesians chapter five, verse eleven: “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them.”

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Scripture's Indictment of the PCA and OPC

And so with these things in mind, let me read for you once again God's warning, through the Apostle Paul, against the evil of man-made doctrines growing out of man-made authority, as we find it in Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen. If you are able, please open your Bible and turn there with me. Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen. This is the Word of God:

Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head [that is, to Jesus Christ], from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.

Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations — "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," which all concern things which perish with the using — according to the commandments and doctrines of men?

These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh. (Colossians 2:18-23)

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What the Apostle Paul describes here is precisely what is taking place in the PCA and the OPC. Men are perverting judgment. They are cheating people of their reward in Christ. They are saying, in effect, "We judge anyone as unworthy of reward, even unworthy of salvation, who would stand against what we are teaching and promoting."

But the Apostle Paul by the Spirit declares, emphatically, "Let no man cheat you of your reward." Do not permit it. Oppose them by the authority of Jesus Christ and His Word.

These men, Paul says, are "vainly puffed up by their fleshly minds." They think according to the flesh, not according to the Spirit. They seek the approval of men. They seek the approval of unbelieving academics and theologians.

Paul says that these men are disconnected from the Head of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ. They have usurped His authority. They have replaced His immutable truth with their variable falsehoods.

The things that these men are teaching and protecting in the PCA and the OPC are, as Paul says, according to the thinking of this world, and not according to Christ. Christian, Paul says, you have died to such things. They are dead for you. Do not subject yourselves to the men who teach such things. Do not subject yourselves to the men who protect those who teach such things.

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Such heresies, Paul says, are “the commandments and doctrines of men,” not of God. They are, as Paul calls them, “self-imposed religion” – literally, self-made religion. That is what has gripped the PCA and the OPC today. Self-made religion.

The Foundation of Genuine Authority in the Church

Now in our last message, we noted the fact, as we often have, that the best way – in fact the only way – for a Christian to be able to identify and flee from a counterfeit is to know the genuine article. The best way to be able to identify counterfeit authority in the church, the best way to be able to free yourself from its evil tyranny, is to understand what God’s Word actually says about church authority. To understand what Christ has constituted, to understand the genuine design of authority within Christ’s church. And so in our last message, we began to do that.

We saw that Ephesians chapter four, verses eleven through sixteen, give us the foundation and purpose of that authority. We saw that Jesus Christ, who is the Head of the Church, has given particular gifts to men of His choosing, men under His authority, for specific purposes. In the past, apostles – a select group of men who had the authority to declare new revelations from God to the early church, until the full canon of Scripture was completed. In the present time, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers.

Those who Ephesians four speaks of as prophets are men who Christ has gifted to be expositors of Scripture. Those who Ephesians four speaks of as evangelists

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are men who Christ has especially gifted to proclaim the Gospel message to the lost, men engaged in the work of missions. Those who Ephesians four speaks of as pastor-teachers are men who Christ has gifted to be shepherds of the local flock, as well as faithful expositors of Scripture. The Greek text of this passage shows that the office of pastor-teacher is a single office, not two separate ones.

The expositor, the evangelist, and the pastor-teacher, must be strictly faithful to the written Word of God. Their authority is rooted in the Word of God alone. Their authority resides strictly within the boundaries of the Word of God. They have no authority to speak, or to do, anything that is outside the bounds of the Word of God. They have no authority to add to it. They have no authority to take away from it. They have no authority to change God's Word or to redefine its terms.

The Twofold Purpose of Genuine Authority

We also saw, in Ephesians chapter four, that this authority has been delegated by Christ to men of His choosing for a twofold purpose. First, men who are called and gifted by Christ for ministry under the authority of the Word are meant to be Christ's means of building up the saints in the unity of the true faith, the true knowledge of Christ. Secondly, men who are called and gifted by Christ for ministry under the authority of the Word are meant to be the church's front line of defense against error.

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But in order to understand fully how this is to operate, we also need to understand God's ordained structure of spiritual authority within the church. And this takes us to three additional things that God's Word tells us about genuine authority – Christ's ordained authority – within the church. So let us go to Scripture once again.

Local Church Authority: The Elders

The first thing that we find is that God has established the office of elder within the local church. In Acts chapter fourteen, verse twenty-three we find that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church. In Titus chapter one, verse five, we find Paul instructing Titus, "appoint elders in every city as I commanded you — if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. For an overseer must be blameless, as a steward of God, and not self-willed..."

Now we don't have time to look at all of the many Scripture passages that deal with Biblical eldership in detail. In the transcript of this message that you will find on our website, we are going to list those passages so you can study them on your own if you wish.¹ But let me give you a brief summary.

The word that is translated "elder" in the New Testament is the Greek word *presbuteros*. We find that elders are also called bishops or overseers, and these

¹ See, within their contexts, Acts 11:30, 14:23, 15:2-6, 15:22-23, 16:14, 20:17, 20:28, 21:18; Philippians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 4:14, 5:17-19, 5:22; Titus 1:5-9; Hebrews 13:7; 1 Peter 5:2.

