

## THREE LEVELS OF CHURCH AUTHORITY

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To differentiate between **New Testament commands**, **apostolic practices** and **human customs** has proven over the years to be most helpful, for settling church disputes, for ascertaining the level of authority for a church activity, and for making plans and establishing priorities. The method is a simple one.

The FIRST level of authority is **New Testament commands**. We must obey them and must not hinder others doing them. These include Jesus' commands, which are foundational, and those of the apostles written in their epistles. These build on Jesus' commands and are for Christians who are already under pastoral care in a church. The basic commands of Jesus, which were being obeyed by the 3000 new believers in Acts chapter 2 in their most basic form, include:

- Repent, believe, and receive the Holy Spirit.
- Be baptized.
- Break bread.
- Love God, neighbor, fellow disciples, enemy (forgive).
- Pray.
- Give.
- Make disciples (witness, shepherd, teach).

The SECOND level is **apostolic practices** that were **not commanded**. We must not make universal laws of these, nor prohibit others' doing them. They include:

- Baptizing immediately.
- Using one cup in the Eucharist.
- Fasting.
- Worshipping on Sunday.
- Speaking in tongues.
- Naming several elders to shepherd a church.
- Etc.

The THIRD level is **Human traditions** not mentioned in the New Testament. We can take them or leave them, and we can prohibit them if they hinder obedience to New Testament commands. We must not force our own traditions and customs on *other* churches. Most traditions are good, and some are necessary for good church order. They include:

- Non-biblical requirements for ordination, officiating the Eucharist, baptism, church membership.
- Sunday School structure.
- Wearing robes in the pulpit, not wearing robes in the pulpit.
- The pulpit.
- Prohibition against using wine in moderation.
- Democratic processes in church business meetings.
- Episcopalian hierarchy, etc.

## Sample items found in some churches

Discern which of the three levels of authority apply to the sample items listed below.

- Level 1=NT commands (we must obey them);
- Level 2=NT practices (not commanded; we may obey them, or have a good reason not to)
- Level 3=human customs (we normally follow them as most are good, but must disobey them when they hinder loving obedience. Some in themselves are external forms, methods or structures that reflect obedience on a deeper level).

- praying
- standing to pray
- raising hands to pray
- kneeling to pray
- repeating memorized prayers many times
- giving
- tithing
- giving products instead of money
- baptizing
- counting converts after being added to a church by baptism
- baptizing immediately (then dealing with ongoing sins and problems within the church)
- delaying baptism so it can serve as a graduation ceremony after a long doctrine course
- baptizing entire families
- confirm saving faith by baptism
- formal ordination required, to baptize or officiate communion
- seminaries, Bible colleges
- Sunday Schools
- using music as an aid to worship
- raising hands in worship
- chanting
- speaking in tongues (interpreted)
- centering worship around a sermon
- women prophesying in public worship
- celebrating the Lord's Supper (break bread)
- breaking bread in church buildings
- using one cup and wine in the Eucharist
- breaking bread frequently in homes
- breaking bread the first day of the week
- discerning the body of Christ in the Eucharist

- \_\_\_ consciously participate in the body and blood of Jesus through the Eucharist
- \_\_\_ pulpits
- \_\_\_ church buildings
- \_\_\_ separating apostolic teams ("sent ones") by prayer, fasting, laying on hands
- \_\_\_ establishing elders when possible in each church
- \_\_\_ establishing elders in new churches within a few weeks in pioneer fields
- \_\_\_ avoiding laying hands on an elder suddenly
- \_\_\_ one pastor doing all the leadership in a church
- \_\_\_ several elders serving as co-pastors in one church
- \_\_\_ vestments or special dress in the pulpit
- \_\_\_ avoiding future problems by listing rules and prohibitions in church constitutions
- \_\_\_ mission agencies
- \_\_\_ training top leaders by personally discipling them
- \_\_\_ submission to the rule of the elders
- \_\_\_ repent, believe and receive the Holy Spirit
- \_\_\_ demonstrate repentance by raising the hand or going forward in a public meeting
- \_\_\_ asking one to make a "decision" for Christ
- \_\_\_ love God and man in practical ways
- \_\_\_ love one's wife as Christ loved the church
- \_\_\_ disciple others
- \_\_\_ disciple neglected people groups
- \_\_\_ witness about Jesus' death, resurrection, forgiveness and repentance
- \_\_\_ teach new believers to obey all Jesus' commands
- \_\_\_ nurture growing Christians with the Word
- \_\_\_ "full time" (supported, salaried) Christian service
- \_\_\_ "bivocational (volunteer) Christian service
- \_\_\_ using small business to facilitate church planting
- \_\_\_ beginning witnessing among the poor or working class, in a pioneer field
- \_\_\_ using oral communication to spread the gospel
- \_\_\_ starting with the great redemptive stories rather than a philosophical approach to the gospel
- \_\_\_ regional or national presbyteries (or formal associations of churches)
- \_\_\_ democratic congregational church government
- \_\_\_ autonomy (independence) of the local church
- \_\_\_ calling clusters of small house churches "the church" in a metropolitan area
- \_\_\_ prohibiting drunkenness
- \_\_\_ prohibiting drinking of naturally fermented wine in moderation

**END**