

## The Role of the Church

What role does the church play in deciding on matters of faith and practice? Despite the fact that the Christian Church has carried out great wrongs through the centuries, Jesus spoke confidently of His church. “Truly I tell you,” He said, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matt 18:18). It is not easy to dismiss those words, especially when He repeats them in the next verse; “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in Heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matt 18:19, 20). So in our day, we need to recognize the weight that Heaven places on decisions of the church in matters of faith and practice. Unless there is a plain “thus saith the Lord” to direct us otherwise, we are called upon to support the decisions of the church in fulfilling the Gospel Commission.

This same principle is expanded on in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) when the young church met to discuss a crisis of identity that was tearing them apart. It was James who gave the concluding remarks (suggesting that James was considered the leader of the church at that time, not Peter) and he laid down the principles to guide the church from then on. (Acts 15:19, 20). He then drafted a letter to be read out in all the churches (Acts 15:23–29). And that was the end of the matter. There is no hint in this account that these matters were optional. This became the norm for the churches from then on.

It is interesting that Ellen White also gave counsel to the early Advent believers to maintain their unity. In volume one of the Testimonies (pages 204–9) there is an interesting story of a brother who was convinced that the church was wrong on an issue that he had discovered in the Bible, and felt convinced the church should follow his lead. He and his wife created such a stir that Ellen White wrote to them and told them that God does not give truth to just one or two, but He leads the church as a whole, so she told them to be quiet. The story is even more remarkable because the issue was eating pork—five years before Ellen White’s vision on the importance of diet and health.

The issue was not about correct theology but about the importance of a dominant voice not being allowed to split the church. God leads the church as a

whole, not by isolated individuals who think they are the only ones with God's truth. On another occasion she states,

There have ever been in the church those who are constantly inclined toward individual independence. They seem unable to realize that independence of spirit is liable to lead the human agent to have too much confidence in himself and to trust in his own judgment rather than to respect the counsel and highly esteem the judgment of his brethren, especially of those in the offices that God has appointed for the leadership of His people. God has invested His church with special authority and power which no one can be justified in disregarding and despising, for he who does this despises the voice of God (AA 163-164).

The prophet Samuel made a rather confrontational comment on similar lines when he stated that "rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry" (1 Sam 15:23). So people who go out of their way to promote themselves as authorities for the church to follow are standing on rather shaky ground.

On yet another occasion Ellen White stresses the importance of guarding harmony in the Church.

If the world sees a perfect harmony existing in the church of God, it will be a powerful evidence to them in favor of the Christian religion. Dissensions, unhappy differences, and petty church trials dishonor our Redeemer. All these may be avoided if self is surrendered to God and the followers of Jesus obey the voice of the church. Unbelief suggests that individual independence increases our importance, that it is weak to yield our own ideas of what is right and proper to the verdict of the church; but to yield to such feelings and views is unsafe and will bring us into anarchy and confusion. Christ saw that unity and Christian fellowship were necessary to the cause of God, therefore He enjoined it upon His disciples. And the history of Christianity from that time until now proves conclusively that in union only is there strength. Let individual judgment submit to the authority of the church (4T 19).

In conclusion, we have noticed the role that the church and its leaders play. As Protestants we are wary of the Church authorities imposing their will upon us. On the other hand we also recognize that the church cannot be lead by individuals who rise up seeking to destroy the established order. There must always be awareness that Jesus is the head of the Church, and that He leads it in the ways He sees fit, placing in leadership those of His own appointment. We

may have different opinions, but now is the time to pull together in unity, to affirm each other, and to answer the prayer of the Lord of the Sabbath “that they may be one...so that the world may believe” (John 17:21). Our unity is essential for our witness to the world, and becomes a necessary part of the Gospel Commission.