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terms are used interchangeably in the New Testament. There is no distinction between an elder and a bishop or overseer. They are all the same man – a man in the local church.

But we do find that Scripture does distinguish between the office of teaching elder – the pastor-teacher of Ephesians chapter four, verse eleven – and the general category of ruling elder. 1 Timothy 5:17 describes teaching elders as “they who labor in the Word and doctrine.” All elders, Scripture tells us, must be able and skilful in teaching. But the pastor-teacher is the elder among the plurality of elders who has this responsibility as his dedicated life’s work.

So these are the elders of the church. For what purpose are qualified elders to be appointed in every church? We find the answer later on in Titus chapter one, at verse nine. The responsibility of the elder is to be a man who is “holding fast the faithful Word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and to convict those who contradict.”

We find this even more intensively expressed in Acts chapter twenty, beginning at verse twenty-eight, where Paul says this to the elders of the church at Ephesus:

Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things,

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to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. (Acts 20:28-31)

The ruling elders as well as the teaching elders, the pastor-teachers, are meant to be Christ's means of building up the saints in the unity of the true knowledge of Christ. And, the ruling elders as well as the teaching elders are meant to be the church's front line of defense against error.

The Biblical emphasis on authority in the church is primarily local authority of ruling elders and pastor-teachers within the local assembly of believers, building up the saints in the faith and protecting the church against doctrinal error. If we were to put it in proportional terms, I believe it would be accurate to say that at least ninety-five percent of the authority given by Christ to His church is local authority, local teaching, local pastoring, local spiritual oversight, local protection of the flock of God, under the headship of Jesus Christ, by the authority of His written Word, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. That is where the vast, vast majority of the responsibility lies – with the eldership of the local church.

Wider Authority: The *Presbuterion*

There are, additionally, two other categories of church authority instituted in the New Testament. The first is what Scripture calls the *presbuterion* – the body or assembly of elders extending across multiple local assemblies of believers. The

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second is one that we find in the book of Acts chapter fifteen – a general assembly of the elders of the entire church, gathered for a specific purpose.

Let me first address the *presbuterion* or the assembly of elders extending across multiple local churches. In a church context, the word *presbuterion* or assembly of elders is only used in one place in the New Testament, and that is in First Timothy chapter four, verse fourteen. Paul says that Timothy was gifted and called to the ministry “by prophecy” – that is, by revelation of the purpose and plan of God – which was confirmed by “the laying on of the hands of the eldership,” the *presbuterion*.

This is actually the one and only stated purpose that we find in the New Testament for a convocation of an assembly of elders, or a presbytery, extending across multiple churches. They gathered to determine that it was God’s purpose and design for a particular man to be set apart for the work of the Gospel ministry, and they confirmed this by the public act of laying their hands upon that man.

But Paul’s exhortation to the elders of the church at Ephesus makes something else very clear: The primary responsibility for making sure that this man remains true to the Word – that primary responsibility rests not with wider body, but with the elders of the local church. That is a greatly neglected responsibility in the church generally in our time, and it is most definitely so in the PCA and the OPC.

However, the clear implication of First Timothy 4:4 is that the *presbuterion*, or the assembly of elders extending across multiple churches, also has a

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responsibility in this matter. Just as a body made up of elders from the wider church determined that it was God's purpose for a particular man to be set apart for the work of the Gospel ministry, and just as they confirmed this by the public act of laying their hands upon that man, by the same token it should be the responsibility of such a wider body, be it called by the name presbytery or some other name, to hear the evidence when a man departs into false teaching and is unrepentant.

And if the accusation is indeed true and the man does not repent, the *presbuterion*, the assembly of elders, has a responsibility to publicly declare that the man is no longer qualified to be a true minister of the Word under the authority of Christ. And it is their responsibility, along with the local eldership, to put that man out of the church.

Much More to Say

Today, the men of the PCA and the OPC are falling down in these duties. Many of them are teaching their people soul-damning falsehood instead of the saving truth. Many of them are protecting and even promoting those who teach these falsehoods. They have made a peace treaty with Satan and his ministers.

Well dear friends, there is much more to say on these matters. And what Scripture is telling us applies not only to churches that wear the Presbyterian label. As we said before, there is one Biblical model of church authority for all churches. And so we also need to consider one last element of genuine authority

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within the church, and that is the role of a general assembly or a gathering of all of the elders of the church, to deal with vital issues that have broad implications. And so that is where we shall resume our study in our next broadcast.

About the Broadcast

The Scripture-Driven Church airs each week across the United States and around the world. Our goal is that of the Great Commission: to preach the Gospel to the world, and to equip believers to stand upon and live by the sole authority of God's Word, to the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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