

Church Government: Power¹

I. The nature of church power

- All authority resides in Jesus (Matt 28:18–20) and comes from Jesus (Rom 13:1). The church only has authority because Jesus has given it.
- “Power” evokes ideas of influence or oppression. Instead, (with Robinson) we use it to refer to:
 - What the church is authorized to do (by Christ’s commission) and
 - What the church is empowered to do (by the Spirit; Zech 4:6).
- All church power is *ministerial* and *declarative*.
- *Ministerial*: we administer the kingdom and the laws that Jesus, the sole lawmaker, establishes.
 - Vs. “magisterial”: which claims that the church is able to add authoritative statements to the body of truth already received.
 - Example of a magisterial statement: in 1956 Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae*, which stated that it was immoral to engage in any artificial forms of birth control.
 - Other examples in Catholicism: authoritative teaching on transubstantiation (1415), purgatory (1274), and the immaculate (i.e., sinless) conception of Mary (1854), all which the Bible does not teach.
 - In contrast, we believe the faith “was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), to which *nothing* is to be added (Deut 4:2; 12:32; Rev 22:18).
 - Church officers do not make the rules for worship, Christian living, and church life. We simply *enact* the rules in the Bible.
- *Declarative*:
 - We declare the laws that Jesus has made, and enforce them by declarations of censure (see class #10 on church discipline).
 - We do not enforce in any other way. The sword is entrusted to the state, not the church (Rom 13:4).

II. The acts of church power

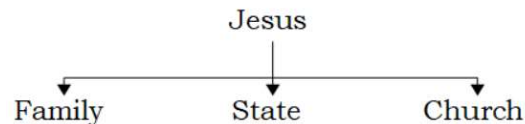
- Specific powers that Jesus has entrusted to his church:
 - Binding the conscience of believers based on the Scripture (Tit 2:15). “You *must* believe this, you *must* do this to be faithful to King Jesus.”
 - Wielding the keys of the kingdom (Matt 16:19; 18:17–18; John 20:21–23).
 - Authoritatively designating someone as *in* or *out* of the church (see classes #9 and #10 on membership and church discipline).
 - Authoritatively determining that a church council (e.g., a session or a presbytery) has committed an error and needs to change their decision.
 - Administering the sacraments: the king’s authoritative signs that someone belongs to him.
 - Enacting the great commission: organizing for worship, discipleship, and evangelism. The call to worship is an *authoritative* summons!

¹ In preparing this, I used <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2020/04/ministerial-and-declarative-authority/>

- Ordaining men to special office or revoking ordination (Titus 1:5–11; 1 Tim 3:1–15; 5:19).
- Recognizing congregations or denominations as churches.
- Determining heresy: what is outside the realm of sound doctrine.

III. The limits of church power / relationships to other spheres of authority

- Things not entrusted to the church:
 - The realm of the home: the education, nourishment, and discipline of children, personal finances, personal time and space (Jesus entrusts this to families).
 - The civil realm (having to do with justice, order, and peace): the authority to make war, to punish evildoers physically or economically, to tax, etc. (Jesus entrusts these to the state).
- Kuyper: no sphere owes its existence to the others; each is ultimately accountable to Jesus.



- However, at times the spheres interact, as when a parent abuses a child (the church and state should intervene), or when the state commits grave iniquity like abortion (the church should speak out), etc.

IV. Applications

- How should we treat something that our elders ask us to do?
 - Just like with civil government and parents: if it is in their authority, then we must submit, even if we personally disagree—as long as it does not involve disobedience to Jesus. This is what it means to submit “in the Lord” (Col 3:18; 1 Pet 2:18).
- WCF 31.3: “It belongs to synods and councils, ministerially to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of His Church; to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same: which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with, reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in His Word.”
- Thought question: does this mean that church members need to do whatever the session says? Under what circumstances?
- Examples of sinfully defying church power:
 - Refusing to let your pastor or elders visit you.
 - Not listening humbly when your leaders confront you on sin.
 - Taking the Lord’s Supper when you have been excommunicated.
 - Blowing off a church’s discipline and joining another church.
 - As a minister, refusing to accept the discipline of the presbytery and continuing to act as a minister without permission.