

Bible - Inspiration & Authority

A Takeover in Your Church?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Part 1 of a series

Is the Bible your church's supreme authority, or have other things taken first place?

The church cannot lightly brush aside this question. Too much is at stake if our answer is the wrong one.

Often our conditioned response is, "Of course the Bible is our authority. We're a Bible-believing church." Often, that's the end of the discussion. But Lord of the church doesn't let us off so easily. The authority question persists in the pages of God's Word.

Do the leadership and people of your church really understand what the Bible has to say about its authority? Does your church continually compare everything it says and does against the Biblical standard? Does your church understand how easily, how insidiously, other things can supplant the Bible's authority — taking the church off-message and off-mission, putting its people in spiritual danger, and neutralizing its testimony to the unbelieving world?

Evidence of a Takeover

These are not idle questions. Recent surveys provide ample evidence that the Bible is no longer the supreme and sole authority in many — perhaps most — evangelical churches. Other things have taken first place.

Trustworthy surveys of church members show that in a typical evangelical church of 100 adults, only 16 of them read the Bible regularly, and 35 of the 100 never read the Bible at all.¹ Only 63 of the 100 believe that the Bible is completely accurate. Only 55 of the 100 believe that Jesus Christ was sinless. Only 48 of the 100 believe that Satan is real. And 57 out of the 100 believe that good works play a part in gaining eternal life.² Only 10 of the 100 cite the Bible as the primary basis for their worldview and behavior.³ Nineteen percent of those who are living with a partner outside of marriage identify themselves as evangelical Christians.⁴

Among the children of the 100 adults in that typical evangelical church, nearly 70% of them leave the church when they reach adulthood. Their main reason is that they do not believe the Bible is true, and they say that the church has done little or nothing to answer those doubts.⁵

Despite the growth of mega-churches, overall evangelical church attendance is down 15% since the 1990s, and down by over 60% since World War Two. Today, fewer than 17% of evangelical churches are growing numerically, and only 2.2% are growing through conversions.⁶

Dr. Stephen Prothero of Boston University has studied the American religious scene extensively and written several books on the subject. In a recent C-SPAN interview, he made a number of telling observations about today's evangelical church based on extensive research. He has found that most evangelicals cannot articulate or defend basic Christian doctrines *from the Bible* — essentials like the authority of Scripture and the rudiments of the Christian Gospel. And, he said, most evangelicals cannot defend Christian moral positions on abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, sex outside of marriage, etc., *from Scripture*. Most evangelicals know in a vague way that the Bible says these things are wrong. But they cannot tell you exactly *what* the Bible says on these vital issues, or *where* it says it.

When asked why this is the case, Dr. Prothero had a ready answer:

Among evangelicals there's been this shift over time — from Bible reading to *feeling* — from knowing what Jesus actually had to say to having a "relationship" with a "Jesus" that they know little or nothing about — from actually *reading* the Bible to merely *revering* the Bible — and going back to certain proof-texts over and over again that don't necessarily give you a sense of what the whole Bible has to say.⁷

A Spiritual Vacuum

Second Timothy 3:16 tells us why God has given us the Bible: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." And the next verse tells us the goal: "That the man of God [and thus the church] may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Scripture is profitable in four ways. First, it teaches us sound doctrine, the only God-ordained path for the church. Doctrine isn't just a set of sterile facts. It is *everything* the Bible has to say about what the individual Christian and the church as a body is to believe, and how it is to operate. Secondly, Scripture is profitable for reproof — telling us when we've gotten off the right path of sound doctrine. Thirdly, Scripture is profitable for correction — getting the church back on the right path. And, fourthly, Scripture is profitable for instruction in righteousness — keeping the church on the right path.

The evidence cited above points to serious neglect of these truths in today's evangelical church.

When the church neglects the Bible and its authority, it creates a spiritual vacuum. What is true in physics is also true in the church: Nature abhors a vacuum. The

secular mindset — man, not God, as the source of authority — fills that vacuum, shaping our thinking and conduct. If the church doesn't teach the Word of God, it embraces and teaches the thinking of the world. There is no third alternative.

Often today's evangelical church is driven by purposes that have little or nothing to do with God's Word. The spiritual vacuum created by neglecting Bible doctrine is being filled by worldly philosophies, man-centered authority structures, and consensus approaches to "truth". The church is losing its spiritual power because it has disconnected itself from the Source.

As a result of the neglect of sound doctrine, Jesus' indictment of church leaders during His days on earth often applies to the church in our time: "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew 15:8-9).

The Church's Only and Final Authority

The church's sole and final authority is found "not in words which man's wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches" (1 Corinthians 2:13). "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner [in the original, a critic] of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

We need to continually examine what we are saying and doing in the church, and why, and how, because it is easy to get off the right path. Scripture is the standard by which we need to evaluate everything the church says and does. The Bible is our critic. Being in God's Word is the only way the church can tell the difference between the real and the counterfeit, spiritually speaking. People who work in banks need to be able to quickly spot counterfeit money. How do they do that? They study the real

thing. And because they become intimately familiar with the real thing, they can detect the counterfeit and take it out of circulation. The church of Jesus Christ needs to study the real thing, so that it can spot spiritual counterfeits before they do irreparable harm.

Not a New Problem

This is not a new problem for the church. The Apostle Paul wrote the book of First Corinthians to a church where there had been a takeover. In Acts chapter 18 we read that Paul had planted the church at Corinth. He spent eighteen months with them, instructing and establishing them in the Word. The Corinthian church had gotten off to a good start. But not long after Paul left Corinth, other things began to supplant the authority of the Bible in the church. The Corinthian church quickly got off-message, off-mission, and was on the shelf as far as God's purpose was concerned.

The church embraced elements of the worldly philosophies that abounded in Corinth at that time, and mingled them with Christianity. The results were terrible. There was open immorality among the membership, and the church didn't see this as a particular problem. People did not take their marriage vows seriously. The church brought worldly practices into its worship, and with them came confusion and disorder. People partook of the Lord's Supper in a pagan manner. The church took a pridefully wrong approach to the matter of spiritual gifts. There was preacher worship, factionalism, internal strife, and materialism. The Corinthian church actually forgot the content of the Gospel message, and had to learn it all over again. Sadly, it sounds like many evangelical churches today.

All of these problems resulted from neglect of the Word, and one by one, the Apostle Paul dealt with them. He pointed them back to Scripture — reproving them, correcting them, endeavoring to set them on the righteous path once again. Near the end of his letter, he summed up his message by saying, "Do not be children in

understanding...but in understanding be mature" (14:20). Preventing a takeover in the church, or recovering from a takeover once it has happened, requires spiritual maturity.

Whose Church?

Like the Corinthian church, many evangelical churches in our time have experienced a takeover, often without realizing it or understanding it. A takeover often begins with a change of thinking that forgets these critical facts from God's Word:

- Christ is Head of the church, not any man.
- Christ owns His church, we do not.
- Christ has defined His church's purpose, we do not.
- Christ has defined success, we do not.

Neglecting these truths places the church on a slippery slope. When we think that we own the church, very soon we begin thinking that we must do things to make the church successful. As that becomes our focus, we begin to neglect the Word. Very soon we are defining the terms of success. As the spiritual vacuum created by neglect of the Word grows, we begin looking at how the world achieves and measures success. And soon we begin to apply the world's principles and methods to the church. The world's philosophy supplants the Bible. The world's philosophy becomes the church's *de facto* authority. The consequences for the leadership, the membership, and the lost in our communities are disastrous, just as they were at Corinth.

Unqualified Advice

One example that we hear and read a great deal about these days is "the purpose-driven church." You can buy books and videos and attend seminars that will tell you how to become a purpose-driven church. The sum of the purpose-driven church philosophy is this: The church needs to look to the unbelieving world for input. It

needs to redefine itself in terms that are acceptable and attractive to the unbelieving world. And, the church needs to constantly redefine and repackage itself in response to the changing trends of the unbelieving world.

When churches go to the world in a misguided search for identity and purpose, they are putting the world's opinions above Scripture. And besides that, they're going to the most unqualified people on earth. In fact, the Bible tells us that when we do this we are going to the enemies of God to ask them how to run the church.

Many unbelievers are very nice people, and their input may be well-intentioned. But spiritually speaking, they are the enemies of God. The Bible tells us in Romans 8:7 that the worldly mind, the unbelieving mind, is at war with God. And First Corinthians chapter 2 tells us that the unbelieving mind is incapable of discerning spiritual matters because unbelievers do not have the Holy Spirit, the Author of all Scripture, living within them. In other words, the unbelieving world is absolutely unqualified to advise believers about the nature and purpose of the church, and how it should carry out its Christ-given mission. Unbelievers can only give us bad advice, ungodly advice, unqualified advice, no matter how well-intended. It is only believers who have the mind of Christ (1st Corinthians 2:16), and believers understand the mind of Christ only by understanding His written Word.

A church that employs the advice of the unbelieving world will very quickly be off-message, off-mission, and on the shelf as far as God's eternal purpose is concerned. Such a church may have many outward appearances of success, but in the ways that really count with God it will be like the Laodicean church of Revelation 3:14-22. That church "went for the gold" — but it was the perishing gold of this world and its thinking, not the pure gold of God's truth in Christ. It was a church that accommodated itself so well to the world that eventually didn't really stand for

anything, at least not anything that mattered to God. It measured its success in terms of its own self-defined purposes, not God's purpose as defined in His Word.

The Scripture-Driven Church

How can a church prevent other things from supplanting the Word of God? How can a church recognize the signs that a takeover has already happened? How can a church recover and remain true to its Christ-ordained purpose?

The evangelical church must be the Scripture-driven church. According to the Bible, the people and leaders of a Scripture-driven church:

- Are committed to Scripture alone as their authority
- Understand God's purpose for the church
- Rightly handle the Word of God
- Operate under the Bible's authority
- Identify and reject illegitimate authorities
- Practice Bible-based evangelism
- Answer anti-Christian positions with apologetics (a clear, Biblical defense of the faith) not apologies

TeachingtheWord is committed to equipping Scripture-driven churches. In future articles in this series, we'll address each of these key characteristics of a Scripture-driven church, how to achieve them, how to guard them, and how to recover them if they have been lost.

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